ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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

July 1975

Dear Reader:

I trust you have grown inured to little crises such as inflation, politics and unemployment, and are no longer letting them bug you. To help stamp out all lingering cares, allow me to suggest *The Preying Mantis*. It is this month's lead story by Pauline C. Smith. This and all stories herein are new, as usual, including the suspense-filled novelette by Albert Avellano titled *Crime by Accident*.

We must, however, consider the value of the insect. I recently heard of a welsher who patronized a young purveyor of lemonade. Upon returning to his office with the refreshment, he discovered therein a six-legged swimmer. The drink went promptly to the potted philodendron, which died by morning. The welsher later learned the lemonade merchant was a midget hit man. As for the bug, he could not testify, but wished it well.

As for me, I intend to continue taking ever greater care that you imbibe monthly

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 20, NO. 7 JULY 1975

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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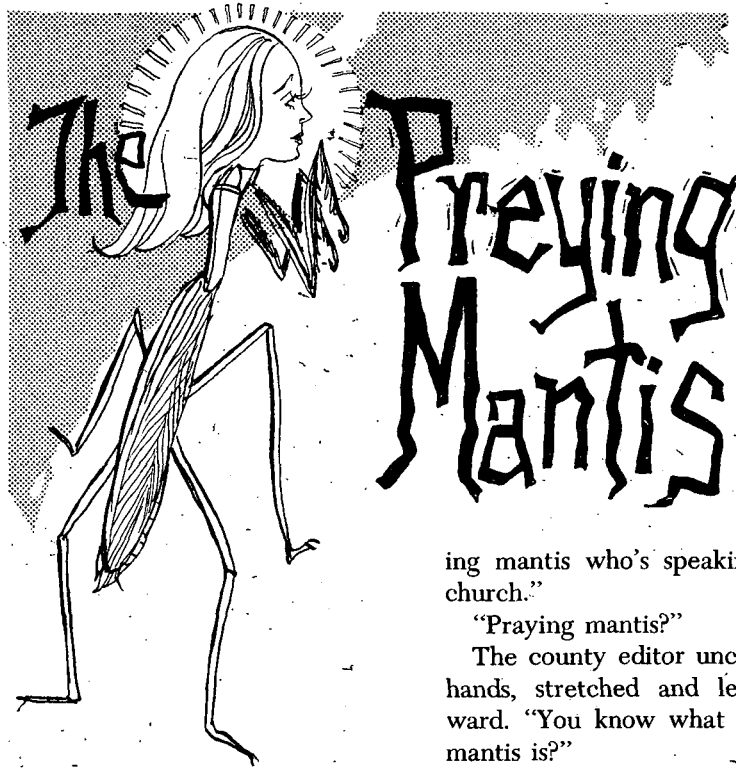
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 7, July 1975. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions $9.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408.

Even an angel may eventually be faced with a credibility problem.



The Praying Mantis

The county editor leaned back in his swivel chair and rested his head in his clasped hands, his shirt-sleeved elbows jutting out like white wings. "I want you to go out to Twin Hills," he told his reporter, "and check on this praying mantis who's speaking at the church."

"Praying mantis?"

The county editor unclasped his hands, stretched and leaned forward. "You know what a praying mantis is?"

"Well, I thought I did. Isn't it a greenish-brown grasshopper kind of insect that puts its forelegs together as if it is praying?"

"Right," said the editor. "Moslems believe it always faces Mecca while it prays."

"Is this a Moslem Church you

want me to go to?" asked the reporter.

"No, it's a Community Church. Do you know the reason for the prayerful attitude of the mantis?"

"Never thought about it. All I know is they leap fast and fly slow, and I used to catch them when I was a kid."

"You know how a mantis rears its body upright and raises its forelegs to draw them back against itself, like hands clasped in prayer? Well, it's not praying at all; instead, it's prey it is after, and when some poor dumb smaller insect comes waddling along, the mantis is in a perfect

by Pauline Smith

position to reach out, seize and eat it. Now, Ed, I want you to go out to Twin Hills where that women's prison is and catch this girl's act in the church . . . . oh, hell, she's no girl anymore—actually she's a mature woman who adopts the praying position so she can gather in her prey."

"I don't even know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about Lydia Deyo, the kid who was so good with a switchblade that she slashed her boyfriend to death and now wants to be patted on the head for how well she became rehabilitated."

"I don't remember any Lydia Deyo."

The editor contemplated Ed with cold and unforgiving eyes for a moment before he snapped his fingers and said, "Sure. You weren't around here then and it only got a line or two on the AP, but it rocked this county on its ear. The sliced boyfriend came from a good family and the slicer from trash. The other one . . ."

"What other one?"

"The guy she laid it on—older—a junkie-punk, in and out of jails. What was his name? Oh yes, Britt. Something Britt. Anyway, he got executed. The girl got off with life, and sure she would, being blonde, a pretty kid in a brazen kind of way, eighteen then, that'd make her about 35 now . . ."

"Her?" Ed asked.

"Lydia Deyo," said the editor impatiently, "the praying mantis who has become an authority on Christian virtue. She's speaking at the Community Church in Twin Hills. I want you to go over there and listen, then interview her. But first, bone up in the morgue of seventeen years ago. Read the

transcript of the trial and my editorials. I haven't changed my mind."

The case was scruffily senseless, an incredible horror, played through on the worn-out Deyo farm around the shabby Deyo barn on a hot August night seventeen years ago. It had about it the elements of a Greek tragedy in modern dress; a *danse macabre*, stiffly stylized. The curtain rose when young Paul Hopkins eased his high school graduation gift, a shiny-bright 1957 Thunderbird, over the ruts and potholes of the Deyo lane. He was just eighteen and had come to show off his car.

He found Lydia, not alone, but with an older man (23), one he knew only by reputation . . . just "hanging around," as Joe Britt put it. "Oh, sure, I hung around a lot over there, and then this guy come, wheelin' up in his shiny Bird, like King o' the Road, you know?"

Lydia concurred. "We were out by the barn when Paul come to take me for a ride in his brand-new car . . ."

The two agreed that Paul did not wish to include Britt.

"He come to show off the car to *me* and take *me* for a ride," Lydia said. "Then Joe said he was coming too, and you could see Paul getting mad. But what could he do about it? So we both piled in and Paul just drove around and around the barn, saying he wouldn't go anywhere as long as Joe was in the car. Then Joe got nasty and made some cracks about the car—how it was a no-good heap, you know—and Paul slammed on the brakes and they both got out and began to fight."

"It wasn't nothing really," protested Britt. "I just pushed him a little and when he was down, I jumped in the car and took off."

"He sure did," Lydia said, "round and round the barn, yelling and laughing, with me hanging on for dear life and poor Paul jumping up and waving his arms for him to stop and jumping back when Joe headed the car at him . . ."

"I was only kiddin'," Britt testified honorably. "Just havin' a little fun. I stopped after a while and got out and told him to take his old car. I didn't want to drive it if he didn't want me to. I said him and Lyd could drive off to China for all me. I was through by then. Honest. But something got into Lyd . . ."

Here the two stories diverged. Britt's had it that Lydia, who didn't know how to drive, attempted to grab the wheel for her turn around the barn, which natu-

rally caused Paul to leap forth in defense of his property and Lydia to yank the keys and jump from the car, most of which Lydia denied categorically.

"Why, that's not so," she said, shocked, adding that what really happened was that she had leaned over, simply to caress the steering wheel of the pretty new car while Paul started to get inside so that they could at last take their delayed drive, and that it was *Joe* who reached inside and wrenched out the keys. "Of course I jumped out of the car. I wanted to *help* Paul get his keys back."

"Lyd ran around the car," Britt then related, "and tossed the keys to me. And there it was, another game, with her tossin' 'em to me and me tossin' 'em back to her, and that poor guy dancin' around between us tryin' to catch 'em, and then they got dropped somewhere out in the weeds . . ."

"It was awful," Lydia said demurely, "Joe with the keys, jumping them up and down on the palm of his hand, and Paul trying to rush him. That's when I ran around the car and Joe tossed the keys to me and I tried to toss them to Paul, and they dropped in the weeds . . ."

The denouement for this Comedy of Errors, this tragically stupid drama, occurred as dusk gathered that hot August night while the youth searched for his symbol of manhood among the weeds. Apparently, the headlights of the prestigious little car had been turned on in order to aid the search which, also apparently, did little good since the car was so faced that they did not shine on the hiding place.

"How about a flashlight?" came Lydia's suggestion.

"Oh, sure, I got flashlights all over me," Britt answered in scorn.

"I bet you got a flashlight. Come on . . ." and the games began again, with Lydia searching Joe, the two of them giggling, scuffling, and drawing forth the switchblade . . .

"Lyd got the knife," Britt testified, "and she tossed it to me like she had tossed the keys. I should have kept it, but I don't know . . . I tossed it back. A game, you know? Back and forth, like with the keys. Maybe that's what the poor guy thought we had—his keys. He must have thought we'd found 'em while he was crawling around in the dark, and were playing with 'em like we had before. Anyhow, he was up and over to where we were, dancing around and reaching for the knife we tossed back and forth, thinking it was his keys."

It was during this weird scene,

as Britt told it, with angular shadows gyrating in the smoky edge of light, that Lydia found and pressed the button that activated the knife from its handle, and immediately changed the game and its tenor.

"She started to jump around," Britt testified, "lunging, kind of, you know? I guess the poor guy connected, thinking Lyd had keys in her hand and not a knife. So I guess it was an accident, kind of."

"With all those knife wounds?" he was asked.

"Well, she got carried away," he suggested.

Lydia's story, from the time of the flashlight request, was totally different. Yes, she had seen the switchblade, had it in her hand and returned it immediately. She had then stalked off to aid Paul in his search for the keys, and it was *Joe* who played games with the knife. Joe did the lunging and the teasing. Joe did the killing. It was Joe's switchblade out of Joe's pocket . . . a straightforward story without any frills or strange innuendos, one the jury could believe—especially since it involved a junkie-punk.

"So what do you think, now that you've read the case of Lydia Deyo?" the county editor asked his reporter.

"Think? Well, it was all pretty gruesome."

"Sure it was. And there she is now, spreading her virtue, her nobility, and her purity all over the place hoping to gain public sympathy—gaining it too, I guess, so a parole board will let her go free."

"She's had seventeen years in prison. Maybe she's ready."

"Sure she's had seventeen years in prison, every minute of which was spelled out for her. She's been managed hour by hour, day by day. How about when she's free and on her own? How about then, huh? And something sets her off so she straightens out her knees and unclasps those praying hands long enough to grab a handy knife and plunge it in someone? She's guilty and she's dangerous, so they'd better keep her locked up."

"Only part guilty—an accessory, according to the courts. It was him, Britt, who really did it."

"Don't you believe it. Killing wasn't Britt's style. He was stupid, perhaps, and a troublemaker, but not vicious. Sure, he carried a switchblade—that was for show, for big-shot purposes. Probably what he used it for, when no one was looking, was to whittle."

One of the Twin Hills was dominated by the prison, the other by the town. The highway

ran through the valley skirted by farms, orchards, service stations and hamburger havens.

It was in one of these last, Hopkins Hamburgers, that the reporter began his questions about Lydia Deyo. "I'm Ed Magill," he told the man behind the counter. "Reporter for the *Courier*."

"Yeah?" the man said without expression.

"I understand a prisoner from up on the hill is going to speak at the Community Church on Sunday."

He said, "Yeah, I guess," and closed up.

"You *are* Mr. Hopkins?"

"I am."

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"Of what?"

"Of Lydia Deyo being allowed out, to speak at a church."

The man's face fell apart and he shrugged his shoulders. "Look," he said, "Paul's gone. Our only child he was. Good boy. Smart too. I wanted him to be something more than his old man, and have something more than a hamburger joint. I sent him through high school on hamburgers," he waved his arms expansively, "and I was sending him to college in the car I bought for him—all on hamburgers." He swallowed and closed his eyes in momentary pain. "Then he got killed—my boy—his future gone. All of it gone. His and ours. Seventeen years ago. I don't think about it. Don't ask me to."

"All right, Mr. Hopkins. All right."

"Sure, they say that girl has been whatever-they-call-it and is ready to be freed. Sure. Some even think she is innocent. That she didn't really do anything. Lots of people say it was that way."

"What do *you* say, Mr. Hopkins?" Ed Magill asked.

"Me? I don't say anything. I quit saying. I quit thinking long ago—seventeen years ago when it happened. It happened. It made no sense . . ." His face crumpled. "So I don't think about it. Don't ask me to."

"All right, Mr. Hopkins."

"My wife. You can ask her. It's all she thinks about. All these seventeen years she's thought about it. Ask her. She talks about it. It's all she talks about. I close my ears . . . I can't stand it. Ask my wife . . . she's probably sitting in front of Paul's pictures right now. Go out there—out on Trimble Road. It's all she does, sits in front of the pictures and if you walk in, she'll talk . . ."

Mr. Hopkins turned and became busy shining chrome, polishing porcelain. Ed laid down a bill and

some coins and went out in the August sun to his car. It wasn't hard to find Trimble Road, being the third offshoot from the highway. There were farms and groves, small acreages; and at the mailbox sign of Paul Hopkins, Sr., he turned in to drive up the meandering road between carelessly cared for fruit trees, weed-infested former gardens, to brake before a carport where stood a jacked-up classic Thunderbird, still shiny under only recent dust. He walked up the steps of a house that looked as if it hadn't had a fresh coat of paint for seventeen years.

He was surprised at the appearance of the woman who finally answered the doorbell. She was birdlike—not the brown-wren type, but more the shrike, with appraising hostile eyes and ruffled feathers. "Yes?" she asked.

Ed stammered an explanation as to his presence, received a wide-open door and a flurried entrance into a room—one beyond the parlor—a kind of sitting room. "There," Mrs. Hopkins stated, and pointed out a sideboard-buffet-whatever, crowded with pictures in studio folders, framed, mounted on cardboard easels . . . A fine-looking boy, thought Ed, with the clean American crew-cut look of the '50's, a boy crouched over a football, looking fierce; serious student in cap and gown. The sideboard, buffet or whatever held the short life of the young man from his bare-bottomed infancy on a bearskin rug in the back row through his tricycle years, school years and up to college.

"Yes," said Mrs. Hopkins, "the killer is to speak at the church."

"Mrs. Hopkins," Ed replied in weak protest, "the girl was judged to be an accessory only . . ." just before being thrust into a chair facing the memorabilia, and weighted down by an album across his knees.

"She was the killer all right. Don't ever forget that. Everyone else has forgotten it, but she was the killer. Look . . ." Mrs. Hopkins leaned over him and flipped a few pages of the album. "Here. These are the news clippings." Ed could see that they were. He had read most of them.

"*She* was the killer. A bad girl. I told Paul not to take his new car around to her place—a girl like that—and he promised. But a boy—and she was . . . well, he couldn't help himself . . ." and Mrs. Hopkins turned away from the reporter, her shoulders hunched, her arms clasped against her spare bosom as if she were folding her wings around cold thoughts this hot August day.

She whirled and leaned her hips against the picture-covered sideboard, her face wild with helpless rage. "Why did she kill him? Paul was so proud of the car. He wanted to show it off. He would have been gone in a week. State College. His tuition was paid, his books bought; his dormitory arranged for . . . his roommate. Everything . . ." She spread her wings, all brown wren. "Paul had girls, nice girls, but he was growing up and this was the one he wanted to show off to," and Mrs. Hopkins again became the shrike.

Ed cleared his throat. "Mrs. Hopkins, if it upsets you too much to talk about it . . ." Rising, he helped her to a chair.

She looked up at him, dry-eyed. "Sit down," she said, "You came to hear about the killer that's going to speak at the church. I am telling you about her. About what she left."

Ed sat, looked around for a place to lay the album, then finding none, placed it on his knees again.

"We built up this property just for Paul. We aren't educated people, Paul's father and I, so we worked to give him what he would need to make his place in life." She bowed her head a moment, then raised it, eyes glaring again. "And that . . . that . . ." She swallowed, not having a word in her vocabulary to name Lydia Deyo. "Why did she kill him?"

"Well," Ed said tentatively, "the jury called the *man* the killer—Joe Britt—and he was executed for it. They named the girl, Lydia Deyo, as an accessory and gave her life."

"Life!" cried Mrs. Hopkins bitterly. "They gave her life! Did she give my son life?" and her eyes were accusing. "*She* was the killer, not the other."

"Why do you think that, Mrs. Hopkins?"

"I know it," she said. "I watched her in the courtroom. She's a killer. Those Deyos. I never knew them. Hardly anybody did. They had this farm ten miles out the highway that didn't amount to a hill of beans. They were trash and so was the girl. She did it, all right, and if she's let go, you mark my word, she'll do it again."

Ed rose finally, and looked again at the reiterated pictures of a dead youth, made his way through the farmhouse and out to his car. He glanced at the T-bird, a regal reminder, and drove the meandering road down to Trimble Road, then to the highway and the motel in the valley.

The motel, called the Silver Shield, was run by Mr. and Mrs.

Orrin Shields, each of whom was willing to talk about the prison on the hill, the inmates and, obliquely, about Lydia Deyo. "What we do here in town," Mr. Shields explained, "is hire those girls they'll let off-grounds—like the ones that are going to be released soon, and have a good record, and they want to give them some experience, you know? So when they get out, they can get a job.

"Well, now, the Deyo woman never worked here. She's a lifer. These girls we hire are short-termers. The prison station wagon brings them down in the morning and comes back for them in the evening."

"The Deyo woman gets out once a week, for a little while," broke in Mrs. Shields. "Every Sunday. One of the matrons brings her down to the Community Church and she baby-sits back in the Sunday-school room while the kids' folks attend the services. She don't sit for my grandchildren though. I have my daughter bring them here before she goes to church. Like I tell her, 'I wouldn't trust a woman like that with a ten-foot pole. You just bring those kids here where I know they'll be safe,' and she does."

"Well, she seems trustworthy enough," Mr. Shields said gently, "and I say she's got a right to her freedom if she gets it. Nobody ever did prove she helped with that killing."

"Maybe she did and maybe she didn't, but either way, she's got the taint," said Mrs. Shields. "Anybody lays down with dirt is bound to get dirty. And, sure, I'm as broad-minded as the next one, so if she gets out of prison after being put in there for life without any chance of parole, like they said, I won't be against it, but I just hope she goes far away because I don't want her around this town."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Shields had seen Lydia Deyo. "But not close up. Only in the car with the matron on her way down to Community Church to baby-sit on Sundays," said Mr. Shields. "She don't look like a killer."

"Of course she don't," said Mrs. Shields. "They never do."

Ed Magill drove up the prison hill road that Saturday evening, between rows of corn, tomato vines, plum and apricot trees. The summit of the hill was completely enclosed by chain link supported with brick pillars. It was maximum security softened by the purple twilight. Through the fence he could see sprawled gray buildings, grassy plots well tended, flower gardens, young trees, and

heard no sound, saw no movement in the breezeless heat of twilight.

So far, Ed knew Lydia Deyo only as the county editor's historical items, Mr. Hopkins' memory block, Mrs. Hopkins' son-killer, Mr. Shields' rehabilitated citizen and Mrs. Shields' rejected grandchild-sitter.

He drove back down again to the highway where the neons had begun to glow bright promise of FOOD and GAS, and the church sign offered a Sunday morning sermon subject, titled: "To Forgive is Divine," with a later presentation: "Lydia Deyo to Speak."

The Community Church stood on the corner of the highway intersection and the town road, white-framed, steepled, a picture postcard church, surrounded by lawn, dark now in the gathering night.

On Sunday morning, the Shields' daughter arrived at the Silver Shield office with two small boys.

"Not me," she answered Ed Magill's question, "I wouldn't trust that kind of woman to take care of my kids at the end of a ten-foot pole. Sure, she may be all right, but why take a chance?"

After the replay of her mother's convictions, she became uncertain as to whether or not she would attend the evening talk. "Oh, I don't know. I'm not too interested. Not that I don't think she's got a right to try and talk her way out of prison if she can. Anyway, maybe she really is innocent . . ." and with that duplication of her father's vague arguments, the Shields' daughter left Ed with no new or further knowledge of Lydia Deyo as he drove to the highway intersection, turned up the town road and into the parking lot at the rear of the church.

The church bell was ringing in the morning services just as Ed stepped from his car and, as if on cue, a station wagon, showing its official emblem, drove up and parked at the outside door of the Sunday-school annex.

Ed caught only a glimpse of the large woman in blue and the small one in gray as they stepped from the station wagon and in through the door of the annex. The driver tilted his cap forward and slumped in the seat, prepared to wait.

Ed approached him. "Is that Lydia Deyo just went in?"

The driver straightened, flicked his cap back with a forefinger and said, "Sure, what about it?"

"I'm Ed Magill of the *Courier*. I'm in town to catch her talk."

"Oh, sure. Well, that's one fine little lady, let me tell you. But she don't talk till this evening."

"I know. I intend to be here."

"The *Courier*?"

"Right."

"Well, you write her up good. She's an angel. I been guard up there for twelve-thirteen years. I watched her grow and educate herself and plant flowers and paint pictures, and take care of kids . . . Look at her. She's a saint. Just go look at her."

Ed walked around the station wagon and peered through the windows, cupping his eyes with the palms of his hands to shade them from the sun, and there was Lydia Deyo, her gray prison uniform shaped seductively to her bowed body as she sat in the midst of a garden of children—little ones, big ones, medium-sized, all hanging onto words Ed could not hear. She looked like a Madonna, Ed thought, a small, blonde Madonna, and he fell in love.

His reporter's eye caught the blue of the matron's uniform, a shadow inside the door.

He did no more interviewing, no more prying and prodding through the rest of that Sunday. He went back to the Silver Shield and lay on his bed, arms cradling his head, waiting for evening church time.

Ed was thirty-nine and had never married. He was a romantic without being aware of it—and being a romantic, self-destructive. The girls he knew and had known did not fit the fragility of his dream.

"What are you looking for?" his mother nagged at him. "You go with a girl, you think she's the greatest—you worship, idolize her, think you might even marry her. Then you find this wrong and that wrong and start all over again. What in the world is it you want in a wife?"

Ed's heart interests had been many. There had been Maida, Margaret, Brenda and Barbara, Eleanor, Eloise, Harriet and Heloise. "Mom," he answered, "I haven't found her. Maybe I never will. If I do, I will tell you."

Well, now he had found her—an angel in prison garb.

The churchyard was crowded that evening, with knots of people in discussion . . . "The sweetest thing!" Ed heard. "A doll. A martyr."

The sun set over the close-clipped lawn in brilliant heat. "She needs her chance for freedom," spoke a voice with certainty.

"What did she do?" Ed heard on the fringes. "What did she do to get there in the first place?"

"Well, I don't remember the case," someone said. "It was a long time ago. Knife murder, as I remember. Two boys fightin' over her, I think that's what it was."

The official station wagon awaited an entrance from the prison road onto the highway.

"Here she comes," a voice called and the crowd, broken up into cliques, came together as one and moved toward the church entrance.

Ed watched the station wagon make the turn from the highway to the town road and into the parking lot in back, and followed the crowd into the church, where he stood, behind the last audience row, his pencil poised on a notebook where he didn't enter a word once Lydia Deyo moved across the platform and stood at the podium to tell the people all about Goodness, Brotherhood of Man, and Life of Service within prison walls.

He wrote it all later, and the county editor blew his top.

"You're kidding," he said, his eyes rolling wildly. "You make her a saint and she ain't. So you're kidding."

"You didn't see her," Ed said stoically. "I saw her and heard her."

"You saw her," said the county editor, "in her praying position, and heard her crunching the bodies of all you dumb insects. Ed, she's playing a game, just as before; only now the rules are different and the stakes higher." The editor glared and went off to write a downbeat editorial on a playful female killer, while Ed Magill stepped up his article on the pure Madonna innocent.

From that time on until the parole board met, the county editor dedicated himself to Lydia's detention while Ed labored over her liberation, making weekly trips to the prison to refresh his mind and heart.

"What's with this thing you've got going at the clink?" the county editor asked coldly. "You take off with a freshman smile as if you're on your way to your first date, and come back with the sophomoric grin of successful conquest."

"She's a wonderful woman and I like her," answered Ed just as coldly.

"You're crazy!"

"You're prejudiced. You have a closed mind. You judged her guilty seventeen years ago and you haven't changed."

"Hell no! Neither has she!"

"Eddie," his mother worried, "you don't go out with girls anymore. Not any girls. You don't even see any girls except that prisoner up there in Twin Hills."

"She's a fine woman, Mother. Finer than any I have ever known," which caused his mother not only to wonder upon the character of his former female companions, but to ponder over what genetic complexity and/or

error in child training had wrought such warped judgment.

Ed's visiting day at the prison fell on a Thursday; and on each following Friday, Saturday and Sunday he savored the visit just past, remembering the golden nimbus of hair, the gentle lift of lips, blue eyes so steady and sincere, the sweet, soft voice; then Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday he spent happily anticipating the next Thursday visit.

He was offered an hour, but Lydia, being the oldest inmate (in years of incarceration), was allowed great latitude, so that sometimes the visit lasted an hour and a half, even two hours.

"You came!" she always greeted him as if she could not believe her great good fortune. "Oh, you came again. How nice!"

"She has no one else to visit her," Ed explained to his county editor. "No friends, no relatives on the outside."

"Of course not," the editor said. "She killed one friend, had the other executed, and her folks disappeared when it was done."

Ed's articles on Lydia and her long life in prison became weekly features, as did the county editor's editorials on why she should spend her lifelong where she was. The county editor would have fired Ed for his mawkish journalism except that the subscription list to the *Courier* rose by leaps and bounds.

The summer heat of August was replaced by the autumn heat of September, and Ed's visits to the prison were garden idylls, with a matron in the unobtrusive offing, and a guard hardly noticeable. Lydia bent prettily over her needlepoint during these times, or knelt by the flower beds in ministering genuflection, and Ed worshiped.

She was like nothing he had ever known. He sometimes wondered if he had made her up.

"Listen," the county editor said, flicking Ed's copy with a contemptuous forefinger, "she can't be all that. You're imagining her."

But she was real. A saint, an angel, as Ed well knew the next Thursday when she cried out to him in velvet musical tone, "You came!" with quiet joy and a hint of thanksgiving.

He brought clippings of his articles, but not the county editor's editorials, and she was pleased as she read, proceeding to give him new facets of her personality so that he would have the material for his next week's item.

Her time in prison was a credit to the facility and its method of rehabilitation, as well as a credit

to her for taking advantage of what was offered. She had finished her high school education and received a college degree via extension courses, majoring in Psychology, minoring in Philosophy . . . *How beautiful!* thought Ed with rapture. *How brave and dedicated.*

She had taken a nurse's training course under the tutelage of the prison doctor and often helped in the yard hospital. *A Florence Nightingale in gray,* thought Ed, starry-eyed.

She was a fine needlewoman, an excellent floriculturist . . . *A wonder at all the lost arts,* thought Ed in awe.

October was cool and November came on cold.

"So she's wonderful," sneered the county editor as he read Ed's copy. "A nurse, flower grower, sews nicely and has company manners. But all these talents don't mean she ought to be let loose on the world. I see she's well educated in Psychology—that's so she'll know what games to play on whom; and Philosophy, so she can make her own rules. Ed, all the education and flower beds in the state can't change the fact that she took one life just for fun, and another so she could live."

"I don't think it was that way," Ed said stiffly, and became militantly defensive. "And, anyway, is that any reason to punish her forever?"

"She isn't being punished," said the county editor. "She's being confined so the rest of us, including you, will be safe."

"Oh, come on. She gets out to give her talks, to take care of children. If you'd only see her, you'd know . . ."

"What would I see? A regimented woman, one who's constantly watched. That's a lot different from letting her out on parole, alone and on her own."

"She won't be alone and on her own," Ed said and smiled. "I'm going to marry her. That is, I'm working on it. So if she's paroled, I'll be there, her husband, to take care of her. If she isn't paroled, she'll be there, my wife, and I will visit her."

When he asked her to marry him that cold November day in the prison visiting room with a matron in surveillance, he thought of her not as a convicted killer, but as a princess in durance vile with an attendant lady-in-waiting. Lydia raised her eyes and clasped her hands.

"The mantis in her praying position," defined the sneering editor to the hopeful bridegroom, "and you've just sprung the trap that

will let her free to sink her knife blades into you."

"I hope so," Ed said. "What I mean is, I hope that marrying Lydia will get her a parole. I certainly hope so."

"You poor, dumb, blind insect you," pronounced the editor and went off to write a scathing editorial about bleeding-heart parole boards and lifers who shouldn't be freed, while Ed tapped out another lyrical Lydia column.

His mother was furious with the fury of the anguished. All these years she had wanted him to marry—worried over whether there was something wrong with him that he did not—and now he had proved what was wrong, now that he wished to marry a convict!

"But she's wonderful, Mother," he said. "I look up to her."

"Yes, you look up to her, up on that pedestal you've put her on. But it's the same old pedestal, Eddie, the one on which you've hoisted every woman you ever got halfway serious about. The same old pedestal, except this time, the woman on her pedestal is inside a prison where she can't topple off. What if she gets paroled and you take her out of there, her and her pedestal? What then, Eddie? You'll chip away at that pedestal just as you've chipped away at every pedestal you've ever stood a woman on, to knock them off—but with this one, Eddie, when you chip the pedestal away from this woman, you may find out you've got a killer . . ."

Ed and Lydia were married in the warden's office on a visiting day, and two weeks later, at a meeting of the probation board, she was paroled in the custody of her husband.

Ed took her far away to the edge of a city and bought her a house in the suburbs, a house with a garden so she could plant her flowers in the spring, and a sewing room where she could sew. She practiced those fine womanly arts of homemaking with bowed-head modesty and small, grateful smiles until the security of her freedom brought out her laughter and lifted her head at last.

It was during the next summer that Ed began to notice these changes. "You're different," he accused. Not that there was anything he could put his finger on, but enough to remember the editor's metaphor and suspect that the mantis he had perched on a pedestal just might have left her praying for prey.

"What happened that night back there?" he asked her.

"What night back where?" she

asked with slanted blue eyes.

It was only after a lengthy series of carefully casual questions and carelessly candid queries, which she tossed back at him like keys in a game of words, that she admitted knowing the night and the place in question, while expertly parrying the happening.

"What did you do?"

"I was there."

"Did Britt really do it?"

"I saw him."

Now the game was on, with Ed hacking away at the pedestal while Lydia tossed pieces of it back to him.

"Remember the knife?"

"The knife Joe used?" she asked.

"Or you."

The questions were intermittently constant with no answers, just as constantly intermittent as Ed chipped and Lydia tossed.

He watched her closely. He watched until there were shadows always dancing along the edge of his vision. "Lydia!" he cried, "you killed that boy!"

"No," she replied at last. "No."

"No what, Lydia?"

"No. I did not kill him."

"Kill whom, Lydia? Paul with the knife? Britt with your lies?"

Her lip curled. She drew herself up to her full height and clasped her hands tight, not as if she were praying, but as if she were holding them ready for the kill.

Ed wheeled and raced for the kitchen where he yanked a wicked little paring knife from the rack.

In the doorway, he called, "Lyd!" and tossed the knife across the room.

It cut away the last of the pedestal and she held it in her hand.

"Lyd, you killed him, didn't you? You killed Paul."

Ed approached her, smiling, and she pounced.

"I didn't kill him. I didn't kill him," she cried, the knife rising and plunging as she repeated mechanically, "I didn't kill him," her voice holding such rote-like tone of habit that even her own ears heard and did not know whether to believe or disbelieve the words.

Despite the many factors to be weighed, one may be able to solve a moral dilemma posthaste.

They Won't Talk to Anyone Else

by James Michael Ullman

She is gone now, the reporter from the *Times-Argus*. She was not at ease interviewing me here in the Loving Care Nursing Home on the occasion of my 87th birthday. She was an arrogant young woman, full of talk about "new journalism" and how she must put her opinions into everything she writes.

I have not yet seen her story, but with or without her opinions I think I know pretty much what it will say.

It will dutifully note that my late wife Clara and I founded the Loving Care Complex which, in addition to the nursing home, includes a general hospital and the best geriatric research facility west of the Mississippi.

It will add that ironically, in the beginning, Loving Care was concerned with the young, not the elderly. We founded it as an orphanage, a refuge for homeless

boys. It remained so until after World War II when, because there was less need for private orphan care here, we moved into fields where we could be of more use.

The story will say that to my mind, those hard, early years in the 1920's and 1930's were in many respects the most rewarding. So many fine boys went through Loving Care then—boys we helped guide to productive lives. An uncommon number became professional men or leaders in their field. In fact two are now in Congress, three are presidents of universities and one was the governor of this state for eight years.

Unfortunately the young woman who interviewed me today will not write much about *those* men. In common with reporters who have interviewed me in prior years, she was interested most in my recollections of two other Loving Care boys, the infamous Hacker brothers, Lamar and Maurice.

Given the current national preoccupation with crime, I suppose that is understandable. The Hackers were outlaws, at their peak as well known as Dillinger, Clyde Barrow and his Bonnie Parker, Pretty Boy Floyd and all the others. Last year a film company even made a movie about them.

The *Times-Argus* story will say that I refused to discuss the Hackers with the reporter, just as I refused to discuss them with the fools who made the movie. Then it will no doubt recount some of the Hackers' exploits culled from old news clippings, exploits which become more distorted with each retelling.

The Hackers robbed banks, back then the fastest way for criminals to enrich themselves. Bank robbery attracted the best young criminal minds before it was made a federal offense in 1934. Contributing to their legend was their bizarre relationship with Sally Lou McCoy, a farm girl who became enamored of them after seeing their pictures on a Wanted poster. By hanging around the underworld's fringe, she managed to meet them, join their gang and become mistress of both of them.

The *Times-Argus* story may lead you to believe that I do not even want to think about the Hackers and Sally Lou, but that is not true. I think about them more than anyone could realize and for a reason you will presently know—but certainly it is not something I would discuss with a reporter.

The Hacker boys—what memories they evoke. My wife, in retrospect always far more a realist

than I, had been reluctant to admit them to Loving Care. She thought she sensed in them a streak of incurable viciousness.

The movie portrayed them as being orphaned because their widowed father was killed trying to block foreclosure of the family farm, but in fact their father, a shiftless ne'er-do-well, died after drinking adulterated moonshine from his own still.

Left on their own the boys ran wild, stealing and engaging in senseless acts of violence until they were jailed. If I had not volunteered to take them in they would have gone to the reformatory.

Neither was a model resident of our little community, but they feared being sent to the reformatory and did not commit any gross violations of our rules. Maurice was an easygoing, handsome youth, but Lamar especially impressed me as showing promise as a natural leader. When they left Loving Care to strike out on their own—I arranged employment for them in Kansas City—I was sure they would become productive members of society.

They never wrote. We heard indirectly that they had been imprisoned in Missouri for armed robbery and a few years later began seeing newspaper headlines about their gang, but by then Clara and I had our own troubles.

The bank that had been renewing our mortgage regularly was so hard pressed that it could no longer afford to carry us. In fact it was near the end of a day of unsuccessfully trying to solicit donations to keep Loving Care from going under that I got a phone call from Sheriff Dunaway.

Even on the weak party line, the tone of his voice made clear that he was under great strain.

"Reverend?" he said. "You've got to get right out to the old Powell place."

I asked, "Why?"

"The Hacker boys robbed an upstate bank this morning. Guess they figured nobody'd look for 'em here, but a farmer saw their car sneaking up a back lane. We got 'em surrounded."

"What do you need me for?"

"There was a shoot-out at the bank and they took a hostage, a teller. We're trying to negotiate to save him, but the Hackers say they don't trust us. They'll only talk to you. They keep repeating over and over again that they won't talk to anyone else."

I had to go.

Sheriff Dunaway was a decent man. Unsaid but understood between us was the knowledge that some peace officers there might

open fire at the Hackers on sight, no matter what promises they violated or who else might get hurt. My presence might forestall something like that.

Then there was my concern for the Hacker boys. I still hoped there might be some chance for their rehabilitation, or at least of their repentance before they were executed.

Finally, and most important, there was the hostage. By going, I might be able to save an innocent person's life.

It was late afternoon when Clara and I reached the narrow dirt road to the Powell place, a small farm that had been foreclosed and was now vacant. Nearing a hill that looked down on the farm buildings, we found the road blocked and the base of the hill guarded by police officers.

Many other cars were parked in a field, and a crowd of morbid curiosity seekers huddled near the hill. I parked a considerable distance from them.

"Wait here," I told Clara. "If shooting starts, get down. There's no telling where stray bullets might land."

"You're making a mistake," she replied, "risking your neck for the Hackers. They'll take you hostage too."

"They already have one hostage. Why would they need another?"

"I don't know, but—"

"Clara, I must do all I can to prevent bloodshed. Despite the terrible crimes the newspapers say those young men have committed, I can't help thinking we've been given a distorted picture. I'm sure there's some decency left in them."

"You're a sentimental fool," Clara said, looking away, "but for pity's sake, don't let them blow your brains out."

A trooper at the roadblock directed me to a cluster of boulders at the hill's crest where he said I would find the sheriff. Fortunately I wore a heavy coat to break the strong northwest wind, which brought an unseasonable arctic chill to the mid-November day.

Two men were with my portly little friend Dunaway—the president of the bank that had just been robbed and Captain Oldberg of the state police, commander of the peace officers. I knew Oldberg from my social work in the courts. Burly and square-faced, his reputation was that of a tough disciplinarian who tended to take the law into his own hands.

About forty other men, state troopers and sheriffs' deputies from several counties, were stationed behind cover around the

farmhouse, which was part way down the slope. At the hill's bottom a thick clump of woodland ran along a riverbed.

"We tried to surprise them," Dunaway said, "but they saw us. We exchanged fire and since then have been yelling, trying to get them to give up. They say they'll kill the hostage if we attack. We know the Hackers and Sally Lou are inside, but don't know if any other gang members are with them. They had two cars, but split up right after the robbery."

"Frankly," Oldberg told me, "I'm against your going down there. I think they're just using the hostage to stall for time."

"Time for what?" I asked. "They're completely surrounded."

"It'll be dark soon. They've got machine guns. If they should come out shooting, there'd be a lot of confusion. They might make it into those woods and get away. No, I say burn 'em out now, while it's still light. When they run out, we could shoot 'em down easy."

"Burn them out how?"

"That old house is bone-dry. We're close enough to shoot arrows tipped with burning rags onto that roof. The place would be a tinderbox in a minute."

"But what about the hostage?" Dunaway asked. He glanced at the banker. "A young man, isn't he? His wife just had a baby?"

"Yes." Nervously, the banker pounded fist-in-palm. "Their third child. Such a nice family. He has such a promising future. It would be a tragedy if—"

"Can't help that." Oldberg was emphatic. "I'm sorry for your teller too, but we're gonna get the Hackers no matter what. You better understand that yourself, Reverend. If they take you hostage, you're on your own."

"Of course. But if they surrender to me, I want your guarantee that they won't be harmed."

"Guarantee? I'm just one man. The Hackers killed another peace officer today. He had a lot of friends here."

"Stop hedging. These men are your responsibility. If any man fires at the Hackers without provocation, I'll place myself in the line of fire. And if I survive I'll hold you accountable," I told him.

Unbelieving, Oldberg stared at me for a moment. Then he said, "All right. I'll guarantee their safety to the Calhoun County Jail. Then all the jurisdictions that want 'em can start arguing over who'll try 'em first. But that's the only deal I make. And absolutely no free passage out, no matter what they threaten to do." He glanced at his watch. "You've got fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen? Why, that's not—"

"After fifteen minutes, come back and report on how the talk is going. Tell 'em if they don't show good faith and let you walk out, we'll attack."

"Very well." I turned to the banker. "What's your teller's name?"

"Bill Perkins."

"Whatever happens, I'll do what I can for him."

"Thanks, Reverend. And when you talk to them—I don't want to sound cold-blooded—but if they won't give up, maybe you could find out about the money. The gang took an awful lot of it. If you could learn how much the Hackers have with them—"

Oldberg said, "Oh, damn your money."

He poked his head around the boulders, cupped his hands and shouted, "Hackers? Hey, you Hackers! Your Reverend's here. He's coming down now."

The walk to the farmhouse was only about a hundred yards but seemed much longer. Conversation among the peace officers fell away. The only sounds were my boots on the frozen road and the wail of that bitter wind.

For the first time I began to comprehend the precariousness of my situation. I confess I became very afraid.

There was no movement at the house, but surely I was being watched. I passed the Hackers' car, now a useless, shot-up wreck. The farmhouse windows were shattered and the walls were riddled with bullet holes, signs of what must have been a furious exchange of fire.

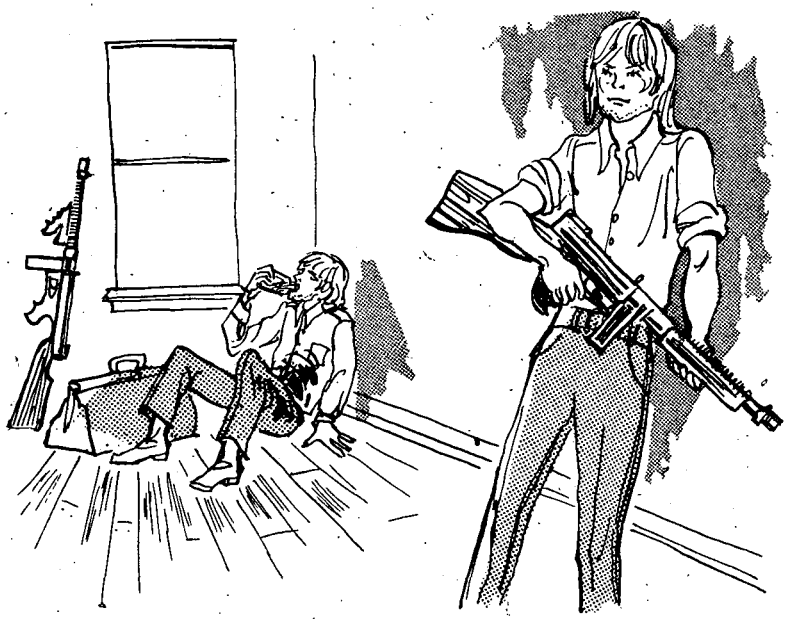
As I neared the front porch the door swung open. I climbed the steps and went inside.

The door closed and there was Maurice, lounging against the wall with a machine gun under his arm. Maurice, the handsome one—only he did not look handsome now. His clothes were filthy and torn. He was unshaven, his eyes were bloodshot and he grinned in a foolish way. "Hi, Rev . . ."

Gazing at me from a far corner was Lamar, the leader, sitting on the floor under a window. His machine gun was leaning against the wall near a suitcase. He was holding a bottle. Whiskey, of course. The place reeked of it. No doubt they were all drunk to one degree or another, numbing their brains to keep from thinking about their desperate plight.

"We *told* them," Maurice went on, "we wouldn't talk to anyone else. Didn't we, Lamar?"

Lamar nodded. He was half-smiling, but there was a look of pain in his eyes. I moved closer



and saw why. He'd been wounded. His trousers were sodden with blood.

"Sure did, Rev. There's nobody else we trust. Sal, come on out. The lawmen won't try nothing while the Rev's with us."

Carrying a lever-action carbine, Sally Lou McCoy walked in from another room.

Newspaper photographs had portrayed her as a freckled country girl with a suggestion of simple charm, but the young woman I saw, her figure blanketed by a man's overcoat, had bloated, prematurely-lined features and lips parted in an insolent half-leer.

"They'd better not. If they do, he gets it first. You hear that, Rev?" she said.

"He heard it. Rev, how's everything at Loving Care? I guess with everyone going bust, it's not so easy to—"

"Lamar," I broke in, "we're wasting time. If I don't go back in fifteen minutes to report, they'll attack. What did you want to talk to me about?"

Straightening, Maurice said, "It's obvious, ain't it? Even if we marched out waving white flags, them crazy lawmen would kill us."

"That's right," Lamar said. "They'd shoot us down, just for the glory of it. That's why we

asked for you. They won't shoot if you're alongside us."

"You'll surrender to me?"

"If the terms are right. The odds on our shootin' our way out weren't too good even *before* I got this slug in my hip."

"What kind of terms?"

"Who's guaranteeing our safety. Where they'll take us. Plus a promise that you won't leave us until *you're* sure we're safe."

Something was wrong. I looked around. "Any other members of your gang here?"

"No. They were in the other car."

"Your hostage, Bill Perkins. Where is he?"

Maurice said, "Well, we kind of fooled those lawmen into thinkin' he was here so they'd send for *you*. Actually, he *ain't* here. We let him out of our car about ten miles from the town where we robbed the bank. Dumped him in a ditch. Oh, he was tied up. But he probably worked himself loose by now."

"Precisely where is that ditch?"

"I don't know *exactly*. You rob a bank, you got things on your mind. I didn't pay that much attention. I *think* it was about ten miles, but—"

"Think harder. I won't help you until he's been found and I'm absolutely sure he's safe."

"Aw, c'mon, Rev. You can't—"

Lamar interrupted. "That's enough, Maurice. We'd best tell the truth." He paused, then said, "Y'see, Rev, he's in the ditch, all right, but—well, at the time there didn't seem much choice. We just *had* to kill him. Oh, we didn't *like* doin' it. But he heard us talking to the bunch in the other car, just before we split up. He knew where *everyone* was goin'. And so—well, given hindsight, I guess you'd say it was a mistake in judgment."

"Yes, I see *now* why you wanted me here. Without my presence, once those peace officers learned the hostage was dead, you wouldn't have a chance. But how did you do it?"

Lamar blinked. "How?"

"Yes." Rage was building up inside of me. "How did you kill that fine young man? Did you shoot him? Strangle him? Stab him, or what? And was he bound and helpless? Or did you give him a chance to run? Did you—"

"We shot him," Maurice said defensively. "Oh, it was all *humane*. We got it over with fast."

"*Who* shot him?"

"Well, it wasn't so much any *one* of us as—"

"Maurice," Sally Lou McCoy said, "don't tell him any more."

She walked up to me. Looking

at her, it was hard to see how this unkempt slattern could kindle a spark of desire in any normal man, something you might think about when you see the beautiful actress portraying her on the screen.

"Rev," she continued, "you're supposed to help us, not preach a sermon. Maybe we should take *you* hostage. And then tell the cops we'll kill *you* if they don't give us a car and let us out."

"Naw," Lamar said pensively, "that wouldn't do no good. Would it, Rev? They musta thought of that."

"They did. Whatever you do to me, you'll get no free passage out of here." I sought to bring my temper under control. "The girl's right. I'm not here to judge you, so let's get on with it. The men out there are commanded by Captain Oldberg. He has already promised that if you surrender to me, he'll guarantee your safety."

"Oldberg?" Maurice snorted in disgust. "Rev, he's vowed to kill us *personally*. You don't understand how much that man hates us."

"He'll keep his word," Lamar said, "if he gave it to the Rev. But how did he say he'd carry out this guarantee?"

"He'll take you to the Calhoun County Jail. You'll be held there until it can be decided where you'll be tried, and for what."

"Calhoun County?" Lamar shook his head. "That's where he fooled you. I guess you ain't been reading about us lately."

"Frankly, I haven't."

"Well, last month we robbed a bank there. We had to run out shooting, like today. It was our bad luck that some children got in the line of fire. One was killed and the others were shot up real bad. So if we went to *that* flimsy little jail, there ain't much doubt what would happen. We'd be lynched."

"You're turning the offer down?"

"No, just askin' for one small change. Go back and tell Oldberg we'll give up if he takes us to the big jail in the state capital. Either that, or we try to shoot our way out—and maybe kill some of his troopers."

"Very well. If I put it to him on that basis, I don't see how he could possibly object."

"Fine. And one more thing . . ." Lamar opened the suitcase and pulled out a fistful of currency.

"Our share of the bank's money. You won't be able to get it *all* out, but under that big coat you're wearin', you could stash a lot of it where them lawmen

wouldn't be likely to see it."

"Money for what? They're going to hang you."

"Maybe they will," Lamar replied cryptically, "and maybe they won't. You just get as much money as you can to our lawyer. He'll know what to do with it."

"I couldn't do that."

"Rev," Lamar said, "you *better* do it. Otherwise we'll keep you with us and gamble on gettin' out as best we can. Most likely you'll be killed. But if we give up, and you double-cross us by giving the money back to the bank afterwards—then it's for *sure* you'll be killed. Even from jail, that wouldn't be hard to arrange."

"You're threatening me?"

"Rev, our lives are at stake. To us there ain't *nothing* more important. Oh, I know the spot this puts you in—what in Sunday School you used to call a moral dilemma. But think of it this way: if you help us, you'll stop a lot of bloodshed. That's humanitarian, ain't it?"

I didn't reply.

"We talked about this before you got here," Lamar went on. "We decided that for gettin' money out for us, you can keep ten percent. With the hard times and all, I imagine Loving Care could use it. So how about it? Either you stash the money away, go back and get Oldberg to agree to take us to the state capital, or we shoot it out, with you here with us, and devil take the consequences."

I had so much to think about in those few seconds, so many factors to weigh. Looking back on it now, it was remarkable with what certainty I made up my mind.

"Lamar," I said, "I want to be perfectly clear about one thing. I won't do this for the money. But I'll do it for what you said—for humanitarian reasons."

Sally Lou said, "Just a minute." Her fingers strayed to the safety on her carbine. "Boys, I don't trust your Reverend. Long as the odds are, I think we'd be better off waiting for dark, and then using him as a shield and trying to shoot our way out. How about it, Maurice?"

Uncertain, Maurice studied me, then turned to his brother. "I ain't sure about him either, Lamar. Not after he started lecturin' us about the teller. He seemed awful riled up."

"There's nothing to worry about," Lamar replied, his eyes never leaving me, "so long as Rev gives his word that he'll bring us out safe. And carry out as much money as he can for our lawyer. You'll do that, won't you, Rev?"

"Yes," I said, meeting his gaze

squarely, "I'll do that, Lamar."

A few minutes later I left the house and climbed back up the hill. Under my coat, stuffed into pockets and inside my shirt, was currency totaling about twelve thousand dollars, an immense sum in those days.

Captain Oldberg asked, "Well?"

"The Hackers," I told him, "want a car and free passage."

"I *told* you. Under no circumstances—"

"I know. And I now agree, they're stalling until dark. What's more, I don't think the hostage is even there. I think they've already killed him. They wouldn't let me see him, and were evasive when I asked about him. So while it's still light, you'd best do what you must do."

As I turned to leave, the banker said, "Reverend, did they say anything about—"

"The money? Not a word."

Black smoke was rising from behind the hill when I got back to the car.

"You were right," I told Clara. "Those boys are beyond redemption. But there's one consolation. They gave me twelve thousand dollars."

"*Gave* you?"

"Well, not exactly." I started the car and turned it toward home. "I had to break my word to them just now, but I think the Lord will forgive me. It was for humanitarian reasons. As for the money, it belongs to the bank they robbed. But if we're going to continue our good work in this community, I've decided we must keep it, pay off the mortgage and put Loving Care on a sound financial footing. Hopefully the Lord will forgive me for that too."

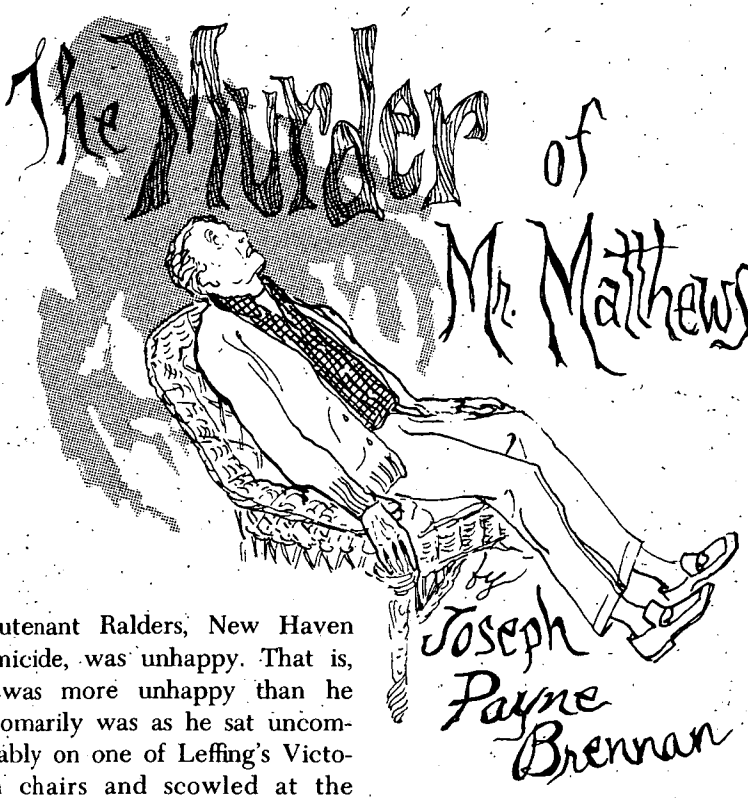
To my relief, Clara did not protest. She always did have a more realistic turn of mind. "With the hard times, there's no other way to save Loving Care, is there? But suppose the Hackers tell someone?"

Behind us there was a single shot, followed by a number of shots and then a great volley.

"Don't worry," I assured her. "They won't talk to anyone else."

In considering motives, one should remember that "a trivial irritation may assume monstrous proportions."

The Murder of Mr. Matthews



by Joseph Payne Brennan

Lieutenant Ralders, New Haven Homicide, was unhappy. That is, he was more unhappy than he customarily was as he sat uncomfortably on one of Leffing's Victorian chairs and scowled at the flowered rug.

"It makes no sense!" he reiterated. "There's just no motive. He was strangled very efficiently, yet his wallet was still in his pocket and, so far as we can tell, not a single item was taken from the apartment. No vandalism either. Not a trace of damage. No forcible entry. No sign that the killer left in a hurry or was interrupted. It's got me buffaloed, Leffing."

He dabbed at his perspiring

forehead with a handkerchief. "And I don't need to remind you we're under terrific pressure these days. The people in these housing projects are really getting on our backs. Burglaries, muggings, vandalism, day after day—and now murder! If I can't crack this, I might as well quit!"

My private investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, regarded the unhappy police lieutenant with a benign smile.

"An intriguing little puzzle, Lieutenant. Perhaps I shall have a look into it."

Ralders sighed with relief. "I'd certainly appreciate it. I feel like a little fish biting a very big hook."

Leffing nodded. "Possibly you could fill us in a bit on the details, Lieutenant. Before you begin, however, let me make one correction. You said, 'There's just no motive.' Nonsense, Ralders! There's *always* a motive for murder. What you meant was, there's just no *apparent* motive."

Ralders humbly agreed. "That's what I meant, of course. Well, to begin, the victim, Frederick Matthews, was sixty-eight. He's lived in the project nearly three years. He's one of those persons who, as they say, has 'come down in the world.' He was a former astronomer and pretty well-known. Had all kinds of degrees and a good teaching job. After his wife divorced him—about ten years ago—he hit the skids. Drank, neglected his work. Finally was asked to retire. He had retirement income but just no head for money. Couldn't pay his alimony. Made foolish investments with the little cash he had left. Finally he became eligible for the elderly persons' housing project."

"Was his divorce amicable—or nasty?" Leffing asked.

Ralders thought a moment. "Somewhere in between. So far as we know, there were no violent scenes, but his ex-wife didn't remain friendly. Her attorney handled all correspondence with Matthews. She's now living in Michigan, by the way."

"Has his former wife learned of his murder?"

"She was informed the next day. She has an airtight alibi, unless she hired someone to kill him. But she had no motive for murder. She's happily remarried and, in fact, really didn't need the alimony even before that. There were no children."

"A 'motive for murder' is not necessarily monetary in origin, Ralders. But continue."

"Well, Matthews lived in one of three apartment units in a complex for the elderly—Tranquillity

Terrace, they call it—out near West Rock. There are fifteen persons in each unit. Generally speaking, the people in each unit keep pretty much to themselves, but not entirely of course. So far, we've interviewed all fourteen people in Matthews' unit. We're starting work tomorrow on the other two units."

Sighing wearily, he pulled out a thick notebook. "Out of the fourteen persons interviewed in Matthews' unit, we have three *possible* suspects, but the cases against all three are awfully flimsy. What I mean is, they had some reason to *dislike* Matthews, but not nearly enough reason to murder him."

Leffing placed his long fingers together, tentlike. "In the distorted mind of a killer, Ralders, a trivial irritation may assume monstrous proportions."

Ralders opened his notebook. "Yeah, I hope so. Well, to start, there's Philip Carver, seventy. Carver had an apartment two doors down from Matthews. They visited back and forth and played chess together. Apparently they took their chess seriously and were sometimes overheard arguing about a game. They had quite a row only a few weeks before Matthews was strangled. From what we can learn, they hadn't spoken to each other since that time."

"Most interesting," Leffing commented. "Continue, Ralders."

Ralders turned a page of the notebook. "Wendell Simpson, sixty-seven; Simpson lived at the far end of the corridor. He was on speaking terms with Matthews, but no more than that. However, a month or so ago, a registered package arrived for Matthews while he was out. Either the deliveryman mispronounced the name or Simpson misunderstood him. At any rate, he told the mailman that the package was incorrectly addressed, that nobody by that name lived in the apartment unit. The package was returned to the post office—and promptly disappeared. We presume it was mislaid and will eventually turn up. But when Matthews found out that a package had arrived and been returned—and then lost—he was furious. He blamed Simpson, of course. Walked down the hall, hammered on Simpson's door and told him off. Simpson answered right back. Like Carver, Simpson quit speaking to Matthews."

"Dear me," Leffing interposed. "Poor Mr. Matthews seems to have possessed a positive genius for alienating his neighbors."

Ralders consulted his notebook. "Third possible suspect, Miss

Amelia Kraft, sixty-five. Matthews had taken her to dinner a few times. The neighbors *think* she, in turn, had him in to dinner at her apartment. Rather abruptly, it appears, he dropped her. That is, he didn't stop speaking, but he no longer asked her out to dinner. In fact, if the neighbors can be believed, he seemed to be trying to avoid her. Well, you know, 'a woman scorned,' as they say." He closed his notebook.

"Female murderers seldom strangle their victims," Leffing pointed out, "but there are always exceptions to the rule. You have no other possible suspects?"

Ralders shook his head. "The other residents in the unit knew Matthews by sight and about half of them spoke to him, but so far as we can learn none of them had any reason for disliking him—much less for murdering him. Most of them knew of his academic background and had great respect for him. A majority of the tenants hadn't got beyond high school, some no further than grade school."

Leffing leaned back in his comfortable morris chair and for some moments remained silent. "Exactly how was Matthews strangled?" he asked at length.

"A thin but tough cord was looped around his neck and pulled tight. He was found in an armchair. It appeared that the killer had dropped the loop over his head from behind. We don't think Matthews ever managed to get out of the chair."

"Was the cord recovered?"

"No. It had cut deeply into Matthews' neck but the killer got it off somehow. We haven't found it."

"The autopsy disclosed nothing else?"

"Nothing relevant that I can think of. No contusions, no bruises—not a single scratch. It seems unlikely that there was a struggle. Apparently Matthews, like most persons of his age, had a degree of arteriosclerosis, but that had nothing to do with his death. He was strangled, period."

Leffing nodded with satisfaction. "You've given us a good outline of the case, Ralders. Perhaps we will look in on the tenants at Tranquillity Terrace tomorrow morning."

Ralders stood up. "I sure hope you can turn up something. I feel right now as if my whole career is teetering on a tightrope." Sighing, he moved toward the door.

"Well, what do you think of the case?" Leffing inquired after Ralders had left.

I frowned. "I'm afraid you've taken on a tough one, Leffing. Assuming it's a so-called 'inside

job'—which we're by no means sure of—there are still forty-four possible suspects. I think Ralders is just indulging in wishful thinking when he says that the residents in each unit 'keep pretty much to themselves.' I've been past the place; the units are well-spaced, but they're not so far apart that the tenants in one unit would remain unacquainted with those in another. Forty-four separate interviews!" I shook my head in dismay.

"Your point is well-made," Leffing agreed, "but perhaps something will turn up before we reach that forty-fourth interview."

About eleven o'clock the next morning we parked in the visitors' lot at Tranquillity Terrace and walked toward the housing unit where the murdered man had lived. The area was clean and well-landscaped but the units themselves, rectangular wooden buildings painted white, reminded me a bit of army barracks. They were obviously designed for the middle to lower income group.

Philip Carver, the victim's former chess opponent, greeted us sourly, rubbing his eyes. "Man can't even take a morning's nap," he complained.

He invited us in reluctantly. Waving toward a worn sofa, he seated himself in a nearby rocking chair. His sharp features were stamped with irritation.

"I've been quizzed already," he observed. "That dumb detective spent an hour grilling me!"

Carver's attitude annoyed Leffing. "Lieutenant Ralders is a competent investigator, Mr. Carver—and may I point out that the killer might strike again. You yourself could be a potential victim. Surely you wish to cooperate?"

Leffing's comments appeared to have a sobering effect. Carver shrugged. "All right. Fire away."

"Is it true," Leffing began, "that you quarreled with Matthews over a chess game and quit speaking to him some weeks before his murder?"

Carver ran a hand through his thinning hair. "That's right. When it looked as if he might lose a game, he usually came up with some crazy rule nobody else ever heard about. I just got fed up with it. I was winning that last game when he claimed that I had to sacrifice a passed pawn whether or not I wanted to. Hogwash! I uptilted the board and walked out."

The recollection rekindled his anger and his face grew red. "But I didn't kill him!" he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Do you know of anyone in this

unit, or in either of the others, who may have hated Matthews enough to murder him?" Leffing asked.

Carver was scornfully emphatic. "No! You're just wasting your time questioning the tenants here. Matthews had a sort of know-it-all attitude that annoyed some of us, but nobody would strangle him for that. It was an outside job, obviously. It was either a burglar or a person who hated Matthews for something that happened in the past. We don't need a Sherlock Holmes to figure that out!"

Leffing stood up. "You may be right, Mr. Carver. You may be right."

As we stepped into the corridor, Carver slammed his door without so much as a farewell nod.

"Testy old boy," I observed.

Leffing remained unruffled. "In this business, one meets all types, Brennan," he replied with professional aplomb.

He started down the corridor. "We will try Mr. Simpson next."

Wendell Simpson, short, plump and white-haired, was the soul of cordiality. After we were comfortably seated in his spotless apartment, he offered us coffee, which I accepted and Leffing politely declined.

Simpson himself opened the conversation. "That incident about the package was most unfortunate. Either the address label was botched or the mailman couldn't see clearly. He inquired for a Mr. Frederick. Of course there's no Mr. Frederick in the unit—nor in either of the other units, so far as I'm aware. Naturally I told him he must have the wrong address. It never occurred to me that he was looking for *Frederick* Matthews. I didn't even recall Matthews' first name till later."

Setting down his coffee cup, he shook his head. "When he learned of the package incident, Matthews pounded on my door and tore into me almost before I could open my mouth." He smiled ruefully. "Gentlemen, he was positively abusive. Ordinarily, I'm quite—ah—even-tempered, but Matthews' tirade was just too much. I'm afraid I lost my temper. Of course I was sorry afterward."

Leffing nodded understandingly. "An unfortunate but essentially trivial incident, Mr. Simpson. I have no doubt you were justified in defending yourself verbally."

Simpson looked relieved. "That detective from the police seemed to look on me as a—well, an actual suspect. I was horrified!"

Leffing smiled reassuringly. "These interviews are purely routine, Mr. Simpson. Where murder

is concerned, we must question everyone even remotely connected with the victim. Tenants in all three of these units have been, or will be, questioned."

Simpson poured more coffee. "You have no alternative, of course. It was a pretty brutal business. I'm still shaken up about it." He set down his cup. "I don't resent being quizzed. But I truly feel, Mr. Leffing, that an outsider committed this horrible crime."

Leffing stood up. "That remains a definite possibility. I'm sure the police are working on that assumption, Mr. Simpson."

After thanking him for his cooperation and hospitality, we emerged into the corridor again.

"Quite a contrast to Carver," I commented. "Where to next?"

Leffing straightened his tie. "Miss Amelia Kraft."

Miss Kraft, tall, dignified and meticulously groomed, looked less than her sixty-five years. She appeared cooperative, yet somewhat aloof.

After we sat down, Leffing seemed momentarily uncertain about how to begin the questioning. "I understand, Miss Kraft, that you were—ah—acquainted with the murdered man."

Miss Kraft, sitting straight in her chair, looked directly into Leffing's eyes. "I was not merely acquainted with him, Mr. Leffing. He invited me out to dinner a number of times and on one occasion we dined together in my apartment. Quite suddenly—or so it seemed to me—Mr. Matthews made it evident that he no longer desired my company. I have no idea why."

Leffing returned Miss Kraft's gaze with a show of admiration in his own eyes. "Thank you for being frank, Miss Kraft. Have you any idea, no matter how fantastic it may appear to you, what person or circumstance may have figured in Mr. Matthews' dreadful demise?"

"None whatever. I believe he had some minor squabbles with some of the other tenants, but nothing of any consequence. I myself was annoyed with him, but I looked on him purely as a friend. I certainly had no *designs* on him! I can't believe that anyone living here would want to kill him. I am convinced that someone from outside slipped into his apartment and strangled him."

She paused and then shuddered. "I am so sure of this that I have ordered double locks for all my doors and windows. I have even considered obtaining a—well, some kind of firearm."

Leffing inclined his head. "I can appreciate your concern, Miss

Kraft. I'm afraid we are living in an intensifying climate of crime."

After a few further questions, which I must admit appeared entirely perfunctory to me, Leffing arose and Miss Kraft acknowledged our thanks as we moved to the door.

Leffing hesitated briefly as the door closed behind us. At length he started down the corridor. "I think that does it for today, Brennan. We have seen Ralders' three so-called suspects. Before we go on, perhaps I had best mull over the facts we have so far assembled, meager though they appear to be."

As we drove back toward Autumn Street, I finally ventured an opinion. "I can't help feeling that the missing package may be a key clue."

"It may be a key clue, or it may prove meaningless," Leffing replied.

"You see no significant leads?"

"At this point, Brennan, mere speculation is foolish. We must have more data. The three suspects remain suspects—but so does everyone else in the housing complex."

When I drove back to Autumn Street the next morning, it was obvious that Leffing had made no progress. He was moody and irritable.

"What baffles me, Brennan, is *motive*. I can see none!"

I nodded. "The same problem that brought Lieutenant Ralders to a dead end."

Leffing paced the room restlessly. "Ralders has furnished me with so-called thumbnail sketches of the other eleven tenants in the victim's apartment unit. All eleven have been interrogated by Ralders himself, and he has drawn a complete blank. I fear we must repeat the interrogation process, Brennan, tedious though it may be."

I stood up. "We might as well make a start, then. My car's outside."

"Have you decided on any systemized order of interview?" I asked as we drove back toward Tranquillity Terrace.

"Since none of Ralders' notes offers any promising information, I can't see that the specific sequence of interviews matters in the slightest," Leffing answered. "We will simply interview at random whoever is up and about and available."

The first tenant to be interviewed turned out to be an elderly arthritic woman, a Mrs. Julia Conport, who answered the door supported by two canes. After motioning us to chairs, she lowered herself onto a sofa with an effort which was obviously

agonizing, then she turned to us.

"One of those days," she commented. "Some days is terrible and some is middlin'. No days is really good once the pain's settled in your poor old bones."

Leffing was properly sympathetic. "Do not despair, Mrs. Conport. Medical science is making tremendous strides."

Mrs. Conport rested her canes against the sofa. "Ain't stridin' fast enough t'help me! Well, I suppose you want to ask the same questions that detective asked the other day. I can tell you now, Mr. Leffing, I thought and thought and there ain't a thing I can add. I had just a noddin' acquaintance with Mr. Matthews. He wasn't interested in a crippled old lady like me. I'm right positive he was killed by some crazy young person who came here to steal. I just think it's a disgrace—them young people all mad-like with dope, runnin' around murderin' to get more money to get more dope. It's an outrage! And the police sittin' in their cars under a shade tree when the sun gets hot!"

"You malign the police, Mrs. Conport," Leffing replied rather sharply. "They risk their lives daily in the pursuit of criminals."

Mrs. Conport remained unimpressed. "Well, they ain't havin' much luck. Every time I pick up the daily paper I get the cold chills readin' about some terrible new killin'."

After a few questions which seemed to me repetitious as well as routine in nature, Leffing stood up and thanked Mrs. Conport. We reentered the corridor.

"Another blank," I commented.

Leffing glanced at the list in his hand. "It would appear so, Brennan. Well, we can but go on. Let us see if Mr. Virgo Atano is available."

Virgo Atano, sixty-five, a short, muscular man with a bald head and bright black eyes, greeted us warmly, even offering wine—which we refused—after we were seated.

Atano spread his hands in a gesture which we soon noticed was habitual and characteristic. "A terrible thing! A terrible thing! I—what you say—rack the brain. I tell the detective all I remember. But is not much. Mr. Matthews a great man!"

He shrugged. "I—had not much school." He shook his head sadly. "He knew so much, and me so little. It should have been me murdered, not poor Mr. Matthews."

"Nonsense, Mr. Atano!" Leffing interrupted. "Great knowledge does not always bring wisdom—nor happiness. But let us get on.

You knew Mr. Matthews sufficiently well to converse with him on occasion?"

Atano spread his hands. "Mr. Matthews a nice, polite man. He talk to me sometimes. He said I made the good wine! You sure you not have any?" He looked from Leffing to me.

I was about to refuse a second time when Leffing spoke up. "Well, perhaps I will reconsider, Mr. Atano. But only a drop."

Atano was pleased. He looked at me, questioningly.

I smiled. "Just a taste, Mr. Atano."

He got up quickly and started for the kitchen. "Is good for you. Good for the blood."

As he moved about the kitchen, Leffing glanced at the far wall. I saw that he was gazing at a painting of what I took to be an olive grove on a hillside.

At length he got up, crossed the room and lifted the painting from the wall. He was still looking at it when Atano came back with three glasses of wine on a small tray.

Atano set the tray on a coffee table. "You like?"

Leffing rehung the painting. "Yes indeed, Mr. Atano. I hope you will forgive my being so bold as to take it from the wall, but I did want a good look at it."

Atano sighed as we lifted glasses. "That painting, it remind me of my homeland. I look at it and sometimes the tears, they come."

Leffing nodded understandingly. "It is indeed surprising, Mr. Atano, how affecting a mere painting can sometimes be."

Somewhat to my surprise, the wine was excellent. We all appeared to relax and enjoy it.

Atano, at Leffing's urging, reviewed his occasional chats with Matthews, but he offered no new information.

He smiled finally, ruefully. "He talked, and I listen. I do not understand what he say half the time." He tapped his head. "Mr. Matthews knew everything. Me? I know how to make the good wine."

Leffing set down his empty glass and got up. "Good wine, Mr. Atano, has its own importance."

After thanking him for his hospitality, we stepped once again into the familiar corridor.

Leffing looked at his list, hesitated, and finally shoved it back into his pocket. "I fear, Brennan, the wine was a mistake. The thought of further useless interviews rather depresses me at the moment."

As we drove back to Autumn Street, he lapsed into one of his frequent uncommunicative moods

which I knew and also dreaded.

"Do you intend to continue the questioning tomorrow?" I asked.

Taking out his list, he read through the names. "I presume so. There seems no escape from it."

When I stopped to pick him up the next morning, I saw at once that his mood had changed. As we drove toward Tranquillity Terrace, I decided a cautious inquiry might be in order.

"There has been a break in the case?"

"I believe so, Brennan. We are to meet Lieutenant Ralders and Detective Cardino at Tranquillity Terrace. I hope to obtain a confession from the murderer."

I was astounded, but I knew better than to question him further. Unfortunately, he possessed an almost childish penchant for climactic melodrama and I realized that he would resent additional questions until after the case was resolved.

When we arrived, Lieutenant Ralders and Cardino were waiting for us. As we strode down the corridor of the unit in which the murdered man had lived, I felt positive that we would stop at Wendell Simpson's door. I was wrong.

Instead, Leffing rang the door chimes at Virgo Atano's apartment.

Atano looked startled to see us, but he recovered quickly and invited us in. He was dressed in a bathrobe and he had not yet shaved.

He apologized for his appearance. "I—oversleep a little. I guess I must get the alarm clock."

Once we were seated, Leffing lost no time. "Mr. Atano, we have come here to arrest you for the murder of Mr. Matthews. We have recovered the cord with which you strangled him. Chemical tests prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are the killer!"

Atano's mouth dropped open in astonishment. He stared at us. "The cord?" he said weakly.

Leffing nodded. "The cord, or rope as you may call it, which you dropped over Matthews' head as you walked behind his chair on some pretext."

Atano's round face whitened visibly, but he was not yet ready to concede anything.

He spread his hands. "Why I kill Mr. Matthews? I have no reason!"

Leffing was relentless. "You had the best reason in the world. Matthews destroyed your faith—your religious faith—and in destroying that, he destroyed your peace of mind. The loss of your beliefs made you miserably unhappy—and

finally you came to hate Matthews!"

Atano gazed at Leffing with horrified incredulity. One might have thought that my friend was some kind of diabolic magician.

There was silence for a moment. Suddenly Atano buried his face in his hands and began to sob.

The four of us sat watching him. I felt embarrassed and ill at ease but Leffing's face remained expressionless.

Atano took out a handkerchief and looked up at us. "Is true! All my life I believe in God, in heaven and hell. I think that when I die, I live again—forever, happy for all time."

He shook his head. "Then I talk to Mr. Matthews. He tell me about the sky, the universe, the stars, millions and millions and millions. He said the earth—this whole earth—was a tiny piece of sand, a grain of sand on a big beach ten thousand miles long. He said the universe stretched so far no telescope ever see the end—not the biggest telescope can be made!"

He wiped his eyes. "I think of these things—until I feel I go mad. I think and think and I not understand. I no longer believe what the good nuns taught me. Mr. Matthews said nobody can understand, can explain, the universe. He just—just laughed about it!"

His face darkened. "Yes, I killed him. Because he killed me—inside." He touched his chest. "In here. He killed my soul, my faith. I hated him for that. And for that I killed him!"

We left Lieutenant Ralders and Detective Cardino to take care of the formalities.

As I walked out of Atano's apartment, I felt a sense of immense relief. Neither Leffing nor I spoke until we were nearly halfway back to Autumn Street.

"I suppose once again I appear obtuse, Leffing, but how in tarnation did you figure it out?"

"Brennan, you simply must learn to be more observant. Did it not strike you as at least peculiar that I would lift down a painting from Atano's wall?"

"The olive grove? But it was a poor painting, one of no significance. You could pick up such a slapdash product at any shopping center for a few dollars."

"Exactly! Obviously, then, I had no interest in the painting. I was interested in what lay beneath it."

I stared at him. "But there was *nothing* beneath it!"

Leffing thought a moment. "You were a few feet farther away from the wall than I, but I doubt that small distance would make any

difference. Beneath the painting, clearly visible on the wall, was the outline where a cross or crucifix had previously hung, presumably for a fairly long period of time."

I made no attempt to conceal my exasperation. "How could I see through the painting to the wall beneath?"

Leffing explained patiently. "The lower two inches of the crucifix had extended beyond the bottom edge of the painting. It was that light rectangle on the wall, directly beneath a painting which was obviously new, which first attracted my attention. When I removed the painting, pretending interest in it, I immediately saw the entire outline of the crucifix which had only recently been removed.

"If I recall correctly, Brennan, I stepped away from the wall when I removed the painting. Had you been more observant, you would have seen the outline of the crucifix."

Back at Autumn Street, I settled into a chair. "All right. I admit I should have been more observant. But I'm still left high in the air. How did you connect the removal of a crucifix from a man's wall with a recent murder in the building?"

Leffing slid back into his comfortable morris chair. "Remember, Brennan, what brought Ralders to us in the first place—lack of any apparent motive for murder. To me, it was obvious from the beginning that Matthews had not been killed by an outsider. Do you think it likely that he would sit quietly in a chair while a stranger walked around behind him and dropped a noose over his head? Possible, of course, but very unlikely. I decided to dismiss such a possibility. I concluded that someone Matthews knew tolerably well had killed him. Probably, I reasoned, the killer got behind his chair on some commonplace pretext. Perhaps he had asked to use the lavatory, which would require him to pass behind Matthews' chair.

"Once I had made up my mind on this, I began to search for a motive. I found it difficult to believe that any of Ralders' so-called suspects were guilty. None had sufficient motive. Carver—a quarrel over a chess game; Simpson—a misunderstanding over a package which had been returned to the post office and mislaid; Miss Kraft—the termination of a friendship which had not progressed beyond the casual stage.

"As I began to muse over Atano's crucifix, a fantastic thought occurred to me. When I

checked with Ralders about the missing cord and a few other matters, he mentioned—quite incidentally—that a trash pickup man had found a crucifix in the rubbish barrel in front of Matthews' unit. Since it was in good condition, he had retrieved it and taken it home. Unquestionably it had belonged to Atano.

"Why, Brennan, would a man remove a crucifix from his wall and throw it in the trash? Why? Because its symbolic value no longer held any meaning for him! You of course recall that Matthews was—or had been—a noted astronomer. While I do not mean to imply that astronomers are religious skeptics, I did sense the incongruity of the conversations which must have taken place between Matthews and Atano. Atano admitted talking to him and mentioned that Matthews had complimented him on his wine. It was apparent to me that Matthews had probably visited Atano's apartment and that Atano, in turn, had returned the visit."

I stood up and paced the floor. "It seems lucid when you explain it, but there are so many loose ends. What about the cord and those chemical tests? You didn't even tell me the cord had been recovered. And what about the missing package?"

Leffing smiled wryly. "There were no chemical tests. We were bluffing. In fact, the cord hasn't been found. We believe Atano threw it in the trash before the investigation got under way, and it has been incinerated at the city dump. The package will probably be recovered in due time. I predict that it will have no bearing on the case."

I sat down, mollified but still somewhat incredulous. "It still remains the most bizarre motive for murder that I've ever heard."

Leffing shrugged. "I assure you, Brennan, I have known of motives *far more* bizarre."

Later, as we lifted brandy glasses to celebrate the successful conclusion of a case, Leffing smiled apologetically. "Perhaps, Brennan, the outline of that crucifix was not as clear as I believed."

A selfless operative may have his own particular reasons for ferreting out a misfit.

Sunday Morning Coming Down . . .

That's the title of a sad popular song by Kris Kristofferson, about a man with no wife and no children and nowhere to go and very little to look forward to on a quiet Sunday morning. On this quiet Sunday morning, I was that man. Nowhere to go and very little to look forward to.

I carried a cup of coffee into the livingroom of my flat in San Francisco's Pacific Heights. It was a pretty nice day out, cloudless, a little windy. The part of the Bay I could see from my front windows was a rippled green and dotted with sailboats, like a bas-relief map with a lot of small white flags pinned to it.

I moved over to the tier of bookshelves that covered one wall, where most of my six-thousand-odd detective and mystery pulp magazines were arranged. I ran my fingers over some of the spines: *Black Mask, Dime Detective, Clues, Detective Fiction Weekly, Detective Story.* I had started collecting them in 1947, and that meant almost three decades of my life were on those shelves—nearly three-fifths of the time I had been on this earth—and next Friday, I would be fifty years old.

I took one of the *Black Masks* down and looked at the cover: Chandler, Whitfield, Nebel, Babcock—old friends that once I could have passed a quiet Sunday with, that would have lifted me out of most any depressed mood I

might happen to be in—but not this Sunday . . .

The telephone rang.

I keep the thing in the bedroom, and I went in there and caught up the receiver. It was Eberhardt, a sobersided lieutenant of detectives and probably my closest friend for about the same number of years as I had been collecting the pulps.

"Hello, hot stuff," he said. "Get you out of bed?"

"No. I've been up for hours."

"You're getting to be an early bird in your old age."

"Yeah."

"Listen, how's for a little cribbage and a lot of beer this afternoon? Dana and the kids are off to Sausalito for the day."

"I don't think so, Eb," I said. "I'm not in the beer-and-cribbage mood."

BY

Bill Pronzini

"You sound like you're in a mood, period."

"I guess I am, a little."

"Private eye blues, huh?"

"Yeah—private eye blues."

He made chuckling sounds. "Wouldn't happen to have anything to do with your fiftieth coming up, would it? Hell, fifty's the prime of life. I ought to know, tiger, I been there two years now."

"Sure."

"Well, you change your mind about the beer, at least, come on over. I'll save you a can."

We rang off, and I went back to the livingroom and finished my coffee and tried not to think about anything. I might as well have tried not to breathe. I got up and paced around for a while, aimlessly.

Sunday morning coming down . . .

Abruptly, the old consumptive cough started up. So I sat down again, handkerchief to my mouth, and listened to the dry brittle sounds echo hollowly through the empty flat. Cigarettes—damned cigarettes! An average of two packs a day for thirty-five years, thirty-five out of fifty. More than a half-million cigarettes. More than ten million lungsful of tobacco smoke . . .

Knock it off, I told myself sharply. What's the use in that kind of thinking? Once more I got to my feet—all I seemed to be doing this morning was standing up and sitting down. Well, I had to get out of there, that was all, before I became claustrophobic. Go somewhere, do something. A long solitary drive, maybe; I just did not want to see Eberhardt or anybody else.

I put on an old corduroy jacket, left the flat and picked up my car. The closest direction out of the city was north, and so I drove across the Golden Gate Bridge and straight up Highway 101. Some two hours later, in redwood country a few miles north of Cloverdale, I swung off toward the coast—and eventually, past two o'clock, I reached Highway One and turned south again.

There, the sun was invisible above a high-riding bank of fog, and you could smell the sharp, clean odor of the sea; traffic was only sporadic. The breakers hammering endlessly against the shoreline began to have a magnetic attraction, and near Anchor Bay I pulled off onto a bluff. I left my car on the deserted parking area, found a path leading down to an equally deserted beach.

I walked along the beach, watching the waves unfold, listening to their rhythmic roar and to the sound of gulls wheeling unseen somewhere in the mist. It was a lonely place, but the loneliness was part of its appeal; a good spot for me on this Sunday.

The cold began to get to me after half an hour or so, and the cough started again. I came back up the path, and when I reached the bluff I saw that another vehicle had pulled into the parking area—a dusty green pickup truck with a small, dusty camper attached to the bed. It listed a little to the left in back, and the reason for that was evident enough: the tire there was flat. Nearby, motionless except for wind-tossed hair and clothing, two men and a girl stood looking at the tire, like figures in some sort of alfresco exhibit.

I started in their direction, the direction of my car. The crunching sound of my steps carried above the whisper of the surf, and the three of them glanced up. They did some shifting of position that I didn't pay much attention to, and exchanged a few words; then they stepped away from the pickup and approached me, walking in long matching strides like marchers in a parade. We all stopped, a few feet apart, along the driver's side of my car.

"Hi," one of the men said. He was in his early twenties, the same approximate age as the other two, and he had longish red hair and a droopy moustache, wore a poplin windbreaker, blue jeans and chukka boots. He looked nervous, his smile nothing more than a forced stretching of his lips.

Both the other guy and the girl seemed to be just as nervous. His hair was dark, cut much shorter

than the redhead's, and he had a dark squarish face; his outfit consisted of slacks, a plaid lumberman's jacket and brown loafers. She was plain, thin-lipped, pale, wearing a long, heavy car-coat and a green bandanna tied forward around her head like a monk's cowl. Chestnut-colored hair fell across her shoulders. All

three of them had their hands buried in their pockets.

I nodded and said, "Hi."

"We've had a flat," the redhead said.

"So I see."

"We haven't got a jack."

"Oh. Well, I've got one. You're welcome to use it."

"Thanks."

I hesitated, frowning a little. You get feelings sometimes, when you've been a cop in one form or another most of your life, and you learn to trust them. I had one of those feelings now, and it said something was wrong here—very wrong. Their nervousness was part of it, but there was also a heavy, palpable tension among the three of them: people caught up in some sort of volatile and perhaps dangerous drama. Maybe it was none of my business, but the cop's instinct, the cop's innate curiosity, would not allow me to ignore the feeling of wrongness.

I said, "It's a good thing I happened to be here. There doesn't seem to be much traffic in these parts today."

The redhead took his left hand

out of his pocket and pressed diffident fingers against his moustache. "Yeah," he said, "a good thing."

The girl snuffled a little from the cold, produced a handkerchief, snapped it open, and blew her nose; her eyes were focused straight ahead.

The dark-haired guy shifted his feet, and his eyes were furtive. He drew the flaps of his jacket in across his stomach. "Pretty cold out here," he said pointedly.

I glanced over at the pickup; it had Oregon license plates. "Going far?"

"Uh . . . Bodega Bay."

"You on vacation?"

"More or less."

"Must be a little cramped, the three of you in that camper."

"We like it cramped," the redhead said. His voice had gone up an octave or two. "How about your jack, OK?"

I got my keys out and stepped back around the car and opened the trunk. The three of them stayed where they were, watching me. They don't belong together, I thought abruptly, not those three—and that, too, was part of the feeling of wrongness. The redhead was the mod type, with his long hair and moustache, and the dark one had a more conservative look. Did that mean anything? One *could* be an interloper, the unwanted third wheel—though in a situation that may have had a lot more meaning than the average kind of two's-company-three's-a-crowd thing. If that was it, which one? The girl had not looked at one guy more than the other; her eyes, crinkled against the wind, were still focused straight ahead.

I unhooked the jack and took it out and closed the trunk again. When I returned to them I said, "Maybe I'd better set this up for you. It's trickier to operate than most."

"We can manage," the dark guy said.

"Just the same . . ."

I took the jack over to the rear of the pickup; the spare tire was propped against the bumper. There were little windows in each of the camper doors, one of them draped in rough cloth and the other one clear. I glanced inside through the clear window. There were storage cupboards, a small table with bunk-type benches on two sides, a ladder that led up to sleeping facilities above the cab; all of it neat and clean, with everything put away or tied down that might roll around when they were in motion.

The three of them came over and formed another half-circle,

the girl in the middle this time. I got down in a crouch and slid the jack under the axle and fiddled with it, getting it in place. As soon as I began to work the handle, both the redhead and the dark-haired one pitched in to help. Nothing passed between any of them that I could see.

It took us fifteen minutes to change the tire. I tried several times to make conversation, small talk that might give me a clue as to what was going on among them, which of them didn't belong, but they weren't having any. The boys gave me occasional monosyllables, and the girl, snuffling, did not say anything at all.

When I had worked the handle to lower the truck onto all four tires again, and pulled the jack out from underneath, I said, "Well, there you go. You'd better get that flat repaired at the first station you come to. You don't want to be driving around without a spare."

"We'll do that," the dark guy said.

I gave them a let's-bridge-the-generation-gap smile. "You wouldn't happen to have a beer or a soft drink or something inside, would you? Manual labor always makes me thirsty."

The redhead looked at the girl, then at the dark-haired one, and began to fidget. "Sorry—nothing at all."

"We'd better get moving," the dark guy said, and he picked up the flat and slid it into the metal holder attached to the undercarriage, locked it down. Then the three of them went immediately to the driver's door.

I did not want to let them go, but there was no way I could think of to keep them there. Following, I watched the redhead open the door and climb in. That gave me a good look inside the cab, but there wasn't much to see; nothing there that shouldn't be there, nothing at all on the seat or on the little shelf behind the seat, or on the dashboard or on the passenger-side floorboards. The girl got in second, and that made the dark one the driver. He swung the door shut, started the engine.

"Take it easy," I said, and lifted my hand. None of them looked at me. The pickup jerked forward, a little too fast, tires spraying gravel, and pulled out onto Highway One. It went away to the south, gathering speed.

I stood watching until they were out of sight. Then I went back to my car and got inside and started her up and put the heater on high. So now what? Drive back to San Francisco, forget about this little incident—that was

the simplest thing to do—but I could not get it out of my head. One of those kids, or maybe even more than one, did not belong. The more I thought about it, the more I felt I ought to know which of them it was. More importantly, there was that aura of tension and anxiety all three had projected.

I had no real cause or right to play detective, but I did have a duty to my conscience and to the vested interests of others, and I did have a strong disinclination to return to my empty, quiet flat. So all right. So I would do some of what I had been doing in one form or another, for bread and butter, the past thirty-one years.

I put the car in gear and drove out and south on the highway. It took me four miles to catch sight of them. They were moving along at a good clip, maybe ten over the speed limit but within the boundaries of safety. I adjusted my speed to match theirs, with several hundred yards between us. It was not the best time of day for a shagging operation—coming on toward dusk—and the thick, drifting fog cut visibility to a minimum; but the pickup's lights were on and I could track it well enough by the diffused red flickers of the tail lamps.

We went straight down the coast, through Stewart's Point and past Fort Ross. There was still not much traffic, but enough so that we weren't the only two vehicles on the road. The fog got progressively heavier, took on the consistency of a misty drizzle and forced me to switch on the windshield wipers. Daylight faded into the long, cold shadows of night. When we reached Jenner, at the mouth of the Russian River, it was full dark.

A few miles farther on, the pickup came into Bodega Bay, and went right on through without slowing. So that made the dark-haired one a liar about their ultimate destination. I wondered just where it was they were really headed, and asked myself how far I was prepared to follow them. I decided all the way, until they stopped somewhere, until I satisfied myself one way or another about the nature of their relationship with each other. If that meant following them into tomorrow, even into another state—OK. I had no cases pending, nothing on my hands and too much on my mind; and work, purposeful or purposeless, was the only real antidote I knew for self-pity and depression.

Valley Ford, Tomales, Point Reyes . . . the pickup did not alter its speed. We were maybe

thirty miles from the Golden Gate Bridge then, and I was running low on gas; I had enough to get me into San Francisco but not much farther than that.

The problem of stopping to refuel turned out to be academic. Just south of Olema Village the pickup slowed considerably, and I saw its brake lights flash. Then it swung off onto a secondary road to the west, toward the Point Reyes National Seashore.

When I got to the intersection a couple of minutes later, my head lamps picked up a sign with a black-painted arrow and the words *Public Campground, 3 Miles.* So maybe they were going to stop here for the night, or for supper anyway. I debated the wisdom of running dark. The fog was thinner along here, curling tendrils moving rapidly in a sharp, gusty wind, and you could see jagged patches of sky, like pieces in an astronomical jigsaw puzzle. Visibility was fairly good, and there did not figure to be much traffic on the secondary road, and I did not want to alert them. I switched off the lights, turned onto the road, and drove along at less than twenty.

The terrain had a rumpled look, because this area was a major San Andreas fault zone. I passed a little "sag pond" where run-off water had collected in depressions created by past earthquakes. Exactly three miles in, close to the ocean—I could hear again the whisper of combers—the campground appeared on the left. Backed in against high sand dunes westward, and ringed by pine and fir to the east and south, it was a small state-maintained facility with wooden outhouses and stone barbecues, and trash receptacles placed in reminder every few yards.

The pickup was there, lights still on, pulled back near the trees on the far edge of the grounds.

I saw it on a long diagonal, partially screened by the evergreens. Instead of driving abreast of the entrance and beyond, where they might see or hear me, I took my car immediately onto the berm and cut off the engine. Ten seconds later, the pickup's lights went out.

I sat motionless behind the wheel, trying to decide what to do next, but the mind is a funny thing: all the way here I had been unable to clarify the reasons why I felt one or more of those three didn't belong, and now that I was thinking about something else, memory cells went click, click, click, and all at once I knew just what had been bothering me—three little isolated things that,

put together, told me exactly which of them did not belong. I felt myself frowning. I still had no idea what the situation itself was, but what I had just perceived made the whole thing all the more strange and compelling.

I reached up, took the plastic dome off the interior light and unscrewed the bulb, then I got out of the car, went across the road. The wind, blowing hard and cold, had sharp little teeth in it that bit at the exposed skin on my face and hands. Overhead, wisps of fog fled through the darkness like chilled fingers seeking warmth.

Moving slowly, cautiously, I entered the trees and made my way to the south, roughly parallel to where the pickup was parked. Beyond the second of two deadfalls I had a glimpse of it through the wind-bent boughs, maybe forty yards away. The cab was dark and seemed to be empty; faint light shone at the rear of the camper, faint enough to tell me that both door windows were now draped.

I crossed toward the pickup, stopped to listen when I was less than ten yards from it and hidden in shadow along the bole of a bishop pine. There was nothing to hear except the cry of the wind and the faint murmuring of surf in the distance. I stared in at the cab. Empty, all right. Then I studied the ground along the near side of the pickup: no gravel, just earth and needles that would muffle the slow tread of footsteps.

One pace at a time, I went from the pine to the side of the pickup. Near the end of the camper I stopped and leaned in close and pressed my ear against the cold metal, put my right index finger in the other ear to shut out the wind. At first, for a full thirty seconds, there were faint sounds of movement inside but no conversation. Then, muffled but distinguishable, one of them spoke—the one who didn't belong.

"Hurry up with those sandwiches."

"I'm almost finished," another voice said timorously.

"And I'm damned hungry—but I don't want to sit around here any longer than we have to. You understand?"

"It's a public campground. The State Park people won't bother us, if that's what—"

"Shut up! I told both of you before, no comments and no trouble if you don't want a bullet in the head. Do I have to tell you again?"

"No."

"Then keep your mouth closed and get those sandwiches ready. We got a lot of driving left to do before we get to Mexico."

That exchange told me as much as I needed to know about the situation, and it was worse than I had expected. Kidnapping, probably, and God knew what other felonies. It was time to take myself out of it, to file a report with the closest Highway Patrol office—Olema or Point Reyes. You can take private detection just so far, and then you're a fool unless you turn things over to a public law-enforcement agency. I pulled back, half-turned, and started to retreat into the trees.

In that moment, the way things happen sometimes—unexpectedly, coincidentally, so that there's no way you can foresee them or guard against them—the wind gusted sharply and blew a limb from one of the deadfalls nearby, sent it banging loudly against the metal side of the camper.

From inside, in immediate response, there was an abrupt scraping and a crashing of something upended. I was still backing away, but it was too late then for running. The camper's doors rattled open and one of them came lurching out and into my vision, saw me and shouted, "Hold it, you! Hold it!" In one extended hand was something long and black, something that could only be a gun. I held it.

The figure was the one who didn't belong, of course—and the one who didn't belong was the girl.

Only he wasn't a girl.

He stood there with his feet spread, crouching slightly, holding the gun in both hands: nervous, scared, dangerous. He was not wearing the wig or the bandanna now; his hair was clipped close to his scalp, and it was light-colored, almost white in the darkness. Except for his pale girlish face, his hairless hands—physical quirks of nature—there was nothing at all effeminate about him.

"Move up this way," he said.

I hesitated, and then I did what he told me. He backed away quickly, into position to cover both me and the rear of the camper. When I was three long strides from him I stopped, and I could see the other two standing between the open doors, silhouetted in the light from inside. They were motionless, eyes flicking between me and the one holding the gun.

"What the hell?" the guy with the gun said. He had recognized me. "You followed us."

I did not say anything.

"Why? Who are you, man?"

I watched him for a moment, then, stretching the truth a little because I wanted to see his reaction, I said, "I'm a cop."

He didn't like that. A tic started up on the left side of his mouth and he made a swaying motion with the gun, as if he could not quite keep his hands steady. He wasn't at all chary about using the weapon, I was pretty sure of that—on me or on the two scared kids by the camper. You get so you can gauge the depths of a man, how far he'll go, what he's capable of; this one was capable of murder, all right, and in his agitated state it would not take much to push him into it.

He said finally, "That's your problem," and made a sound that might have been a grunt or a skittish laugh. "You don't seem surprised that I'm not a female."

"No."

"What put you onto me?"

"Three things," I said flatly. "One was the way you blew your nose back there on the parking area. You took your handkerchief out and snapped it open in front of you; that's a man's gesture, not a woman's. Second thing is the way you walk. Long strides, hard strides—masculine movements, same as the other two kids. Third thing, you weren't carrying a purse or a handbag, and there wasn't one inside the camper or cab. I never knew a girl yet who didn't have some kind of handbag within easy reach at all times."

He rubbed the back of his free hand across his nose. "I'll have to watch those things from now on," he said. "You're pretty sharp, old man."

Old man, I thought. I said, "Yeah, pretty sharp."

The redheaded kid said, "What are you going to do?" in a shaky voice.

The guy with the gun did not answer immediately; he was staring intently at me, mouth still twitching. I watched him think it over, making up his mind. Finally he said to the other two, "You got rope or anything inside there?"

"Some clothesline," the dark one answered.

"Get it. We'll tie the cop up and take him with us."

Anger started up inside me. You let him tie you up, I told myself, you stand a good chance of dying that way, helpless; you and those two kids, dead by the side of the road somewhere. I said, "Why not shoot me right here and be done with it? Here or someplace else, what difference does it make?"

His face darkened. "Shut up, you!"

I took a measured step toward him.

"Stand still!" He made a convulsive stabbing motion with the gun. "I'm warning you, old man,

I'm shooting if you don't stop."

"Sure you are," I said, and jumped him.

The gun went off a foot in front of my face.

Flame and powder seared my skin, half-blinded me, and I felt the heat of the bullet past my right cheek. The roar of the shot was deafening, but I got my left hand on his wrist, coming in close to him, and twisted the arm away before he could fire again. I hit him twice with my right—short, hard blows to the stomach and chest. Breath spilled out of his mouth, and he staggered, off-balance. I kicked his legs out from under him, wrenched the gun free as he fell and then went down on top of him. When I hit him again, on the lower jaw, I felt him go limp. He was out of it.

I pulled back on one knee, stood up holding the gun laxly at my side. My cheek was sore and inflamed, and my eyes stung, watered, but that was all the damage I'd suffered. Except for a liquidy feeling in my legs, I did not seem to have any belated reaction to what I had just done.

The redhead and the dark guy moved forward jerkily, the way people will after a full release of tension; their faces, stark and white, were animated with a kind of deliverance.

"OK," I said to them, "you'd better get that clothesline now."

We used my car to deliver the one who didn't belong, whose name turned out to be Cullen, to the Highway Patrol office in Point Reyes. On the way, the other two—Tony Piper and Ed Holmberg—gave me an account of what had been for them a twelve-hour ordeal.

They were students at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon, and they had set out from there early this morning for a two-day camping trip along the Rogue River. However, near Coos Bay they had made the mistake of stopping to offer a ride to what they thought was a girl hitchhiker. Cullen pulled the gun immediately and forced them to drive down the coast into California. He wanted to go to Mexico, he'd told them, and because he did not know how to drive himself, they were elected to be his chauffeurs all the way.

He had also told them that he'd escaped from the local county jail, where he had been held on one count of armed robbery and two of attempted murder after an abortive savings-and-loan holdup. Following his escape, with a statewide alert out on him, he had broken into an empty house look-

ing for clothing and money. The house apparently belonged to a spinster, since there hadn't been any male clothing around, but there had been a couple of wigs and plenty of female apparel of Cullen's size. That was when he had gotten the idea to disguise himself as a woman.

When we arrived at the Highway Patrol office, Cullen was still unconscious. Piper and Holmberg told their story again to an officer named Maxfield, the man in charge. I gave a terse account of my part in it, but they insisted on embellishing that, making me out, in their gratitude, to be some sort of hero.

Maxfield and I were alone in his private office when I showed him the photostat of my license. He gave me a cynically amused smile. "A private eye, huh? Well, the way you disarmed Cullen was private eye stuff, all right. Just like on TV."

"Sure," I said wearily. "Just like on TV."

"You've got a lot of guts, that's all I can say."

"No, I don't have a lot of guts. I've never done anything like that before in my life. I just couldn't let those kids be hurt, if I could help it. Cullen might have killed them, sooner or later, and they've got plenty of living left to do."

"He almost killed *you*, my friend," Maxfield said.

"I didn't much care about that. Just the kids."

"The selfless op, right?"

"Wrong."

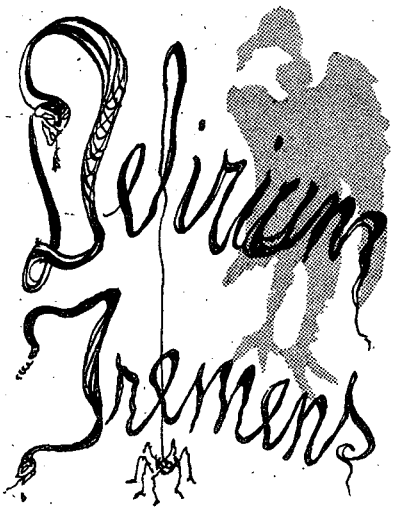
"Then why didn't you care what happened to you?"

I did not say anything for a time. Then, because I had kept it inside me long enough: "All right, I'll tell you. In fact, you'll be the first person I've been able to tell. My best friend doesn't even know."

"Know what?"

I went over to the window and looked out so I would not have to face Maxfield's reaction. "Unless something of a minor miracle takes place, the doctors give me maybe eighteen months to live," I said. "I've got terminal lung cancer."

A little knowledge is said to be a dangerous thing—but there are times when it is expedient.



Toward midforenoon after the midnight sailing, the purser, Mr. Harloe, left his office in response to a telephone call and went up to the captain's room. Captain Baird, prone in his bunk with another of his recurrent attacks of arthritis in the legs, handed him a yellow radiogram form, delivered to him a few minutes ago by the bellboy. The message was addressed to the Master, *S.S. Guayas,* and came from the manager of the Andean Sugar Company's Guaro Division.

It read: NURSE FEBER IS MISSING STOP CUSTOMS GUARD ON GANGWAY LAST NIGHT STATES SHE DID NOT LEAVE SHIP STOP CONFIRM SHE IS ON BOARD.

Handing back the radiogram, Mr. Harloe remarked, "She was in the send-off party for Dr. Reid. She got pretty drunk, so may have found a vacant cabin unlocked and flopped out. Still, she'd surely have come round by now and shown herself."

"The customs guard could have been mistaken," the captain suggested. He winced as he moved a leg. "Better check anyway."

by Patrick O'Keeffe

The purser nodded. He was dark and short, with a florid face and the hint of a blue-veined alcoholic nose, his middle-age bulge straining the brass buttons of his white jacket. He turned to go, but paused as the captain added as an

afterthought: "It must have been a lively party."

"Not rowdy, though. Nurse Feber was the only one who got really tight. Dr. Reid was annoyed, I could tell, and one of the other women led her out of the smoking room."

"It's a wonder she wasn't missed, if she didn't go back ashore."

"The party didn't leave in one group. Some drifted off ahead of others." Mr. Harloe shrugged. "I don't think any of them would concern themselves about Nurse Feber. She's not popular with the women."

"As a nurse or socially?"

"Socially. This is her first year down in Guaro and they're already calling her something of a tramp after she made a play for a married man."

"Oh?"

Mr. Harloe nodded again. He attended dances and any other social events staged at the American Club whenever the *Guayas* happened to be loading sugar in Guaro, and hence was familiar with the gossip and scandal of the Andean Company colony. "The wife warned Nurse Feber to stay away from her husband. They were drinking in the clubroom with others at the time. Nurse Feber made a gibe about the wife's homeliness. The wife smashed a highball glass on the edge of the table and lunged at Nurse Feber, saying she'd spoil that pretty face of hers. Nurse Feber managed to twist away and save her face, but the jagged stump of glass gashed the back of her neck. She has to wear her hair down to hide the scar."

Captain Baird smiled. He was broad and past fifty, an easygoing man with brown eyes and modest, graying sideburns. "The married ladies are doubtless hoping she's on board and good riddance. She's perhaps our problem child now."

Mr. Harloe went below, musing that if Nurse Feber were on board she'd be his particular problem child, for during his bouts of arthritis Captain Baird invariably left it to him to act on his behalf, and at his own discretion, in matters relating to the passengers. The only vacant cabins were on "B" deck, and the purser found cabin 36 unlocked, significantly located opposite the stairway leading down from the smoking room. Furthermore, the spread on one of the two beds had obviously been lain on, and there were traces of vermilion lipstick. The purser called in the bedroom steward responsible for that section, and pointed to the disarranged bedspread.

"What do you know about that?" he demanded darkly, suspecting that the steward might have unlocked the cabin for a visitor to use, in anticipation of a tip.

The steward shook his head, looking uncomfortable. "It must have been one of the party in the smoking room last night, sir. It looks like I forgot to lock the door after the passenger in it debarked in Guaro."

The purser accepted the explanation, since the man had admitted his carelessness. It could be safely assumed that the woman who had made temporary use of the cabin was no longer on board. Mr. Harloe reported back to the captain to that effect. "It could have been some other woman from the party, but if it was Nurse Feber, then the customs guard was mistaken."

Captain Baird pondered for a moment or so. "I wonder if anyone on board saw her go back ashore. I'd like to be able to state something positive in my reply to the radiogram. If—I'll tell you what. Go down and ask Dr. Reid if he saw Nurse Feber go off the ship. If he did, then the manager won't be worrying that she might have fallen overboard at the pier or something else dire happened to her while at the ship. Incidentally, I've a mind to ask Dr. Reid for an opinion on Brandon."

"Get rid of him before he becomes violent and brains someone," Mr. Harloe growled.

Mr. Harloe went below, telling himself that if it were up to him he'd put Brandon ashore without a qualm. Captain Baird was taking a big risk in keeping him on board; he'd hate to see the captain lose his license on that score. James Brandon was an old friend of Baird's, and this was his fifth annual cruise in the old *Guayas*, a medium-size passenger and cargo vessel in service from Los Angeles down to sugar and banana ports along the west coast of South America. Brandon's notion of an ideal respite from the cares and worries of his stock brokerage business was a long voyage in a ship's barroom. During the present cruise, however, he had become an inebriated nuisance to the other passengers, and finally, when the ship was homeward bound up the Peruvian coast, Captain Baird had felt obliged to order his bar service stopped.

With the wiliness of the alcoholic, Brandon had managed to wangle a carton of whisky aboard during the brief call at Callao, and took to drinking alone in his cabin. After a couple of days, he had come running out with the

D.T.'s. The other passengers at first had been amused by his antics, such as unscrewing his cabin light bulbs to keep snakes from crawling around them, or barking sell orders into the purser's office telephone and then running out on deck yelling, "Sell at ninety." Then he had really frightened the wits out of old Mrs. Kreech by running up to her, wielding an empty ginger ale bottle and howling, "Fine captain he is, accusing me of stealing this!"

After hearing of that incident, Captain Baird had considered confining Brandon to the ship's hospital under Dr. Seldes for the remainder of the cruise. Dr. Seldes, however, told him that Brandon had fallen into a deep sleep that was probably the long sleep marking the end of an attack of delirium tremens. Mr. Harloe had been dubious. Dr. Seldes was a young intern relieving the regular ship's doctor for his vacation, and had admitted that this was his first case of D.T.'s.

Mr. Harloe found Dr. Reid at the less crowded after end of the promenade deck, chatting with another male passenger. The doctor was a large man around forty, with thinning light hair and a neatly trimmed moustache and pointed beard that gave him a professional appearance, wearing a dark turtleneck sweater and brown slacks. Excusing himself for interrupting, Mr. Harloe drew him to one side and told him about the radiogram.

Dr. Reid replied without hesitation. "I distinctly saw Nurse Feber go back ashore last night."

"You're positive?"

"Absolutely. I was standing right here by this rail, and I happened to glance over and saw her going down the gangway. I'd come up from the party for a few minutes, to get a little fresh air. I couldn't mistake her for anyone else, with that red hair of hers."

"That settles it, Doctor. The customs guard was wrong."

"Perhaps he didn't notice her. I recall now that he was having a little altercation of some kind with a crewman returning from shore."

"Have you any idea why she should be missing on shore?" the purser asked curiously.

The doctor looked away for a moment across the gray, unruffled sea. He was superintendent of the sugar company's Guaro hospital, a widower, and was now on his way to San Francisco to take up his new appointment as medical officer in charge of the company's entire medical department. "Nurse Feber may have shown up by now. It wouldn't be the first time

she's appeared late at the hospital after a party the night before. She's a most competent nurse, but undependable in other respects. You saw the state she was in at the party last night. It was most embarrassing to me."

Mr. Harloe hastened back to the captain to report on his talk with Dr. Reid. He concluded it with his own opinion. "She definitely went back ashore. May be at the hospital right now."

"I'll radio Guaro that Dr. Reid saw her leave the ship." Captain Baird grimaced as he eased his legs to a more comfortable posture in the bunk. "One more thing before you go back to your office—see if Brandon's come out of the heebie-jeebies yet. If he has, drop back and let me know what you think—if he's really back on an even keel. If not, I'll ask Dr. Reid for an opinion. He's probably had some experience with D.T. cases."

Mr. Harloe shrugged and went out. Captain Baird was in no doubt what his opinion was.

Brandon occupied one of the dozen high-priced cabins on the promenade deck, with spacious rectangular windows instead of the round portholes of the lower decks. His two windows were wide open, for the aging *Guayas* had been built shortly after World War II and lacked the air-conditioning of later-designed ships. Over by the bathroom door was the whisky carton, with the necks of the last two emptied bottles sticking up from the wastebasket. Brandon lay awake in crumpled brown pajamas on the single bed, eyes bloodshot, and looking like a dockside wino who hadn't shaved for a week. He stared up blearily at the purser.

"It's you, Harloe," he grunted in recognition.

The purser saw that Brandon was plainly out of the D.T.'s. He gestured amusedly at the open windows, through which came the click of shuffleboard disks and the shouts of the players. "No longer scared of the buzzards?"

"Okay!" growled Brandon. "Have fun and tell it to me. The room steward slipped up on that one."

Mr. Harloe grinned. "You shut the ports and ran out yelling that a swarm of buzzards was trying to get in and peck you alive."

Brandon, nearing sixty and already white-haired, his face broad, with prominent cheekbones and a cropped moustache, raised a shaking arm to his head. "I don't remember any of it except the one I had this morning."

"This morning?" repeated Mr. Harloe curiously.

"Didn't Taggart tell you about that one?" Brandon asked dryly. He ran trembling fingers through his thin, tousled hair. "When I told it to him, he chased me off the bridge."

"When was this?"

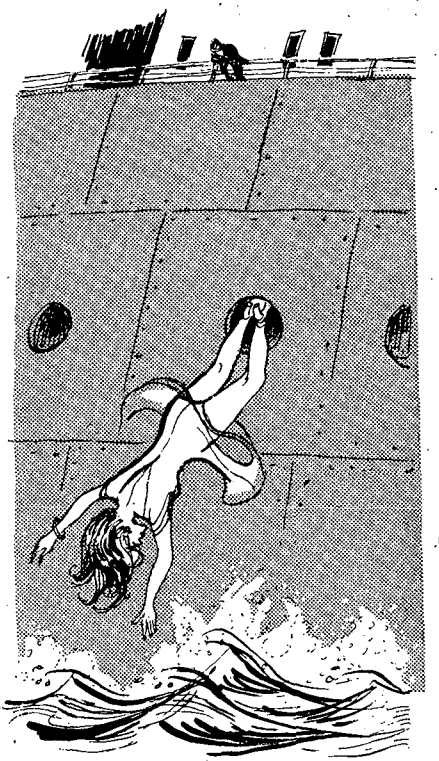
"Around five o'clock. I woke up suddenly. It was light outside, but my watch was stopped, and I couldn't tell whether it was morning or evening. There were no sounds out on deck, so I decided it must be early morning. I couldn't remember a thing past Callao. My head felt as big as a house and my stomach was on fire. I got up and took a big dose of antacid powder; then went out on deck feeling like I've never felt before in my whole life." Brandon groaned. "I made straight for the rail and leaned over, or maybe I draped myself over it. That's when I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"Don't laugh, Harloe. It was a woman's head coming out of a porthole right under where I was standing. Then the rest of her came through, facedown, a little at a time, as if she were being pushed through. There wasn't a peep out of her. Then her legs came out, and she slithered down the ship's side into the sea with a splash and was gone. That was it."

"Then what?" Mr. Harloe was far from laughing by this time.

"I looked round, all excited, but couldn't see anyone around. Then I heard two bells on the bridge, and knew it was five o'clock and Taggart would be up there. I was



pretty groggy, but I made it to the bridge without tumbling back down the ladder. I told Taggart what I'd seen. He joked about it and said it was only some poor guy getting rid of his wife the easy way. I told him I wasn't fooling, and I'd seen it with my own

two eyes. That made him let into me. He told me I'd seen plenty with my own two eyes this past couple of days. No pink elephants yet, but snakes and spiders, and now a woman being pushed out of a porthole. He ended up by telling me there wasn't a redheaded woman in the whole ship, and to get the hell off the bridge and stay off." Brandon grunted. "Taggart sounded as though he got out on the wrong side of his bunk this morning."

"You mean that the woman you saw coming out of the porthole had red hair?" Mr. Harloe pursued.

"And a yellow dress. I saw it all as vividly as if it were really happening, but by the time Taggart had set my ears back, I felt like crawling down into the bilges for the rest of the cruise. I came down here again, hoping no one would see me. I must have gone off to sleep again, and woke up to find the room steward looking in to see how I was. I got him to tell me about the other things I'd been seeing. He just went away to get me some black coffee and toast. I asked him for a hair of the dog. He said nohow." Brandon moaned. "I feel too mortified to show my face outside."

"I know how you feel, but forget about the hair of the dog," Mr. Harloe said curtly. There was little room in his mind at the moment for thoughts of sympathy for Brandon. What was crowding it was whether Mr. Taggart would have run Brandon off the bridge so quickly if he'd known about Nurse Feber. This was something to be taken up with Captain Baird without delay.

"Captain Baird is anxious to know how you are. I'll go up and tell him. He was thinking he might have to land you in Balboa. I'll drop back later."

"Being dumped ashore is all I need," Brandon groaned.

Mr. Harloe hurried back to the captain's room. After listening to his report on Brandon, Captain Baird expressed deep concern. "No wonder Taggart chased him off the bridge. A thing like that could start the passengers wondering if there was any truth in it, if they got to know that Nurse Feber is missing."

"Mr. Taggart didn't know about it," the purser pointed out. "And was it another hallucination? After coming out of the D.T.'s, a man doesn't remember his hallucinations."

"You might be wrong on that. And don't forget that Dr. Reid saw Nurse Feber go ashore. Also that no woman passenger is missing, with or without red hair."

"It's not only the red hair, but the yellow dress too. The one Nurse Feber wore last night was yellow."

Captain Baird gazed at the purser, dumbstruck for the moment. "If it wasn't another hallucination, then there's only one conclusion to be drawn. But how can we make sure?" The captain paused, seeking an answer. "I know—we'll consult Dr. Reid. Tell him I'd like him to come up here at his convenience."

Mr. Harloe hastened below again, wishing that the captain were well enough to pursue these inquiries himself and not take him away from his work at a busy time. Dr. Reid had moved down to the smoking room and was drinking at a table with a Peruvian merchant. He was about to order another round when Mr. Harloe approached, and he invited him to join them.

"Thanks, but I quit drinking some time ago," Mr. Harloe said, self-conscious about his blue-veined nose. "The captain would like to speak to you in his room, when it's convenient for you."

"At once," the doctor said readily, pushing back his chair. Excusing himself to his fellow passenger, he followed the purser up to the captain's room. After hearing Mr. Harloe's report on Brandon, he gave a prompt and unqualified opinion.

"Undoubtedly another hallucination. In some cases of delirium tremens, the patient may not see the customary creatures, such as snakes or spiders; he may see persons, or mistake objects for persons. Your Mr. Brandon may have seen something thrown from a porthole, a discarded box, perhaps; or a porpoise leaping up close to the ship's side, and his disordered mind transformed it into the illusion of a young woman."

"But a man doesn't recall his hallucinations after he comes out of the D.T.'s," Mr. Harloe demurred.

"As a general rule, but there are exceptions. I must admit that in Mr. Brandon's case, it is most extraordinary that the illusory woman had red hair and was clad in a yellow dress—remarkable coincidences, indeed—but the inescapable proof that it was an hallucination lies in two indisputable facts: my seeing Nurse Feber return ashore, and no female passenger missing overboard. Surely, if it hadn't been an hallucination, Mr. Brandon would have recognized Nurse Feber."

"She came out facedown, for one thing, and Mr. Brandon had never seen her; he was asleep in

his cabin all the time she was aboard."

"I wasn't aware of that, of course," Dr. Reid said, smiling. "However, what I meant to convey was that if Mr. Brandon had seen something that, unlike color, could have been identified only with Nurse Feber, then there might be some justification for believing that the illusory woman was real."

Captain Baird looked at the purser. "I'm accepting Dr. Reid's opinion. I'm relieved to know that Brandon has come out of his D.T.'s." The captain addressed Dr. Reid again. "I was in fear he might turn violent and harm somebody."

Mr. Harloe was far from satisfied. He felt that Dr. Reid's opinion had been unduly influenced by his belief that he saw Nurse Feber go back ashore; the doctor could be wrong about that. Mr. Harloe left Dr. Reid chatting with Captain Baird, who had offered him a cigar and asked him if there was anything new on treating arthritis. The purser went down to his office on the deck beneath, where the second purser was wrestling with the payroll and the third purser typing a cargo manifest. Mr. Harloe sank into the swivel chair beside his own desk and picked up a pen, then suddenly dropped the pen and rose again, just as the second purser was turning to him with a query. "I'll be right back," he said, and hurried from the office.

He went straight to Brandon's cabin. Brandon was now sitting up in the bed, a tray with toast and a pot of black coffee beside him. "Mr. Brandon, when you saw the woman's head coming out of the porthole, her hair was probably blown to one side by the breeze. Did you see a scar on the back of her neck?"

"Do you have to keep bringing it up?" Brandon grumbled. "I'm trying to forget these last two days."

"Did you or did you not see a scar?"

Brandon blinked up at him curiously. "What difference does it make?"

"It can make a very important difference."

"You're sure hopped up about it. Okay. So I saw a scar, a long ugly-looking thing."

Mr. Harloe suppressed his excitement. "Can you recall anything else, something you didn't mention before?"

Brandon gulped down a mouthful of coffee, screwing up his eyes in the effort to remember. "There was a woman's handbag. Did I tell you that? It came out of the

porthole right after the woman. That's about all I can remember."

The handbag didn't excite Mr. Harloe. Unlike the scar, it wasn't identifiable only with Nurse Feber. "Can you tell me exactly where you were leaning over the rail at the time?"

"It must have been right opposite the doorway leading out to the deck from these cabins. I went straight to the rail, wanting something to lean on and stick my head out into the breeze." Brandon became quizzical. "What's all this third degree about anyway?"

"It's for the official log," Mr. Harloe told him evasively. "You reported what you saw to the chief officer on the bridge, so it has to be logged in detail."

Brandon groaned. "Why didn't I come right back here and hop into bed again?"

Mr. Harloe then went out and along the short passage and stepped out onto the promenade deck, lined with passengers reclining in steamer chairs. A thin man was chatting with a plump woman at the rail directly opposite the doorway. Mr. Harloe crossed and leaned over beside them. Beneath him was the long row of round portholes to the cabins on "B" deck. The last pair aft were those of cabin 36. He counted the ports back to the pair immediately beneath the couple standing beside him.

The man turned and looked down at the lacy foam churned up by the speeding hull. "Something caught your interest down there?" he asked with a smile.

"Something more than just interest." Without amplifying, Mr. Harloe straightened up and went back to the captain's room. Dr. Reid was now seated comfortably in an easy chair with the cigar. The purser addressed the captain. "I spoke to Brandon again. I'm now convinced that what he saw this morning wasn't an hallucination. It was the body of a woman being pushed out of a porthole."

The captain stared at him blankly. "What convinced you?"

"Brandon saw a long scar on the back of her neck. I'm prepared to believe that red hair, a yellow dress, could be imagined, but it seems to me that only by the most fantastic of coincidences could Brandon have had the illusion of a scar, and exactly in the right place. Dr. Reid said that if Brandon had seen anything that could be identified only with Nurse Feber, then there might be some justification for believing that the illusory woman was real."

Captain Baird glanced at the doctor. Dr. Reid seemed both perturbed and confused by having his

professional opinion and credibility thrown into doubt. "Well, I must admit," he said stiffly, "that it would be indeed a fantastic coincidence. I—well, I can only conclude that I mistook some other woman for Nurse Feber going down the gangway."

"The question now posed," the captain said gravely, "is who killed Nurse Feber and put her body through the porthole?"

"And how he knew or found out that she was in cabin 36," Mr. Harloe added.

Dr. Reid puffed out smoke as if to hide his face. "If I may venture another opinion at the risk of being confounded," he said in a quavering voice, "I'll name the man responsible."

Both the captain and the purser waited in dead silence for him to continue. He waved away the smoke.

"He was a passenger—your Mr. Brandon."

"Brandon!" Captain Baird's face registered incredulity.

Dr. Reid raised his eyebrows. "Didn't you fear he might become violent? That is exactly what happened this morning. He came out of his cabin in delirium tremens and dangerous, and wandered about the passenger quarters, deserted at that hour. Nurse Feber wakened about that time and, finding herself at sea, came out of the cabin just as Mr. Brandon was passing. She mistook him for a steward and questioned him excitedly about what would happen to her. Something she said provoked Mr. Brandon. He backed her into the cabin, strangled her, and disposed of her body by way of the porthole.

"Then," concluded the doctor sadly, "his deranged mind presented him with the delusion of having witnessed his deed from the rail above. He reacted by running to the bridge and reporting it to the chief officer. He then went back to his cabin and fell into what was really the terminal sleep."

Captain Baird seemed shocked into silence. Mr. Harloe, however, again voiced his previous objection. "But why was Mr. Brandon able to remember everything in clear detail, the color, the scar? Total recall, it seems to me."

"As I stated before, Mr. Harloe," Dr. Reid replied in a patient voice, "there are occasional exceptions to the usual absence of memory."

The purser still balked. "I find it hard to believe that this is a case of D.T.'s. I can understand a man killing a woman under the circumstance you just mentioned, but shoving her body through a

porthole afterward—it appears to me the act of a man in his right senses trying to hide his crime."

The doctor smiled indulgently, blowing out more smoke. "It's been my experience with cases of delirium tremens—several, may I say—that the patient will display deep cunning in trying to conceal an act he knows to be wrongful."

Mr. Harloe studied the doctor's last remark for a moment or two, and then said scornfully, "I wouldn't call shoving the body through the porthole an act of cunning. I'd call it simply part of the violence, a continuation of it."

Dr. Reid smiled again. "And what would you call throwing her handbag out of the porthole? Was that a continuation of the violence impulse, or an act of cunning?"

Mr. Harloe was about to pounce on that statement, but Captain Baird broke in. "It isn't for us laymen to dispute the doctor's opinion, Mr. Harloe. After all, your experience with D.T.'s was a limited one."

"Unfortunately for Dr. Reid's theory, Nurse Feber's body wasn't pushed out of cabin 36." There was a note of grim satisfaction in Mr. Harloe's voice. "It came out of a porthole farther amidships—right under where Brandon was standing, cabin 18."

"Then what was she doing in that cabin?" queried the captain.

"Perhaps Dr. Reid can best answer that. That's his cabin."

Captain Baird looked at the doctor, who had blanched, the cigar forgotten.

"This is an outrage!" Dr. Reid protested. "He's casting suspicion on me. He's been listening to the babblings of a man in a state of temporary insanity, who wouldn't be able to remember where he was standing."

"He babbled something else. He babbled something that only two men could possibly know—Brandon himself and the murderer. He told me on my second visit that a lady's handbag was thrown out of the porthole after the body. I just led Dr. Reid into revealing his knowledge of it."

Dr. Reid had turned deathly white, eyes staring at the purser, lips trembling as if from words trying to pass them. He dropped the cigar into an ash stand beside him and sagged in the chair.

After a long silence, Captain Baird said, "Well, Doctor?"

Dr. Reid dropped his gaze and spoke to the rug. "An old story," he said bitterly. "Blackmail. I had an affair with the Guaro Division manager's wife while he was away in San Francisco at a company conference. Nurse Feber learned of it, through snooping. She

started taking advantage—slackness, insubordination, intoxication. The head nurse must have come to suspect that Nurse Feber had some kind of hold over me because I declined to discharge her. The scandal could shatter my career with the Andean Company.

"At the send-off party last night, Nurse Feber told me she had a dream of herself as supervisor of nurses for all the company's hospitals. I could have choked her right then and there." The doctor glanced up at the purser. "That's why I went up on deck, not for fresh air. When she wakened this morning from her drunken stupor and found herself out at sea, she lost her head and came running to my cabin, wanting to know what was to be done. I calmed her, learned that no one knew she was on board. I yielded to the temptation.

"Unfortunately," the doctor finished bleakly, "Mr. Brandon's terminal sleep had ended, and Mr. Harloe possesses more than the layman's usual knowledge of delirium tremens."

"I went through the D.T.'s once myself," Mr. Harloe said, "and afterward, I read up on them. With my little knowledge, your opinions sounded a bit phony. After finding out that the woman had come out of one of your portholes, I suspected that they were not just phony but faked, and the reason. The problem was how to prove it. When you blamed Mr. Brandon and claimed that putting the body through the porthole was an act of cunning, I disputed it and that led you into offering the handbag as further proof of your contention."

"Your little knowledge turned out to be a dangerous thing—for me!" said Dr. Reid, with bleak wryness. "I now realize what I was up against."

"If it hadn't been for Captain Baird," Mr. Harloe replied, "I'd have got fired out of the line over my bout of D.T.'s. He covered me. I owed it to him to see that he didn't get into trouble through showing consideration for his old friend Brandon. That's what you were really up against, Dr. Reid."

Curbing one's emotions at a critical point may be almost too much for the ordinary mortal.

First Principles

Parker, the deputy, walked across the office to the window. With his fingers he parted two slats of the blind and peered outside.

"What are they doing?" Thomson asked. He was sitting behind the desk, carefully and meticulously cleaning his nails with the point of a long hunting knife. He was a brawny man in his late thirties, his powerful biceps filling the short sleeves of his shirt. A polished, five-pointed star with "Sheriff" printed across it was pinned to his breast pocket.

"Still out there," Parker said. "Milling around."

"How big are the groups?" Thomson asked.

"Threes and fours, most of them."

Thomson grunted and went on with his nail-cleaning. It would be all right as long as they remained fragmented in small groups. It was when one or two fire-eaters began haranguing them and pulling them together into a mob that the trouble would start. At the moment, they were merely sullen and dissatisfied, not hostile and menacing.

"What do you think they're gonna do?" Parker asked.

"Dunno," Thomson said.

"Most of them are across the street in front of the hardware store, talking among themselves and staring over here."

"Let 'em talk, let 'em stare," Thomson said laconically.

"You think they'll try and take him?" Parker asked.

The knife in Thomson's hand stopped moving, its point poised over his thumbnail. His lowered eyes contemplated the blade.

Parker moved away from the window, walked halfway toward the desk and stopped. "You'd like them to, wouldn't you?"

Thomson's eyes came up and

languidly he raised his head and gazed thoughtfully at his deputy. "Like them to what?" he asked quietly.

Parker jerked his thumb toward the rear of the building, where the cells were; the only jail in Brownstown, the only jail for 30 miles around, and a flimsy one, vulnerable to departures from within and assaults from without.

"Like them to take him," Parker replied.

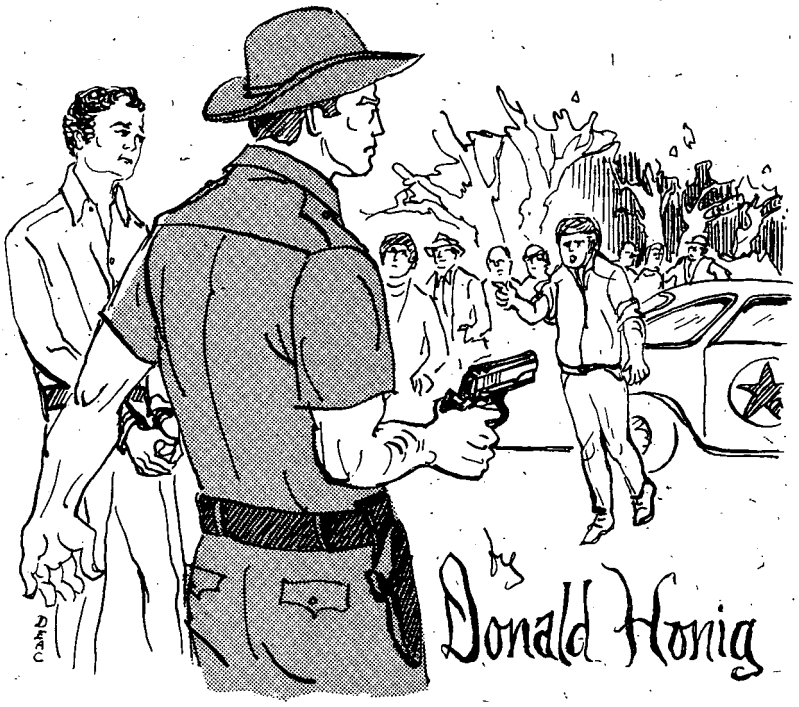
"He's my prisoner," Thomson said. "*Nobody* is going to take him away from me. My personal feelings about him have nothing to do with it."

Parker shrugged.

"Anybody thinks they're going to move into my area of responsibility without invitation," Thomson continued, "will find his damned skull full of lead."

"OK by me." Parker returned to the window and looked out again. "They're gathering," he said ominously, surveying the scene under the street light.

There were town men out there, and men in from the outlying farms and down from the



mean little hardscrabble hills; the town men in their conventional trousers, white shirts and fedoras, the others in overalls or denims, wearing caps; mingling together, smoking cigarettes, talking quietly. Pickup trucks kept cruising past—these were the teen-agers, exhilarated by the "excitement." Parker knew them all—they were his neighbors, his friends, and he believed he understood them perfectly. As a matter of fact, he knew that if he weren't wearing a deputy's badge, he would doubtless be standing out there with them.

"If you want my opinion on it," Parker said, and paused—the sheriff didn't want his opinion, he knew, but he went on nevertheless, "you're foolish to be moving him at night. Morning would be better."

"First of all," Thomson said, impatience making his voice inordinately polite, "I was told to bring him to Glensburg tonight, that they want him there first thing in the morning, to charge him. And second of all, this jail is a cracker box and you know it and they know it out there just as well."

"It's a lonely drive at night," Parker said.

"You needn't fret," Thomson said caustically, "you're not coming along, so just forget about it."

"I would if you asked me," Parker murmured.

Thomson emitted a loud, harsh laugh. "You're damn right you would. But I ain't asking you. If I can't handle this job by myself, then I may as well hang it up."

Thomson put down the knife, pushed back his chair and got to his feet. He put his thumbs into his belt and hoisted his khaki trousers more securely around his thickening middle.

He walked back to the cells. There were only four, and they seldom held anyone, and even then it generally was someone sleeping off a drunk. Tonight, however, cell number one held someone special: a murder suspect.

Thomson stood before the cell, gazing impassively through the bars at the occupant. The young man within was sitting on the cot, which was suspended out from the whitewashed concrete wall by a pair of taut, diagonally poised chains. The prisoner was 20 years old, slight of build, with short curly hair. The expression on his face was of despair, and of mute, almost ingenuous appeal, as of someone hoping for compassion and understanding from strangers. He was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt, corduroy trousers and

desert boots. He had the soiled, weary look of the informal traveler.

His name was Earl Johnson. He had been passing through Brownstown, heading for Miami, he said, to look for work. Late in the afternoon of the day before, he was seen approaching the house of an elderly widow, Mrs. Norris. His purpose, he said, was to see if he couldn't contribute a few hours' work in order to earn a meal. No one had answered his ring, he said, and he had gone away. Some hours later a neighbor found Mrs. Norris strangled.

Earl Johnson was picked up on the highway at midnight, his thumb in the air. The car he had thumbed down was Sheriff Thomson's, who by that time had Johnson's description burned into his mind.

Johnson stuck to his story, under the sheriff's relentless and menacing interrogation. He had done nothing more than mount the porch steps of Mrs. Norris' house, he claimed, ring the bell, wait, and then go away. To his disadvantage, however, was the fact that two people had seen him approach the house and none had seen him go away, the witnesses being a man and a woman in a passing car.

Word of what had happened spread quickly through the town and its environs. People didn't like what they heard. Mrs. Norris had been a particularly popular and well-liked old woman, and the accused was a stranger. At five o'clock the men began gathering outside of the jail, not belligerent, not noisy, but simply there, brooding and restive.

When Sheriff Thomson telephoned the county prosecutor at Glensburg to ask for instructions, he was told to bring the prisoner there.

"Can you do that?" the prosecutor asked.

"I can do it," Thomson said. "But I can't guarantee anything. The people around here are pretty upset over it."

"Do you want me to send some state troopers to give you a hand?" the prosecutor asked.

"No," Thomson said. "I can handle it myself," and he hung up. With his hand resting on the telephone, he thought: *I can handle it myself.*

Now he lifted a key from the chain that hung from his belt and unlocked the cell door and swung it slowly back.

"Get up," he said to Johnson.

"Why?" Johnson asked. "What's happening?"

"I'm taking you to Glensburg."

"Why?"

"Because it's the county seat."

"Can I see a lawyer there?" Johnson asked.

Thomson wet his lips, studying the young man with flat, expressionless eyes. "Sure," he said.

He entered the cell and handcuffed Johnson's hands in front of him. Then he took his prisoner by the elbow and walked him out to the office.

"I heard you talking," Johnson said. "There's a mob outside, isn't there?"

The deputy grinned at him. "You scared?" he asked.

"Sure I'm scared," Johnson said. "Wouldn't you be?"

"Not if I had a clear conscience," the deputy said. "I wouldn't be scared of anything, if I had a clear conscience."

Johnson turned to the sheriff. "What's going to happen?"

"I told you," Thomson said. "I'm taking you to Glensburg."

"What about them?" Johnson asked, indicating with a lift of his head what was outside.

"Parker," the sheriff said, "take a rifle and cover us. Stand in the doorway until we're in the car."

The deputy unlocked a wall cabinet and took down a rifle, grabbed some cartridges from a box and loaded it.

Thomson went first, unlocking the door and opening it. At the sight of the big, broad-shouldered sheriff standing in the lighted doorway, one hand on his holster, the men in the street stopped talking, paused in their gestures and became quite still.

"Come on," Thomson said over his shoulder.

At the appearance of the prisoner, the men in the street became animated with pent-up anger, outrage.

"Give him to us, Sheriff," one shouted.

"Hand him over, Tommy, and take the night off!"

Thomson ignored them. The car with the big, encircled star on either door was parked directly in front of the office. As Thomson led his prisoner to the car several of the men began crossing the street toward them. Without hesitation, Thomson lifted his .45 free of its holster and held it belt high.

The men stopped.

"Not another step," Thomson said quietly.

One man, in the lead of the others, with a mean, sun-cracked face, said in a soft, cajoling voice, "Give him over, Tommy."

Thomson studied him, almost as though giving consideration to the request. Then his lips parted in the merest smile. "I appreciate your feelings, Bob, but you boys know me well enough. You know

I can't, and you know I won't."

A beefy young man with a white T-shirt covering his broad, sloping belly came forward and pointed his finger at Thomson. "You're making a big mistake, Sheriff!" he shouted.

"Not as big as the one you'll be making if you take another step," Thomson said, grinning maliciously and cocking the .45. Then, to Johnson, he said, "Follow me."

Without taking his eyes off of the crowd of men in the street, Thomson opened the door on the passenger side and pushed Johnson inside, then slammed the door shut. With the deputy standing in the doorway, rifle shouldered and aimed into the street, Thomson got into the car and slid behind the wheel. He placed the .45 on top of the dashboard, turned on the ignition and drove away.

The drive to Glensburg was 30 miles of almost unrelieved desolation, covering winding back roads. One saw an occasional farmhouse, but that was all. Thomson had made the drive countless times and knew it well. He also knew that after dark only an occasional car or truck traversed the sinewy two-lane road, which for years the old-timers had referred to as the "highway" because of the white stripe painted down the middle. Depending on your purposes, the "highway" could be dangerous or it could be safe.

As he drove away from town, Thomson kept looking into the rear-view mirror. He didn't think any of them would have the nerve to follow, to try something, but he couldn't be absolutely certain. He knew they weren't going to disband so quickly, that they were going to continue standing there, talking about it. It was quite possible one of the fire-eaters in the crowd might strike the right chord and provoke the others into doing something impulsive.

Thomson took the road's broad, sweeping curves as fast as he dared. Next to him, his prisoner sat, handcuffed, head bent, morosely silent. From time to time Thomson glanced at him. Neither man spoke.

When they were about 15 miles out of Brownstown, Thomson began to slow down.

Johnson raised his head and stared out to where the headlights were picking up the roadside brush, the scrawny trees. "Why are we slowing up?" he asked.

Thomson didn't answer. He brought the car to a halt at the side of the road and switched off the engine, then turned off the lights. The darkness was immediate and engulfing.

"What are you doing?" Johnson

asked as he gazed at the sheriff.

Thomson reached out and took the .45 from the dashboard. He swung it around and pointed it at Johnson.

"What's going on?" Johnson asked.

Thomson did not immediately answer. Only the noise of the crickets beating their rolling, twinkling sounds interminably upon the night broke the silence.

"Listen," Johnson said, fear and panic filling his voice now, "what are you doing? What's happening?"

"I want to tell you something," Thomson said. "That old lady was like a mother to me. She practically raised me, after my own mother died."

"Look," Johnson said, "I had nothing to do with it. You're making a big mistake here. I never saw her. Nobody answered the door, and I went away. I've told you that over and over. It's the truth. Why can't you believe it?"

Thomson said, very quietly, "Because I can't. Because it isn't the truth, and you know it."

"Then if I did it," Johnson said, "why didn't you find something on me? You said there was stuff taken from the house—money, jewelry. Where is it?"

"You had plenty of time to get rid of it, once you saw you weren't going to be getting out of town so fast."

Johnson closed his eyes despairingly and brought his manacled hands with some impact up to his forehead. "Oh, hell," he muttered. "Oh, hell. Oh, hell."

"I've been waiting to do this," Thomson said. "Of all the people in this world, she was the only one who ever gave a damn for me."

"I never saw her," Johnson whispered, shaking his head, his hands still pressed to his forehead.

"I'll tell them you tried to escape," Thomson said.

"You'll never get away with it."

"Nobody will give a damn about you," Thomson said. "You saw those men back there. Is anybody going to give a damn?"

No one would question the incident, Thomson knew. He would tell them that his prisoner had gone berserk in the car, tried to wrest the gun away from him. There had been a struggle in the moving car, the gun had discharged. The prisoner was killed. That would be the end of it. No one would care about a murderer, a stranger.

At that moment a flash of light in the rear-view mirror caught Thomson's attention. He peered into the mirror, then whirled around. Three sets of headlights

were advancing along the road.

"Damn them!" Thomson said bitterly.

There was no question in his mind about who they were, what they were doing on this road at this hour. One car along this road at night was a rarity; and two or three, traveling in tandem, meant that the fire-eaters had finally got the men in the street moving.

Thomson jammed the .45 into his holster and swung back behind the wheel and got the car started.

"What's happening?" Johnson cried.

"Shut up," Thomson said furiously.

The sheriff gunned the accelerator, taking the curving road as fast as he dared. The car swung out dangerously across the road's center stripe. The roadside trees and shrubbery seemed to be lunging straight for the car as the headlights suddenly opened on them, but then, as the car followed the curving road, they seemed to leap back.

Gritting his teeth, scowling, Thomson negotiated the turns with all the skill he could. Now and then he threw a glance into the mirror: they were still behind him, still coming, with a recklessness and determination equal to his own. There was no point in stopping and trying to face them down, not out here, not after they had come this far. He knew them well enough—they had guns in those cars, and they would use them. Once that kind of energy became mobilized there was no stopping it.

Next to him, Johnson swung back and forth with every sharp snap of the wheel, like some lifeless, boneless mannequin.

Thomson hit the accelerator a shade too hard then—he knew it the moment he saw the next road bend coming up. He tried to brake, though he knew that was a mistake too. The car shuddered and swung across the road. Frantically, Thomson fought the car, but it was out of control now, and there wasn't time or road enough to bring it back. It shot across the narrow shoulder and fairly leaped into a snarling tangle of stunted pine and brier thickets. Driven forward by its own maniacal momentum, the car plowed ahead for about 30 feet before coming to a halt with a thudding suddenness that tossed its passengers against the dashboard.

Thomson turned off the ignition and the lights, then jumped out. He hefted himself onto the fender, slid across the hood and got to the other side of the car. He opened the door and with one powerful hand took hold of Johnson's arms

and yanked him out of the car.

"Get moving, get moving," the sheriff said. "And keep your mouth shut."

Pushing and pulling and dragging his prisoner along with him through the scratching, grasping thicket, Thomson pushed ahead into the darkness. Looking back, he could see the great fans of headlights rising into the night as the cars came forward around that last curve.

"Keep moving," Thomson said.

They kept going until Thomson heard the cars screeching to a halt, then he unceremoniously threw Johnson to the ground and crouched next to him, .45 in hand.

He saw them on the road, walking in front of their headlights. He cursed softly.

"What are they doing?" Johnson whispered.

"Shut your mouth," Thomson said.

He watched them. They were milling now in front of their headlights, with the same tentative uncertainty they had shown in the street outside of the jail. They could see his car in there, but that was all they could see.

Thomson's lips moved in a churlish smile. He didn't think they would have the guts now to move in, to come maneuvering through the thicket in the dark, guns or no guns (and he could see that several of them had rifles). He would kill the first one that came close; they knew that. This was something more than simply overpowering him now. A lynch mob was capable of many things; exposing itself to gunfire was not one of them.

Through a network of thicket silhouetted by the headlights, he watched them. He was almost wishing they would come in. With those headlights behind them the damn fools would never have a chance, but they were either too dumb or too afraid to turn them off.

Then one of them called out: "Thomson. We know you're in there. All we want is that man. That's all. You know that."

Thomson bent his head low, next to Johnson, who was trembling and hugging the ground.

"All they want is you, boy," he whispered.

"Sheriff . . ." Johnson said.

"Shut up," Thomson said. "They're not gonna get you."

The men at the roadside called out a few more times, but made no forward move, even though Thomson's car was clearly visible to them, the doors hanging open.

Thomson watched them come together in a group to talk it over. A few moments later they

did exactly what he expected them to—they got back into their cars and turned around and drove away.

"Are they going?" Johnson asked.

"They're going," Thomson said, a hard satisfaction in his voice. He stood up, drawing his prisoner with him.

"Sheriff . . ." Johnson said.

"Shut up," Thomson said. "We're going to Glensburg."

A look of astonished relief crossed Johnson's face. He wanted to say: *A few minutes ago you were about to kill me,* but he didn't say it; he didn't say anything. The events of the past hour had totally drained him.

They began walking. As near as Thomson could estimate, Glensburg was about 10 miles along this road. They would walk it. They would get there. He was furiously adamant about it.

After walking several miles, they were met by a state police car coming from Glensburg. The car pulled alongside and the trooper behind the wheel said, "Hey, Thomson, where you been?"

"Been taking our time, that's where," Thomson said.

He opened the back door and pushed his prisoner inside, then hauled himself in and closed the door, settling himself in the seat.

"You have some trouble?" the trooper asked.

"No," Thomson said, and added dryly, "just some inconvenience."

"Your deputy said you left hours ago. We've been wondering about you. The prosecutor's getting jittery."

"Then let's get moving," Thomson said.

The streets of Glensburg were deserted when they drove in. The trooper dropped them at the courthouse, where the county prosecutor was waiting. Thomson led his prisoner through the quiet corridors, to the prosecutor's office, where he entered without knocking.

"Hello, Sheriff," the prosecutor said. He was a slender man, his narrow frame slouched in a swivel chair behind the desk. "This, I take it, is Earl Johnson?"

"That's him," Thomson said.

Self-consciously, the prosecutor laughed. "I'm sorry, Sheriff," he said, "but if we'd found out earlier, we could've saved you the trip."

"What are you talking about?" Thomson asked.

"We got a call from Laurelville about an hour ago. They got the man who killed the old lady. Nabbed him in the bus terminal."

Thomson's eyes narrowed. He

glared at the prosecutor. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"They've got the man. Found some of the old lady's jewelry on him. Got a full confession."

Thomson pointed a finger at the prosecutor. "Now you listen to me," he said angrily. "I had to fight off a lynch mob to bring this man in here. My car was wrecked. I was almost killed. And now you're telling me he's *innocent*?"

Thomson heard a thud behind him. When he turned around he saw Johnson fainted dead away on the floor.

Later, when Thomson left the courthouse to wait outside for his ride back to Brownstown, he saw his former prisoner sitting on the courthouse steps, back curved, one hand rubbing his wrist, as if trying to rub away the pain or the humiliation of the handcuffs.

Thomson came softly down the steps, ignoring Johnson, and stood at the curb, hands on hips, looking into the street. He was acutely conscious of the man on the steps, knew he was being stared at.

"Sheriff," Johnson said at last.

"What?" Thomson asked without turning around.

"Some of it I understand—some I don't. You have to explain."

Thomson said nothing, merely stood there staring into the empty street, waiting for the state police car.

"You were about to kill me," Johnson continued. "But then you were ready to lay down your life to save me. I don't understand it."

Now Thomson turned around and looked at him.

"It's very simple," the sheriff said. "They were trying to push me around, which they had no right to do, and which you can't ever let them do."

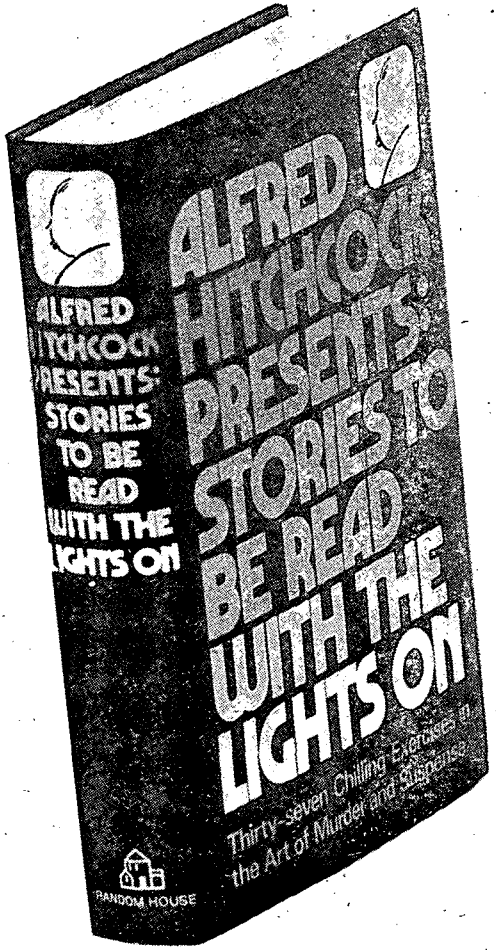
"But you—"

"I know, I know," Thomson said with a pained expression. "I let the emotions of it get to me, that's all. And it was a mistake. Violation of first principles. Policemen are like doctors, Johnson." He turned around and finished his statement facing the empty street, "When they make a mistake, there's usually nobody to apologize to."

WHILE THEY LAST

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER



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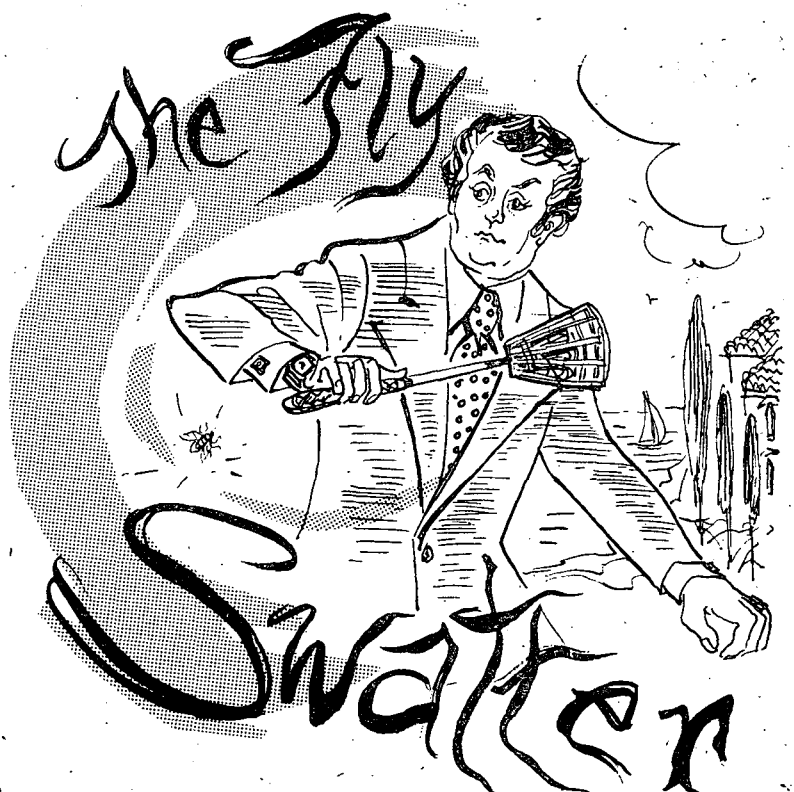


by Frank Sisk

Twice a day nearly every day Sr. Giampietro Saccovino, l'Americano ricco as the Portofinese referred to him, descended from his villa in the pine-shrouded foothills above the Via Roma and refreshed himself for a while at a table on

the piazza outside the Trattoria Navicello.

He came first in the morning not long after the carabiniere had unpadlocked the heavy chain that stretched across the narrow road at the town's entrance from one stone post to another—about 7:30. He came again late in the afternoon, a few hours before sunset. Generally he was alone, although there were those rare occasions when he might be accompanied by a woman—one of a number who visited the villa with some degree of regularity; women who, in the eyes of the parochial natives, looked suspiciously like high-priced sgualdrine down from Genova. The Signore nevertheless was adjudged il gentiluomo, for man is not born to be a saint.

Besides, Sr. Saccovino tipped most handsomely all who served him.

Also he wore shimmering silk suits of a conservative cut. The third finger of his left hand shone with a stone worth perhaps two million lire or more. Another fortune was represented by the ruby-studded clasp formed like a scimitar that adorned a succession of hand-painted cravatte. Then there was the thin gold watch, not much larger than a Communion wafer, which told not only the hour down to the split of a second but the day of the week as well. Not to be overlooked either was the slender pen of (some said) platinum that the Signore employed with a smile and a flourish to sign the presented chits, never failing to write down that generous gratuity. Then—the pearl-handled fly swatter.

This fly swatter was final proof, if ever such proof were needed, that Sr. Saccovino was not only a rich American gentleman but eccentrico in the bargain, and this could be the very best kind to have around.

He entered Portofino toward the middle of March on board the yacht *Santa Costanza.* The marinai who operate the taxi craft in the harbor quickly learned that he had chartered the yacht at Bastia in Corse and had sailed here by way of Livorno and La Spezia.

Five boat-taxi and three mule-cart trips were required to transport the Signore's luggage from the yacht, which soon thereafter raised anchor, to the villa that had been unoccupied since the previous spring when the owner, a crusty old port-drinking inglés, had succumbed to il colpo apoplettico while watching, as was his diurnal wont, the evening sun sink like a big orange into the Ligurian Sea.

Sr. Saccovino made his first ex-

ploratory visits to the quayside a few days after settling in. Flies being scarce at this time of the year, he came armed only with his warm engaging smile and his soft but authoritative voice. His "Buon giorno," his "Buona sera," his "Venga qua, per piacere," his "Mille grazie," were all uttered without the trace of a foreign accent. When he ordered lasagna al pesto (a regional manifestation of squared pasta covered with a green sauce in which basil is prominent, and sprinkled with grated goat cheese and crushed pine nuts), he obviously knew exactly what to expect.

These pleasant aspects of the man, combined with the dignified swaths of gray in his sleek black hair and the corded wrinkles in his mastiff-like face, earned him immediately a certain homage from the townspeople.

The pearl-handled fly swatter didn't appear until the last days of May. By then the mosce were growing bold and bothersome. While strolling from shop to stall and along the quays, the Signore carried the fly swatter as inconspicuously as possible. Often as not he concealed the greater part of the beautiful handle up the sleeve of his jacket in the fashion of a professional knife thrower, but whenever he sat at a table he always laid it out in plain view on the cloth to the right of the place setting, ready for instant use, and he could use it with remarkable accuracy.

Each morning the Signore broke his fast with the same nourishment—caffe ristretto, warm rolls with sweet butter and tart marmalade, a bottle of mineral water, more caffe ristretto. Mercia was usually the cameriera at his table and she batted her brown eyes outlandishly as she served him. She was a plump young widow with two small children.

In the evening, when he consumed a bottle of white wine with perhaps pasta con frutti di mare, he was most respectfully attended by a gaunt middle-aged bachelor named Silvestro, whose voice and mien were as funereal as an undertaker's at the obsequies.

During the noontime repast in the trattoria's aromatic kitchen these two—Mercia and Silvestro—were forever dissecting and analyzing every nuance of Sr. Saccovino's utterances and behavior. The following colloquy, typical in mood, occurred one day in July:

"This morning the Signore praised the cool breeze coming in from the harbor."

"Last evening he spoke well of it too."

"Did he dine alone?"

"As if you didn't already know, Mercia."

"What did she look like?"

"Her hair was as black as a raven's wing . . ."

"You have a poet's tongue, Silvestro."

". . . Her eyelids were tinted green. A tiny black star occupied her left cheekbone. Her skin was the color of fresh cream. She possessed a pair of mammelle the like of which you see on—"

"Ah, one of that type again."

"What else?"

"What else indeed. He is a man with blood in his veins. His nature is affectionate."

"Last evening he ordered two bottles of Cinque Terre and permitted the lady to drink a bottle and a half."

"He is an abstemious man. His name is a gross misnomer. What did he eat?"

"Fish soup with an extra pinch of basil. Squid simmered in oil and garlic. Anchovies and capers in lemon juice. Bearded mussels in mustard. Pasta with clam sauce. Wild strawberries in brandy."

"The food of love."

"I must say he appeared to be wonderfully prepared for the lady by the time she had finished the last of the wine."

"I can well believe it. Did he kill many flies?"

"Only three in my presence. The lady was a powerful distraction."

"And the gratuity, it was generous?"

"More than generous. Eight thousand lire."

"So it goes. This morning he presented the carabiniere with two long cigars and bought a dozen lace handkerchiefs from old Camilla."

"The dark hours of night rewarded him."

"Over coffee he inquired after my bambini by name."

"He is a most courteous gentleman."

"He asked why I do not marry again."

"How do you reply to such a question?"

"To the Signore I said that a good man is not to be found in the market as readily as a good fish."

"Alas, that is the truth."

"And he answered— Do you wish to hear what the Signore said to that, Silvestro?"

"I think so."

"He said that many a sweet-fleshed fish is overlooked because it is thought to be not fat enough or young enough."

"That also is true."

"Such a fine fish is Silvestro, he said."

"He actually said that, Mercia?"

"I swear on the cross."

"Ah."

"He spoke in jest, of course."

"Of course."

"Then with his platinum pen he wrote out a gratuity of thirty-five hundred lire on a chit of half that sum. A night of love is a wonderful experience, Silvestro."

Toward the latter part of September—sabato, settembre ventisimo primo, as it would be remembered locally—the Hairy Tourist arrived in a rented Fiat just as the carabiniere was making fast the chain across the Via Roma. The time was 10:04 a.m.

"What's the big idea?" the Hairy Tourist asked as the carabiniere snapped shut the padlock. "I want to drive this heap into town." He spoke abominable Italian with an atrocious foreign accent.

"No motor vehicle is allowed in the town, signor," said the carabiniere, whose name was Umberto. "Except between the hours of seven and ten o'clock in the morning. And then we allow only those vehicles authorized to make deliveries of essential commodities."

"What the hell kind of a town is this anyway?"

"An old town, signor. A peaceful town. A town as yet unblessed by the fumes of benzina."

"Okay, admiral. Where do I park the heap?"—using the word mucchio.

"You may park the mucchio where the mucca grazes," Umberto said, pleased at the way he had worked a cow into the conversation.

It was Sr. Daddario, manager of the Hotel Nazionale, who dubbed this man the Hairy Tourist. The proffered passport identified him as Henry A. Scotti of St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A., but Sr. Daddario was more impressed by the bushy black eyebrows, the sweeping black mustachios, the dense black beard, and the flowing black hair that fell nearly to his shoulders.

"You are fortunate, signor," Daddario said. "Because of a late cancellation we have a single room available."

"I'll take it," the Hairy Tourist said, setting his luggage, an airlines flight bag, on the counter as he signed in.

"On the other hand, you are not so fortunate. This room is available for three days only."

"That's all right with me, captain. I'll be checking out early tomorrow morning."

"In that case, signor, you must pay in advance."

The room, a small one as are all

the rooms in the Hotel Nazionale, was situated on the second floor and overlooked the town square. The Hairy Tourist remained in it just long enough to drop the flight bag on the bed and then he was outside wandering around the town and asking questions of everyone about everything.

Where is the Church of San Martino? Who lives in the Castello Brown? Are there dolphins in these waters? Where is the Church of St. George? Is the fishing good outside the harbor? How cold does it get here in the winter? How old are some of these old arches? Do many tourists come here? Where do most of the tourists come from? Are there any Americans in town now? Has Sr. Giampietro Saccovino been living here long? Where does he live? When he dines here in town does he dine alone? How many miles is it to Rome? How much is a kilometer?

Sr. Saccovino strolled down from his villa an hour before sunset, graciously greeting all whom he met on the way, and finally settled down at a table outside the Trattoria Navicello. The chair he sat in, his favorite, afforded him a view of the harbor, with its flotilla of pleasure craft, impeded only by an occasional passerby. He enjoyed the warm glittering look of the water at this time of day.

Silvestro materialized at his side with a mournful "Buona sera" and "Desidera, signor?"

The Signore ordered a bottle of Cinque Terre and the antipasto and placed the pearl-handled fly swatter on the table. The flies of September are obnoxious and hardy. In a moment one of the creatures buzzed past his ear and settled on the corner of a folded napkin. The Signore's veined right hand moved stealthily toward the pearl handle, grasped it firmly, lifted it slightly, slapped it down unerringly.

The crumpled fly left a spot of black blood on the white napkin. Using the rubber palm of the swatter, the Signore meticulously shoved the small corpse off the table onto the cobbles.

"This I had to see with my own two eyes," twanged an American voice close by. "Old J. P. Sacco killin' flies for his kicks."

The Signore raised his eyes from the spot of blood and saw the Hairy Tourist standing where Silvestro normally stood, with what appeared to be an exultant grin breaking its way through the hirsuteness. The Signore's eyes grew suddenly slitted but his voice, when he spoke, was toned to its usual softness. "Buona sera,

signor. A que ora c'è l'omicidio?"

"Let's talk United States," the Hairy Tourist said.

"As you wish," said the Signore. "Since you probably plan to stay a while, take a seat."

The Hairy Tourist, sitting in a chair that placed his back to the harbor, said, "You got a very quaint scene here, J. P."

"It's restful."

"I guess. A man could rest in peace here. Forever."

"There are worse things. What is your name?"

"What's the diff? We ain't gonna know each other long enough to get acquainted."

"We're already acquainted," the Signore said, lifting the swatter and striking down a fly in mid-air. "You're acquainted with me by sight and reputation. I'm acquainted with you because I've known a dozen of your kind."

"It takes one to know one," the Hairy Tourist said.

"Don't equate me with yourself, young man. I never did a thing in my life for just money alone."

"Oh yeah."

Silvestro arrived with the wine and cast a look of sad inquiry at the newcomer.

"Bene, grazie, Silvestro," the Signore said. "Un altro bicchiere, per favore." To the Hairy Tourist: "What will you drink?"

"What's good enough for you is good enough for me."

"Would you care for an antipasto?"

"Why not?"

The Signore gave instructions to Silvestro, who left for a moment and returned with another glass. He poured a dram for the Signore's taste of approval and then filled the Hairy Tourist's glass to the brim.

"Can this ginzo understand English?" the Hairy Tourist asked after Silvestro's departure.

"No more than ten or twelve simple words," the Signore replied, his attention on a fly that had landed a few inches from the tip of his fork.

Taking a swallow of wine, the Hairy Tourist watched the Signore slap the insect fatally and flick it from the table. "What's all this business with the fancy fly swatter?" he asked.

"Swatting flies is second nature to me," the Signore said. "The first money I ever made was paid to me for swatting flies."

"You're tryin' to put me on, J. P."

"Not at all."

"This is Cutter Moran you're talkin' to."

The Signore took a thoughtful sip of the wine. "I knew a Cutie Moran back in the old days."

"None other than my old man."

"You don't say. Like father like son. As I remember, Cutie got too cute for his own good. And suddenly he wasn't around anymore."

"Just like you, J. P. Suddenly you weren't around no more and one hell of a lot of bread went with you."

"I took my retirement fund, Cutter. That's all."

"I ain't interested in the details, man. All I'm gettin' paid for is findin' you and finishin' you."

"How did you find me, by the way?"

"It wasn't easy."

Silvestro served the antipasto and asked whether there would be anything else. The Signore thanked Silvestro and promised to signal when further service was required. Silvestro bowed somberly and left.

The Hairy Tourist fingered a slice of red peperoncino from the dish in front of him and popped it into the whiskery opening in his face. "One thing's for sure, J. P.," he said, chewing, "you got off the beaten track when you picked this burg. They don't even let cars inside. Wow, these peppers are hot!" He downed a big draft of wine. "Now, if you'd gone to Rome or Naples, we got connections there and could've dug you out in a couple a weeks. In fact that's where I was goin' first, to Rome, but then I decided I better see an uncle a mine in Corsica I hadn't seen in four five years, a nice old guy retired like you but clean, and that's where the old coincidence come in. I'm in a waterfront joint outside Bastia a couple nights ago and I get talkin' baseball with this cat speaks United States pretty good and it turns out he goes to sea whenever a job turns up, except he ain't been to sea since way last spring when he gets a berth on a yacht chartered by a rich American named Saccovino, this cat says—Jampeetro Saccovino—and I think to myself, I wonder. Plain dumb luck, but here I am, two days later drinkin' wine with old J. P. Sacco himself."

"Do your employers in St. Louis know about this dumb luck?" the Signore asked, laying another fly low.

"Not yet. Until I seen you in person I wasn't a hundred percent sure you'd be the same cat who chartered that yacht. Besides, I hate to use the phones in this damn country. I don't trust the damn phones, you know what I mean."

"And quite right too, Cutter."

Beads of perspiration began to form on the bare area of the Hairy Tourist's face, that space

between the bushy eyebrows and the low bangs. "That pepper was *hot.*" From the lapel pocket of his jacket he flicked a handkerchief embroidered with a blue *M* and patted his brow. "Do you eat these damn peppers as a regular thing?"

"Yes," the Signore said. "I find they sharpen my wits."

"Like swalleyin' a lighted match."

"Well, you've got to be properly dressed to eat these peppers."

"Oh, sure you do."

"That turtleneck sweater you're wearing, for instance, and the tweed jacket. Absolutely no good for anyone who plans to eat a few red peppers."

"Yeah, you gotta be naked to eat them."

The Signore chuckled. "It might help at that, yes it might. But I can promise you one thing, Cutter, you'll definitely be more comfortable without that heavy wig and those phony whiskers."

The Hairy Tourist registered confoundment, at least to the degree that it was able to seep through the camouflage, and then tried to cover it up by pouring more wine into his own glass. Finally he said, "A real sharpie, ain't you? They told me that about you—a real sharp cookie. Don't ever rate him low, they said. He's got a sharp eye for a lot a little things nobody else notices. That's why he live so long. He keeps an eye open for the—"

The Signore's swatter took toll of another fly.

"Flies they failed to mention. Little things like flies. What's this fix you got on flies, man? You act like a cat with a bad habit."

"It's an old habit anyway," the Signore said. "I've already told you that."

"Yeah, you made money at it. Tell me more."

"Are you really interested, Cutter?"

"Until the sun goes down, J. P., you're my main interest in life."

"That's very flattering, Cutter. *Silvestro!*"

"Keep it cool, man."

"That's why I'm ordering more wine."

"Whatever you do, you talk United States."

"That wouldn't be cool at all, Cutter. I always converse with Silvestro in Italian."

"Then keep it short. My old lady was Italiano and I capeesh and don't you forget it."

Silvestro materialized and leaned deferentially toward Sr. Saccovino, who ordered another bottle of wine and two plates of lasagna al pesto. The Hairy Tourist followed every word with the

big-eyed concentration of a bloodhound.

"My first flies," the Signore said as Silvestro withdrew. "I was eight or nine at the time, a small boy, small for my age, my father already dead, my dear mother forced to work long hours in sweatshops . . . Are you sure you want to hear this, Cutter?"

"With violins it would be better, but keep talkin'."

"My mother had a younger brother Isacco—Ike to all who knew him—and somehow he got enough money together to rent a small shop in our neighborhood. Much later I was able to guess where the money came from. Anyway, for sale in Ike's shop were olive oil, cheeses, prosciutto, sardines, salami, tomato paste, figs, mushrooms, peppers hotter than even these in this antipasto, braciole—"

"Skip the Little Italy part, man, and get to the flies. That's the part I'm interested in. How you started out makin' money by killin' flies."

"Of course. Well, my uncle's inventory attracted flies in the warm weather. And although this inventory was merely a front for his real stock-in-trade, he had a fussy prejudice against—"

"You mean he was like hustlin' somethin' else out of the back room there, I guess. Right, man?"

"That's right, Cutter. This was during the time of the Eighteenth Amendment. Ever hear of it?"

"Sure, the no-booze bust."

"Right again. Uncle Ike didn't sell enough Italian food to pay the rent. He moved what was known in those days as hooch. Still, he had a certain number of food customers, old-country people, who came in for a pound of provolone or something like that, and he honored them by keeping the front of the store neat and clean. No flies allowed. He let me hang out there after school and on Saturdays for the express purpose of keeping the place free of flies. I used a rolled-up newspaper to kill them and earned a penny a corpse. At the end of a good day I often collected as much as . . ."

While the Signore was talking Silvestro served the lasagna and more wine and the sun slipped into the shimmering sea and violent shadows crept rapidly over the pines on the uplands behind the town. Soon the darkness lay everywhere outside the meager light from the old-fashioned street lamps and the boats moored in the harbor.

The Hairy Tourist washed down the last morsel with the last of the wine. "I feel so good right now," he said, "that I almost might grab

the check right off the waiter."

"Don't strain yourself," the Signore said. "I have a weekly account here."

"This could be the week it don't get paid." The Hairy Tourist chortled mirthlessly in his beard.

"That depends on how well you do your job."

"I ain't flubbed a job yet, J. P." "*Silvestro!*"

The Hairy Tourist, sobering, leaned across the table. "Watch yourself with the waiter, man. One word outta line and I'll put a shiv in your gut so fast you won't have time to say scusa."

"Don't worry, Cutter. I have due respect for any man with a name like yours." The Signore took the proffered tray from Silvestro and signed the chit with his renowned pen, adding a fat gratuity.

"Mille grazie, signor," Silvestro said.

"Prego, Silvestro," the Signore said benignly.

"Buona notte, signor."

"Arrivederci, Silvestro."

A few minutes later the Signore and the Hairy Tourist passed from the town square side by side. The Signore was carrying the fly swatter, pearl handle up, under his right arm, much in the manner of an NCO with a baton on parade. The Hairy Tourist was smoking a cigarette silently, all talked out.

As they proceeded around one of the stone posts that held the chain across the Via Roma, the Signore said conversationally, "Did you come by car?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Where did you park it?"

"You'll see soon enough."

"You plan to give me a ride?"

"Just a short one."

Out in the darkness, away from the lights of the town, a thousand stars became visible around a nearly full moon. In a moment the Signore's searching eyes caught a metallic glint ahead on the side of the road—a steel wheel disc.

"Do you have another cigarette?" he asked.

"Sure do," the Hairy Tourist said.

"I could use one."

"Okay, but no tricks." The Hairy Tourist took a pack of cigarettes from one pocket of his tweed jacket and a switchblade knife from the other. "Just in case," he said, snapping out the business end of the knife.

With his left hand the Signore pulled a cigarette from the pack. "Do you have a match?"

"You want me to spit for you too?" Returning the cigarette pack to his pocket, the Hairy Tourist came up with a butane lighter.

"Here you are, man," he said, clicking a blue flame into life. "Enjoy it. You got time for maybe five good drags."

The Signore was standing ramrod straight, a few inches shorter than his companion. He still held the fly swatter tucked under his arm like a baton. As the Hairy Tourist leaned forward to touch the cigarette in the Signore's mouth with the shimmying flame, the Signore's left hand went swiftly to the pearl handle and gave it a double twist. There was a vibrating sound—*piiing-giing-giing*—and the lighter shook convulsively.

"Aaah gug ach," the Hairy Tourist said, dropping the switchblade and reaching for his throat. In a few seconds he got down on his knees and in another few seconds he prostrated himself at the Signore's feet.

After rolling the body over on its back, the Signore squatted beside it and began to remove the wig, the eyebrows, the beard, the moustache. The face thus revealed struck a chord of memory. Cutie Moran all over again, 20 years later, with a few minor variations. Still stupid, still inept. Like father like son.

He raked the nearby ground with his fingers until he located the butane lighter. Then with the lighter's help he explored the throatal region until he found what he was looking for—the tip of a narrow stainless-steel shaft protruding a tiny fraction of an inch from the folds of the turtleneck sweater. With a pair of jeweler's pliers taken from the pocket of his silk coat he grasped the tip of the shaft and gently pulled, presently extracting a needle six inches long. He wrapped it carefully in the monogrammed handkerchief which he took from the breast pocket of the dead man's jacket and set it on the ground next to the fly swatter for reloading at a later time. He stripped off the jacket and went through the pockets. Wallet, money, traveler's checks, *two* passports.

The first passport, containing a photograph of the Hairy Tourist, identified him as Henry A. Scotti of St. Louis, Missouri; the second, depicting a living likeness of the hairless corpse, was issued to Charles Moran, also of St. Louis.

"Addio, Enrico," the Signore muttered. "Addio, Carlo."

He spread the tweed jacket on the ground. Onto its lining he dropped the passports and the switchblade. The turtleneck sweater followed. Next went the slacks, in the hip pocket of which he found the car keys. When the corpse was stark naked he

dragged it several yards off the road and propped it in a sitting position with its back against a boulder.

He made a bundle of the tweed jacket by tying its arms together. He carried the bundle to the car—a rented Fiat, he noticed—and locked it in the trunk. He climbed into the driver's seat and drove the car in the direction of Paraggi until he reached a place where the road hung recklessly over the Golfo Marconi. He got out of the car, its motor idling, and walked it with some effort to the brink of doom. As it began its irreversible tilt he lit the butane lighter and tossed it into the front seat. Then he began the longish walk—three kilometers, at least—back to the villa, reloading the pearl-handled fly swatter en route.

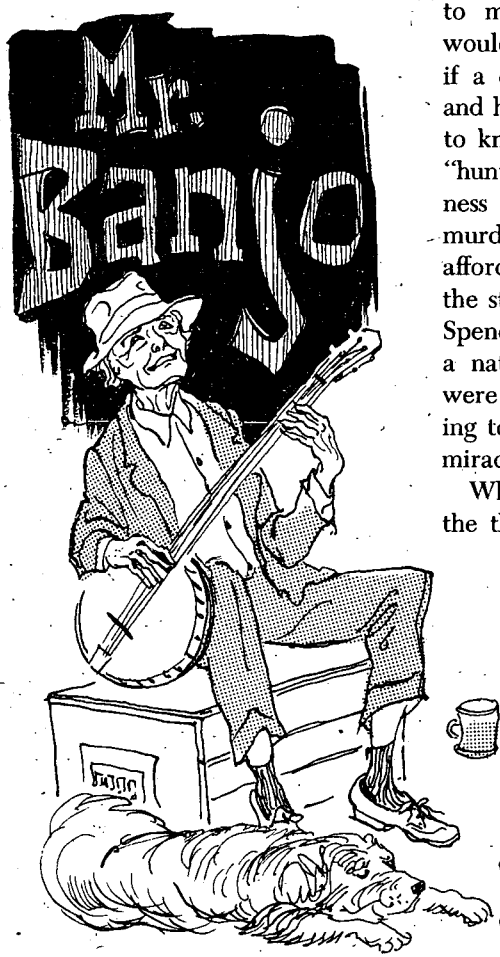
The next day was domenica, God's day, but the Portofinese weren't talking about God. The main subject of conversation was the discovery of the nude body of an unidentified man on the Via Roma outside the town. The man was generally assumed to have been an Italian because of the tattoo on the left forearm—a serpent (evil) climbing a cross (good). Though not yet officially determined, the cause of death was attributed by Umberto the carabiniere, who had seen such things, to a fishbone's lodgment sidewise in the man's gullet. Nobody seemed to wonder why a naked stranger would be eating bony fish out there at night.

A minor topic of conversation that same morning concerned the fact that Henry A. Scotti had departed unseen from the Hotel Nazionale without taking along his airlines flight bag which contained, according to the manager, Sr. Daddario, a safety razor, a package of razor blades, an aerosol can of shaving cream and a bottle of lime-scented lotion.

"Why should such a hairy devil carry around articles like these?" Sr. Daddario was fond of asking whenever the subject arose, which was not often.

On this same day Sr. Saccovino killed 27 flies.

Life has some curious twists but frequently it compensates if one plays the right tune.



by Charles Beckman

A murder trial brought me back to my home town, Whitaker. I would never have gone back there if a certain wealthy doctor's wife and her boyfriend had not decided to knock off the good doctor in a "hunting accident." Their clumsiness got them arrested for capital murder. They wanted, and could afford, the best criminal lawyer in the state. So they hired me, Roger Spencer. I come high, but I have a national reputation. Since they were guilty as hell, they were going to need the kind of courtroom miracles I could pull off.

Whitaker had changed little in the thirty-odd years since I left. I

drove into town in my new car and turned slowly down Main Street, the setting of a thousand boyhood memories. Old Hester's pharmacy was now a chain drugstore. The front of the Bijou had been remodeled and was now the Ciné, but for the most part, the store fronts had the same depressing, slightly seedy look as when I'd grown up here. It was as if the Great Depression had settled here and never left. I had the spooky feeling that if I walked into the barber shop, the calendar on the wall would read "1936."

Then I passed the corner where the First National Bank was still located, and suddenly I could hear a banjo plunking. It was a trick of memory, of course, because that was the corner where old Mr. Banjo used to sit on his apple box and play for nickles and dimes. After all these years, I could still see him clearly, a frail old man, his sightless eyes looking nowhere, his faithful old dog Rascal curled beside his box, and his banjo strumming merrily away.

Then the memories became chilling. I shivered and speeded up to get away from there but the ghostly banjo music followed me down the street. I drove to the new motel where I had a reservation.

For the next twenty-four hours I was extremely busy, meeting with my clients and their local attorney, preparing for the first day of jury selection.

I was leaving the courthouse about four the next afternoon when a rather nondescript, gray, middle-aged man approached me. "Mr. Spencer—Roger . . . remember me?"

I put on my professional, public-relations smile. "Why yes, I think so. Let me see now . . ." (Actually, I hadn't the vaguest idea who he was.)

"Dick Frazer. I—I guess we've all changed," he said, apologizing for my not remembering him.

Again flashed a flood of memories—the banjo ringing faintly down the corridor of years—and a slight chill rippled down my spine. "Dick! Of course I remember," I said with genuine warmth, shaking hands with him. "Why, we were good friends. We hunted squirrels and rabbits after school."

"Had to," he laughed. "Food came scarce in those days. Remember the rattlesnakes we used to trap and sell?"

I shuddered. "Don't remind me! Like you said, though, money was hard to come by. So you're still living here."

"Yes. I'm running the town's newspaper—still a weekly like it always was. I took it over after

my father passed away. Listen, do you have a minute for a cup of coffee? You're a celebrity now. I'd like to get a story about you for this Friday's edition."

I could do that much for my boyhood chum, Dick Frazer. He'd been the only person in this entire town I'd given a hang about. I hadn't even come back for my old man's funeral. His sister, my Aunt Cynthia, sent me a wire the night his booze-riddled liver finally gave out. The wire said, "Your father died at eleven p.m. tonight." I had a strong urge to wire back, "So what?" but I guess we're all slaves to our conscience. I wired several thousand dollars to the funeral home here, told them to plant the old man in their best casket. I made only one stipulation—that they put a quart of cheap bourbon beside the body.

Over coffee at the local cafe, Dick said, "Roger, I guess you know this story I'm going to write will have the old 'local boy makes good' angle. You were the only one in our school crowd who had the sense to get out of this town and make something of yourself. Remember Kate Lowery, the prettiest girl in our class? Everybody said she'd be a Broadway star one day. Well, she's still here, running a dingy little dance studio for kids, supporting her no-good husband. Cecil Buford, our football captain—well, he's running a service station. Some of them are dead now . . ."

I know what he was thinking; me of all people—Roger Spencer, son of the town drunk—the least likely of us all to make it big. Life has some curious twists.

We had our coffee and chat and Dick made his notes for the story he was going to write about me—the story I told him, of course. Nobody knew the real story except me and a couple of other people who have been dead for a long time. That's the one part of my life about which even my wife Ellen doesn't know.

We left the cafe together and walked to the parking lot. On the way, we passed the First National Bank corner.

"Hey, Roger, remember that old tramp that played the banjo here on the corner?" Dick asked.

"Sure," I said, hurrying a little to get to my car.

"Mr. Banjo, we used to call him. He was a fixture on that corner for years. Remember how somebody got the crazy story started that he was one of those eccentric misers who went around in ragged clothes while he was hoarding a bunch of money hidden somewhere in his shack?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Would you believe it, for years after he disappeared folks in this town rooted around that shack where he lived, hunting for his buried treasure. Of course, they never found anything. Poor old guy never had more than the clothes on his back. But people like to dream. I often wondered what became of that old man. One day he just disappeared."

"Not much telling. Well, I've got to get back to the motel, Dick. Have a lot of briefs to read. Sure nice talking to you again after all these years."

"Same here." He looked admiringly at my car as I slid behind the wheel. "So glad for your success, Roger. Again, congratulations."

He said it a bit wistfully. I understood. He was one of many men who suddenly look around and find that middle age has arrived, and they must face the fact that life is never going to deliver the promises it made when they were young.

"It's all in the breaks, Dick," I said, and that was true. I'd just been one of the lucky ones. We shook hands and I drove out of the parking lot. Dick and I had been close, but that was more than thirty years ago. Now we had nothing in common, and I probably would never see him again. I preferred to leave the past where it belonged.

In my motel room the large vanity mirrored my reflection: a tanned, still handsome man, gray over the temples, but a body kept trim by the best-equipped gym in town plus regular golf at the country club. I took off my expensive suit, my imported Italian shoes and the fancy wristwatch guaranteed not to lose over two seconds in two months. I put it on the dresser beside the picture of Ellen, my lovely wife, and Pam, our daughter, that I always carried with me.

I mixed a drink, then stretched out on the bed in my shorts. I'd brought along my banjo. I began idly strumming some chords. Playing the banjo was a hobby going back many years. I played for kicks and for charity shows back home. I'd found it an excellent therapy for unwinding the knots of tension that go with my profession.

Now the instrument brought the memories back again, this time in sharp focus.

Those had been hard times, growing up in Whitaker back in the thirties, but we kids made our own fun. My greatest treasure was a single-shot .22 squirrel rifle. Somehow my old man managed to stay sober enough one Christmas

season to give it to me. Most of the time he spent in an alcoholic fog in some bar while I roamed around town and into the country pretty much as I pleased. As Dick said, we spent a lot of time on the river bottom hunting squirrels and rabbits, and I had developed a little business trapping and selling rattlesnakes to an outfit in Florida that canned the meat. That paid for my .22 cartridges and clothes my old man never quite managed to get around to buying for me. School was a sketchy affair, but I'd inherited a high I.Q. from my mother who died when I was four. I read a lot on my own and made good grades despite all the times I played hooky to hunt.

I picked up music from that old blind beggar we called "Mr. Banjo." I'd once heard that his last name was Jones—Banjo Jones. I don't know for sure if that was really his name. He never told me. He probably didn't know himself.

He lived in a one-room tar-paper shack out of town a way, between the city dump and the river. A familiar sight in our town was Mr. Banjo trudging in every morning to take his place on his apple box beside the bank. He'd be carrying his banjo and holding the leash of his dog Rascal. Rascal wasn't one of those fancy Seeing Eye dogs. He was just a big old mongrel, but he sensed with some kind of canine intuition that Mr. Banjo was blind and did a pretty good job of leading him around.

Kids like Dick and myself were fascinated by Mr. Banjo. We'd stop by the bank on our way home from school to hear him whanging away on his banjo. All we had to do was drop a coin in his tin cup, and he'd start off like a jukebox. If we didn't have a nickle or penny for his cup, we'd drop a steel washer in. He didn't know the difference. He seemed to enjoy playing. He'd whang that old banjo like he was performing on a stage with a spotlight, showing his toothless gums in a grin and nodding his gray head to the time of the music.

I guess I made friends with old Banjo because we were both what you might call town outcasts. I was "that ragged Spencer kid," son of the town drunk. Most of the nice kids in town—like that snooty Kate Lowery that I had a hopeless crush on because she was so pretty—wouldn't have anything to do with me. The town just tolerated old Banjo because they felt sorry for him, I guess. In those days, every place had its town beggar. Mr. Banjo was ours.

My roaming around the countryside with my squirrel rifle

sometimes took me down to the city dump and past old Banjo's shack. Sometimes on Sundays (the only day he wasn't in town), he'd be sitting in front, sunning himself, Rascal curled at his feet. I began stopping off to talk to him. He was a strange old guy. I don't guess he had a full set of brains, but I liked to listen to him. He wouldn't talk much to people in town, so everybody thought he was a half-wit. I think it was because he was suspicious of people; but he trusted me. I'd get him started and he could tell stories by the hour. According to him, he'd been all over the United States before he came to Whitaker. He talked about cities like San Francisco, New Orleans, Memphis. To a kid who'd never been out of his home county, that was exciting stuff, even if most of it was lies. I guess it was listening to Banjo tell those stories that gave me the itchy feet that wanted to shake the dust of Whitaker forever.

Old Banjo taught me what I know about music. He'd put my fingers on the strings of his beat-up old instrument, showing me the way chords were made. I guess I had a natural ear because it wasn't long before I caught on. He must have liked me pretty much by then, because he hardly ever allowed anyone else to touch his battered old treasured banjo.

I don't know who the idiot was that started the rumor about Banjo having a fortune hidden in his shack. I guess it was the hard times. People were so desperate for money, they liked to believe stories like that. It probably got started when somebody read about a ragged bum who died on skid row and the police found a bunch of money sewed up in his mattress. Things like that do happen all the time—misers who live in rags, with hardly enough to eat, accumulating a fortune, penny by penny, until they have hoarded a bunch of money they hide in their dwellings because they don't trust banks.

Of course it was ridiculous to think poor old Banjo had anything besides his dog and his banjo and the shack he lived in, but I heard the rumors. Guys down at the barber shop who didn't have anything better to do would speculate on how much Banjo had stashed away. It got to be a kind of game around town, guessing the amount. "See that old bum," somebody would say when Banjo shuffled into town, holding Rascal's leash. "He collects a lot of nickles and dimes and never spends a cent except for a few cans of beans every week. He's a miser. Must have hoarded thou-

sands of dollars. No telling how much he's got hid." Somebody added fire to the rumors by claiming they'd seen Banjo ride the bus into the county seat with a heavy tin box under his arm—and come back without the box.

It might have been a harmless game if Sheriff Buck Mayden hadn't decided to get serious about it. You saw a lot of law officers like Buck in the small towns back in those days; men short on brains, but long on muscle. Buck was a big, sullen man with a mean streak. Everybody was afraid of him. His way of keeping law and order was to pack a big six-shooter on his hip and bully people into respecting him.

Buck got to be sheriff when old Sheriff Honer died. Well, Buck hadn't been sheriff long before he started making life miserable for old Banjo. I saw him talking to Banjo in front of the bank one day. The next day, Banjo didn't show up in his usual place. That was the first time in my entire life I could remember that I didn't see Banjo with his dog, his cup and his apple box on Main Street.

I went out to his shack, expecting to find him sick, but he was sitting out front on his apple box, looking sad. "Sheriff says the city's got a law against beggars," he told me. "Sheriff says I got to buy a license. I ain't no beggar. I play music for a living," he said with a stirring of pride.

"How much does the license cost?" I asked.

"Sheriff says it's twenty-five dollars to start and ten dollars a week after that. The old sheriff never told me nothin' about a license like that when he was living."

I whistled softly. That was a big sum of money in 1936. "You goin' to pay it?"

"Where'm I goin' to get money like that? Guess I'll have to move along. Don't much feel like it, though. I'm gettin' too old to go driftin' around the country. Always figured to spend the rest of my days here."

The next several days, whenever I went down to Banjo's shack, he was sitting in the same place out front, staring straight ahead, his blind eyes looking at nothing. I figured he didn't have anything to eat, so I cooked up some rabbit stew and took it out to him.

One afternoon, when I was approaching the shack, I saw the sheriff's car parked there. Buck drove one of those black 1934 Ford V-Eights that Clyde Barrow liked.

I sneaked closer to see what was going on. Buck was standing over Banjo, yelling at him. The

old man looked scared. "You got that twenty-five dollars. I know you have. That and a lot more! Now where is it?"

Banjo made some kind of frightened, pleading sound, holding up his hands as if to protect himself. He kept shaking his head vigorously when Buck asked about money.

Buck uttered a scorching swearword and stomped into the shack. I heard him throwing things around in there. It sounded as if he were tearing the place apart, board by board. I hid behind a bush. My heart was thumping. Like everyone else in the county, I was afraid of Buck Mayden. Wasn't a thing I could do but sit there and watch.

After a while, Buck came out, looking mad and frustrated. "Where is it, you old fool? Where you got that money hid?"

"Ain't got no money hid," Banjo whined.

"Th' hell you ain't! You stingy old miser. You been hoarding them nickles and dimes for years. Where you got them hid?"

Banjo just kept shaking his head. Buck suddenly grabbed him and gave him a hard shaking. It was like shaking a sackful of rattling bones.

Rascal was growling fiercely. Then, to protect his master, he charged Buck. He sank his fangs in Buck's leg. Buck let out a howl of pain and fury. He shook the dog loose, then drew his big old six-shooter and shot Rascal dead.

Poor old Banjo let out a cry of grief. He knelt on the ground beside the dog that had been his companion for so many years. Buck grabbed Banjo again and started giving him a terrible pistol whipping. He'd stop from time to time, sweating and panting, and demand to know where Banjo had his money hidden, but Banjo would only shake his bloody head and beg the sheriff to stop hitting him.

Finally Buck yelled, "Well, if you ain't got no money, then you're a vagrant and you're goin' to jail! Get in there!" and he threw Banjo into the back seat of his car.

I sat behind the bush a long time after they'd left, feeling sick. Finally I went down and dug a hole behind the shack and buried Rascal. I made the grave as nice as I could, and put a piece of broken concrete that I dragged over from the dumping grounds for a headstone and wrote "Rascal" on it with a pencil.

There wasn't much left inside the shack. Buck had ripped the mattress apart, torn up the flooring, cut Banjo's few clothes to

shreds. I found the old banjo and tin cup in the wreckage and carried them home with me.

Next day, I went down to the jail. The sheriff's office with its two-cell jail was situated in a little brick building near the outskirts of town. Respectable people never went near the place. I knew where it was because my old man spent a lot of Saturday nights there, sleeping off drunks.

Buck was leaning back in his swivel chair, his boots crossed and propped on his scarred desk. He was chewing a match and reading the *Police Gazette.* When I came in, he glanced up. "What do you want, kid? I ain't got your old man in here today."

"I wonder if I could see Banjo," I said.

He went back to reading. "Can't nobody see him. He's a dangerous prisoner. Got him in solitary confinement."

I screwed up my courage to ask, "How come he's in jail?"

"Attacking an officer, resisting arrest. Vagrancy. Mostly vagrancy."

"How long's he gonna be in jail?"

"Till he can pay his fine."

"Where's he gonna get the money?"

"Oh, he's got it. He's got a lot of money hidden somewhere, but he's too tight-fisted to tell anybody. He'd rather rot in jail. Now go on, beat it, kid."

I stood on one foot, then another, thinking fast. "Well," I said, "me'n ol' Banjo's pretty good friends. I'd sure like to see him get out of jail. Maybe if I could talk to him, he'd tell me where his money is. He trusts me."

Buck slowly lowered his *Police Gazette,* gave me a thoughtful look as he sucked on his match. Finally he spat out some frayed match pieces, got up and took the cell key out of his pocket. "You find out where he keeps his money so's he can pay his fine and we'll let him go."

"How much is his fine?"

"That depends. First you find out where his money is."

Buck unlocked the cell door. I went in. Poor old Banjo was lying on a smelly bunk. He looked real bad. The blood was dried and crusted on his face and in his gray hair. It was plain to see he'd had no medical attention. Probably nothing to eat, either.

"Hi, Banjo," I said, trying to sound cheerful. "It's me, Roger. I came to see you."

He turned his sightless face slowly, painfully in my direction. "Hello, boy," he whispered faintly.

I said, "I brought your banjo.

Figured you'd like to have it. It wasn't hurt none."

For the first time he showed a little life. He reached out with shaking hands. I put the banjo in his hands and he hugged it close. Some tears rolled out of his eyes. That surprised me. I didn't know blind people could cry.

I looked around to see if Buck was listening, but he'd gone back up front to his desk. "Here's a candy bar," I whispered, sneaking it out of my pocket. He thanked me, but he put it beside him without eating it. I guess he was too sick to eat.

"Buck said he'd let you go if you'll pay a fine," I said.

He shook his head. "Ain't got no money to pay a fine." He turned his face to the wall. "I'm going to die here."

He wouldn't say anything else. I finally called Buck to let me out of the cell. I looked back once. The old man was lying there, hugging his banjo, his face turned to the wall.

"Well?" Buck demanded. "Did he tell you?"

I shook my head and Buck muttered some cuss words.

I went home, got my rifle and spent the rest of the day down on the river bottom, plinking around and checking the rocks for rattlesnakes. I was feeling pretty low. I couldn't sleep much that night, thinking about poor old Banjo. There wasn't any use talking to anybody in town about him. Nobody was going to cross Buck Mayden over a worthless old beggar. Banjo was going to die in that jail cell, just like he said.

Sometime during the night I hit on a way I could save Banjo. I sat straight up in bed, sweating and scared, my heart pounding. I tried to stop thinking about it, but I couldn't. Finally I knew I was going to do it.

The next day I skipped school and made a trip out to Banjo's shack. Then I hiked back to town. It was early afternoon when I got to the jail. Buck scowled when I walked into his office. "You back again?"

I wet my lips and swallowed hard. "Could I please see Banjo one more time? I sure want to get him out of jail. Maybe he'll tell me today about where his money's hid."

Buck was in a real mean, sullen mood. "Don't know why he'd tell you when he won't tell me. That's the stubbornest old miser I ever saw. He'd rather lay there and die than tell me where his money's hid."

"Let me try," I pleaded. "He came close to telling me yesterday."

Buck gave me a hard, suspicious look. "How do I know if he tells you, you won't run out there and dig the money up and keep it yourself?"

"Then how could I get Banjo out of jail?" I pointed out. "Please; he's gonna die if I can't get him out soon."

I guess I did a good job of convincing him. He scowled at me hard, but said, "Well, it won't hurt to try. He's sure not going to tell me. But let me warn you, you're in big trouble, boy, if you try to make off with that money. I'll throw both you and your old man in jail."

He took me back to Banjo's cell and left us alone for a while. Banjo was worse than the day before. He was only partly conscious. I leaned over his bunk; whispering to him.

When Buck came to get me out of the cell, I said, "Well, he told me."

Buck's eyes lit up like the electric sign in front of the Bijou. "You tellin' the truth, kid?"

"Sure. I know where to find it."

"Well, I'm not trusting you. Come on. We'll go out there and you'll show me where it is."

Buck got his Stetson hat and buckled on his big six-shooter. We drove out of town fast in his V-Eight Ford. We went down the dirt road to Banjo's shack in a cloud of dust. When we got there, I led the way around the shack in the direction of the dump grounds. Finally I pointed to the rusting remains of a Model T. "Under there. He's got it buried there."

"Whoopee!" yelled Buck. "You stay back here, kid," he warned. Then he ran to the wrecked car and started digging wildly, throwing trash and loose dirt aside. There were dark sweat stains around the arms and neck of his shirt. Then I heard him give a panting exclamation when he came to the can. He clawed the lid off and plunged his hand down for the money.

Then he let out a bellowing scream and leaped to his feet. Dangling from his arm was the big, diamond-backed rattlesnake I'd put there earlier that day. The snake's fangs were sunk in Buck's wrist. He screamed again with pain and fright. He shook the snake off, yanked out his six-shooter and blew its head off.

I'd stood there, petrified. Now I broke into a dead run, back to Buck's car. I grabbed the keys out of the ignition and sprinted toward the woods.

Behind me I heard Buck's enraged bellow. "Come back here, you lousy kid!"

I ran all the faster, zigzagging around the trash in the dump grounds. I heard the roar of his six-shooter. The buzz of .45 slugs were around me like angry hornets. Then I reached the woods and plunged into the brush. I heard him coming after me, crashing limbs. He was sobbing and bellowing with a mixture of pain, fright and anger.

For a long time I ran through the brush along the riverbank with Buck floundering and crashing behind me. Luckily, I'd spent so much time down here I knew every trail and bush. I don't know how long Buck chased me but at last I heard a final crash in the brush behind me, then silence. I crept back to make sure it wasn't a trick. It wasn't. Buck was sprawled out on his back, staring up at the sky with glassy, scared eyes. Sweat was pouring off him. His arm was swollen up like a balloon. It was turning purple.

It took a long time for Buck to die. I sat on the ground and watched. He got delirious. He'd cuss for a while, then he'd sing. Sometimes he'd try to get up, but he'd fall back down and lie there. Finally, at sundown, he died. I waited a while, then went over and looked down at him. His bulging eyes were staring straight up at the sky like glass marbles about to pop out of the sockets. I forced myself to reach in the pockets of his sweat-soaked clothing for the jail keys. Then I ran back to his car.

It was dark when I drove up to the jail. I made sure no one was around; then I went inside, turned on a light and unlocked Banjo's cell. "It's me, Roger. Come on. I'm going to get you out of here."

Two things: I had to get us away from this town before people started looking for Buck, and I had to get Banjo to a doctor.

The old man was so weak I half-dragged him out to the car, but he wouldn't leave his banjo behind. He lay down on the back seat, still hugging his banjo while I drove out of town.

I figured it might be several days before somebody found Sheriff Buck Mayden, but I drove all night to be on the safe side, crossing the state line about dawn. The first large town I came to, I asked how to find a hospital that had a charity ward. It wasn't long before I had Banjo in the county hospital and a doctor was working on him.

I went to get some breakfast and I ditched Buck's car on the other side of town.

When I got back to the hospital, they'd cleaned Banjo up and

he looked nice and peaceful in a hospital gown on a bed in the charity ward. He was sleeping. The awful look of pain was erased. A nurse told me they'd given him a shot to make him comfortable.

I hung around the hospital most of that day. I told them Banjo was my uncle and that he got all banged up when he fell off a horse. His foot was caught in the stirrup and the horse dragged him. I'd read about that happening to a guy in a pulp Western story.

That night I slept on a park bench. The next morning I went to see Banjo again at the hospital, but his bed was empty.

The doctor saw me and called me aside. He explained that Banjo had died peacefully in his sleep during the night. "We did what we could for him, but he was a very old man." He asked if we had any money and I said we didn't and he said that he'd arrange for the county to bury the old man.

They gave me a small bundle, the bloodstained rags he'd been wearing when I brought him in, and his banjo. I went down to the park bench where I sat alone and cried a little.

I hit the road after that. I did what a lot of young guys were doing those depression years. I worked the C.C.C. camps and roughnecked in the oil fields.

In 1938, I was roughnecking in an oil field near Seguin, Texas. Wherever I went, I always took Banjo's beat-up old instrument with me. I was in my rented room one night, plunking some chords, trying to learn a tune that was popular that year. The head on the banjo split. I took it apart to see if I could fix it. It was easy—a blind man could do it. When I removed the head, I found pasted inside the banjo five one-thousand-dollar bills. That was a lot of money in those days—enough to take a smart kid out of the C.C.C. camps and oil fields and put him through law school.

I've liked banjo music ever since.

Man may escape one trial only to find himself facing another more severe.

a novelette
by Albert Avellano

The white Rolls-Royce made a right turn off Washington's Georgia Avenue at the main entrance to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The M.P. in front of the little guardhouse waved it through, and the limousine rolled smoothly along the black asphalt. It passed the commanding general's house, circled the fountain in front of the main building, and made its way to the front of the Red Cross Building where it pulled quietly to the curb.

The chauffeur, a slim, narrow-shouldered man with a pink face and small, silver moustache, got out, leaving the engine running. He was wearing a dark gray suit, white shirt, narrow black tie, and a dark gray cap with a black visor. He walked around to the passenger side, glanced at his wristwatch and stood waiting. It was 4:28 p.m. He was two minutes early.

A few blue-robed patients with facial disfigurements, with empty sleeves, or who tried to make two

metal crutches do the work of a missing leg, left the building and a few others entered. A man in a private's uniform came out and paused to light a cigarette. Although he didn't wear a long blue patient's robe, the soldier might have been mistaken for a patient. He had pale-blue, expressionless eyes, and his face seemed incapable of registering emotion. Like the Vietnam casualties, he, too, had something scarred or missing—it just wasn't on the surface.

There was a stocky man in civilian clothes standing in front of the yellow-brick post theater, pretending to read the placards and nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. From where he stood, he had a good view of the entrance to the Red Cross Building 200 yards away. As soon as the car arrived, he became alert. When the soldier appeared, he began striding rapidly toward the white Rolls-Royce, opening and closing his hands as he walked.

A young woman in a gray Red Cross uniform came out of the building. She danced lightly down the steps and her blonde hair bounced on her shoulders. The chauffeur bent and opened the rear door for her. She stopped beside him to say a few cordial words, then entered the limousine. The driver closed the door and turned to find the cold-eyed soldier standing in front of him.

From then on the action speeded up. The stocky civilian reached the other side of the car, opened the door, and climbed in beside the startled girl. The slamming of the car door caused the driver to whirl around to see what was happening. When he did, the soldier placed the barrel of a small pistol at the nape of his neck and sent a bullet upward into his brain. Then he ran around and took the wheel of the car, made a curb-hopping U-turn, and drove away.

At the sound of the shot, a patient, who had been coming along the sidewalk with the aid of two canes, sat down and began to cry. He was still there, refusing all help, when the FBI arrived to assist the military police.

When the phone rang, Zoltan Lenny was reading a detailed report from one of his companies about a proposed Dallas-Fort Worth monorail. Telephones, whether in his Washington office or here at his Maryland estate, had been installed for his convenience, not the callers'. If it wasn't convenient for him to answer, he simply ignored them and

waited for his secretary to take the call after the third ring.

In this case, however, it was his green phone that was screaming for attention. There was no extension in the secretary's office. The green phone was his most private line, used only by a handful of the nation's most powerful men and only in emergencies. He snatched the handset from its cradle and said, "Yes?"

He was answered by a dull, obviously disguised voice. "Mr. Lenny, we have your daughter. If you want her back in one healthy piece, start raising $500,000 in cash. Old bills. Nothing bigger than a hundred. You have one week. Do exactly as you're told, or she gets what your chauffeur got." The line went dead.

For once in his life Zoltan Lenny was at a loss for words. He dropped the phone back in place and drummed his fingers on his desk. Then he punched a button on his intercom. "Tell my daughter I want to see her in my office right away," he ordered.

Phyllis Lenny came bursting through the door a few minutes later. She was five-feet-two, pretty, with long blonde hair. "Daddy!" she said indignantly. "You know I'm having a party in my apartment for one of my friends. I'm not finished with the preparations yet. Why did you have to bother me?"

"I just received a phone call from a man who said he had kidnapped you," he answered.

"Oh!" The girl put her hand to her mouth in a gesture learned from television. "I asked the chauffeur to pick up Ruth Lord at Walter Reed at 4:30. Her husband had their car, and she had no other way of coming to the shower." She allowed her hand to drop. "Ruth looks a lot like me, Daddy . . ."

Paul Lord, the husband of the kidnapped woman, rushed to the Lenny estate as soon as he got the news. His car was ten years old and white smoke poured from its exhaust, but anyone following him would have had a hard time keeping up. He took the private road to the front of the sprawling mansion, and left his old sedan double-parked beside an FBI vehicle.

Lord was of medium height with an athletic build. He wore his hair short. He'd tried it long, but he'd been in the Army too many years to be comfortable with long hair. He had on a pair of faded green fatigue trousers and a short-sleeved sport shirt, the costume he always wore to classes at the University of Maryland.

He had been afraid no good would come of Ruth's friendship

with Phyllis Lenny, but he hadn't anticipated anything like this. His fear had been that his wife would become dissatisfied with their life together after exposure to Phyllis Lenny's life style. The only thing the two girls had in common, besides a similar appearance, was the fact that both did volunteer work at the Army hospital. Once they began to meet away from the hospital, Lord was afraid Ruth would make unfavorable comparisons. It had seemed inevitable.

Paul Lord had met Ruth at the hospital. He had been there to have some shrapnel fragments removed from his left leg shortly before his discharge. She had been one of the volunteers who brought books around, read to the men, and wrote letters for the patients unable to write. Lord was the only man in his ward well enough to appreciate what he saw.

He invited her to the tiny post theater a couple of times and she accepted. After he was discharged from the hospital and then the Army, he had remained in the Washington area, and she had continued to see him. He had decided to resume his education. He wanted to become a patent attorney, and Washington, D.C. was the best place in which to do it.

One night he had carefully explained his financial status to Ruth. They decided that his G.I. educational benefits plus his income from his part-time job would be enough: they could be married. They couldn't afford children right away, but they could be married.

Now, as the butler led him to Zoltan Lenny's office, Lord was afraid his one-year marriage might be over. He knew his wife had been kidnapped by mistake and he knew the men had killed the Lenny chauffeur. There didn't appear to be much hope that she'd be released even if they got whatever it was they wanted. There would be no hope at all if they didn't.

When the butler opened the office door, Zoltan Lenny was speaking. "Of course, I'm not going to pay the ransom. That's all I'd need. Once word got around that I was willing to pay ransom for total strangers, there would be no end to it." He noticed Lord in the doorway. "Who's this?"

The FBI agents in the room turned to look, and Phyllis ran to Lord. "Oh, Paul, I'm so sorry," she said, taking his arm and bringing him farther into the room. "This is Paul Lord, Ruth's husband."

"Oh, the husband. Sorry about this, son," Lenny said.

Paul Lord brushed it aside.

"You were saying something about ransom. How much do they want?" He spoke crisply.

"Half a million in small, used bills."

There were six agents in the room. One of them took Paul's arm and tried to pull him away. "Mr. Lord, I'd like to ask you—"

Lord turned on him. "Do you know how I can keep those men from killing my wife and get her back?" he snapped.

"Well, uh—"

"Then keep your hands off me and keep your mouth shut."

The agent's face reddened, but he remained silent.

Zoltan Lenny watched the scene with an expression of surprise on his face.

"Okay," Lord continued, "how do they want the money delivered?"

Lenny shook his head. "They didn't say. They just told me how much they wanted and gave me a week to raise it."

"Oh!"

Lenny misunderstood. "Not much time, is it?"

"It's too much time," Lord said, getting control of himself again. "My wife isn't strong."

"You mean she's ill?"

"I mean she's not strong. This experience is going to be very bad for her." He paused to sweep the room with his glance, making eye contact with all of the agents. "I don't want you people to do anything that might put her in more danger than she is already. Don't tell the newspapers they took the wrong woman. If they find out they have nothing to sell to Mr. Lenny, they won't call again."

He turned to Zoltan Lenny. "When they call again, tell them you'll have the money and ask how they want it delivered."

"But I'm not going to pay the ransom," Lenny protested.

Paul Lord put his hands flat on Lenny's desk and leaned forward with his face only inches away from the other man's. "Mister, you tell them exactly what I told you to tell them. Nothing more. Nothing less. Ruth is *my* wife. This will be handled *my* way. Don't any of you make the mistake of getting me more angry than I am already."

Zoltan Lenny wasn't used to being talked to this way. He watched Paul Lord leave the room and realized his mouth was hanging open like a schoolboy's. He snapped it shut and sat more erect in his chair.

"Wow!" Phyllis Lenny exclaimed in awed tones. "That explains it."

"Don't talk in riddles," her father said. "What explains what?"

"At the hospital there were several men who had been in Nam with Paul Lord," she said. "They were all afraid of him."

Lenny cleared his throat. "He's right, of course. The woman is his wife. The decisions should be his, not ours."

The agent in charge stepped forward. "That may be, sir, but what about the telephone number the kidnapper called? Am I safe in assuming it is unlisted?"

"All of my numbers are unlisted, and that one was the most private of all. Less than a dozen men have it, and none of them could possibly have given it to the kidnappers."

"Let me have the names of the people, anyhow, Mr. Lenny. They will have to be checked out."

Lenny shrugged and gave him the list. The first name was the President of the United States.

Bruce and Victor Cowles had the same last name, but they

weren't brothers. They were cousins. They had, however, lived and worked together for the previous five years, first as linemen for the telephone company, and later at a long list of illegal activities, culminating with the kidnapping of Ruth Lord.

They got their start in crime by accident, literally. Bruce fell from a pole and landed, headfirst, on concrete, suffering brain damage. His I.Q. plummeted from high-average to the low sixties. Bruce became a childish automaton. The insurance settlement he received was large because of the extent and permanence of the damage.

After the settlement, the cousins lived like princes on Bruce's money. They traveled widely, staying at the best hotels and eating in the finest restaurants. They wore expensive, tailored suits and often moved on to new places, forgetting to pick them up from the cleaners, and had more made in the next city. They gambled insanely, accepting the most ridiculous bets and making good their losses instantly. They tipped liberally and attracted a following of hangers-on, both male and female, who were content to tell them what great fellows they were as long as they paid the bills.

The cousins had acted as though the money would last forever, but it lasted little more than six months. By then there was no chance that Victor would be content to go back to climbing telephone poles for a living, and Bruce had nowhere to go at all. Crime—specifically, armed robberies—was the only answer. At least, it was the solution Victor found.

It wasn't easy money, but it was *quick* money, and it allowed them to continue their free-and-easy style of living. A robbery a week, or sometimes two, was all it took. They progressed from filling stations to supermarkets, and even robbed a couple of small branch banks before Victor decided that robbery was too much work and risk. There had to be something else.

Victor remembered connecting the private lines at the Lenny estate in Maryland. At the time, he had carefully made note of the telephone numbers. He liked to have the private numbers of important men. It made no difference that he would never use them. The green phone had obviously been the most important because it was a direct line from a Washington, D.C. exchange, and it had no extensions in the mansion. He had circled it in red.

He also remembered seeing Lenny's white Rolls-Royce drop

his daughter at Walter Reed Army Hospital one morning. He and Bruce had been checking telephone lines when the car passed. The car was memorable because of its one-of-a-kind, custom body, and the cousins had admired it when they'd seen it at the Lenny estate. Victor took the two memories, put them together, and they added up to a full-blown kidnap scheme.

Now, a few weeks later, the plan was in operation, and they were speeding along a back road in Virginia. Bruce had removed the Army shirt and hat and was driving with the mechanical precision he brought to all of his actions. Victor sat in the center of the rear seat with his feet resting on the still form of the girl.

She had tried to make a break for it when they were changing cars in Rock Creek Park. Victor had hit her with his fist, and she hadn't moved since. He had watched her while he made the call to Lenny from a roadside phone, but she hadn't so much as twitched.

Bruce slowed their car and made a right turn onto a gravel-covered farm road. A few minutes later he parked the car behind a weather-beaten frame building where it couldn't be seen from the road, and helped Victor carry the woman inside. She was still unconscious.

In the large front room there was a cage made of steel rods that had been welded together. The only thing it contained was a stained old mattress. They dropped Ruth Lord onto the mattress and Victor squatted beside her. He opened a few buttons on her bodice and slid his hand inside. After a moment he nodded and stood up. "She's breathin'. She'll come around before long."

They left the cage and Victor snapped a large padlock in place, locking it securely behind them.

"Did you have to hit her?" Bruce asked, his face an unreadable mask.

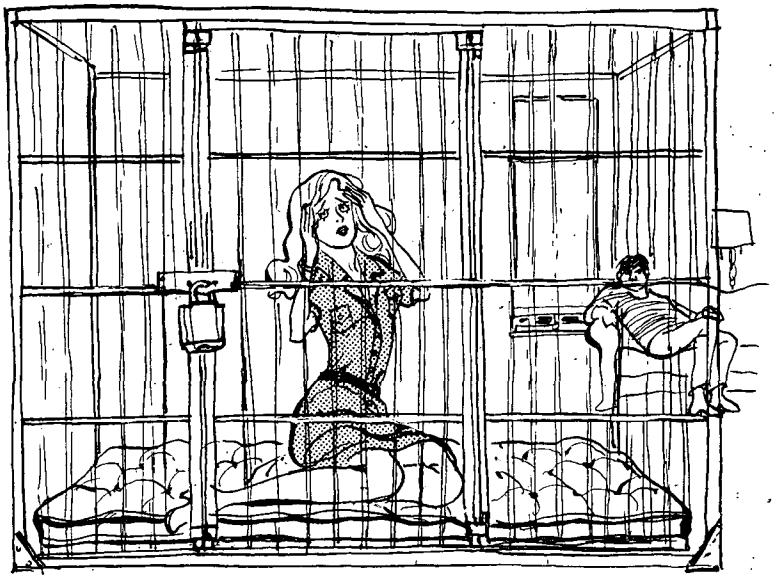
"Sure I did. You know that. You saw her try to run."

"But you promised," Bruce accused.

"I know."

"You promised," Bruce repeated. "You said if she had to be hit, I could do it."

Twenty minutes passed before the girl regained consciousness. She made a whimpering sound and sat up, holding her head with both hands. The left side of her face was swollen and discolored from the blow Victor had struck. She began to cry and strands of blonde hair stuck to her wet cheek.



"Shut up!" Victor ordered, and the girl reacted as though she had been kicked.

She twisted around on the mattress, cowering and holding one arm up in a defensive pose, until she was facing the cousins. They sat side by side on the couch, regarding her through the bars.

"Any more noise out of you and you'll get your head whipped some more," Victor threatened. He took a puff on his cigarette and continued, "Be quiet and behave. You give us any trouble and you'll wish to hell you hadn't."

She wiped her eyes, but she couldn't keep her chin from trembling. "What do you want with me?"

"Money—what else? Your old man is going to part with a piece of the Lenny fortune if he ever wants to see you again."

"But . . . But—"

"But nothing. My partner and I don't mind taking a risk if we get paid for it, but you're not goin' nowhere unless your old man pays. You better hope he likes you more than his money because he's going to have to part with one of 'em."

Victor stood up and crushed out his cigarette on the bare wooden floor with the heel of his shoe.

"Stay with her," he said to Bruce. "I'm goin' to get some sleep. I'll relieve you later. We've a long week ahead of us."

By the time Paul Lord had stolen a boat and rowed across the Washington Channel from East Potomac Park, it was 2:47 in the morning. He dropped the boat's cement-block anchor into the polluted water beside a retaining wall and leaped, catching the top of the concrete wall with the tips of his fingers. He pulled himself to the top and looked carefully about him. It was a cloudy, moonless night, and he had trouble seeing very well. It was plain, however, that his navigation had been accurate. He was behind one of the barracks at Fort McNair. All Army posts are amazingly alike and Fort McNair is the only one located along the east bank of the channel.

Lord was dressed entirely in black. He had on black denims with a black cotton turtleneck sweater, and he'd applied a coat of dull black to his tennis shoes with a spray can of quick-drying paint. From his wide belt hung a boltcutter. When he moved from the wall he dissolved silently into the deep shadows.

To get to the front walk he had to creep past the post arms room, but he didn't pause. He had no use for a mortar, bazooka, or any of the other heavy weapons stored there. At the walk he stopped and looked both ways for the sentry he knew was posted. There was no one in sight, so he knew the guard had to be at one of the extreme ends of his post. Lord made a dash for the barracks' entrance and disappeared inside.

The Charge of Quarters was asleep on a cot in the office to his left. Lord slipped quietly inside and leaned over the counter. He pulled out a drawer and removed a pair of Colt .45 caliber automatics. He placed one in each of the side pockets of his trousers and moved silently into the larger room. There were several rows of bunks, almost every one containing a sleeping man. The only light came from the office behind him and the entrance to the latrine at the far end of the room.

A long rifle rack stood in the center of the floor. A steel chain ran through the trigger guards of two rows of M-16 rifles to keep anyone from removing a weapon. Lord advanced to the rack, taking the boltcutter from his belt. The men of this barracks were assigned as honor guards. The M-16 rifles were all new and in perfect condition. He placed the chain in the cutter's jaws and waited. One

of the sleeping soldiers was snoring. Lord timed the rhythm of the man's snores, then crushed the chain when the snoring covered the snap of the metal links. He removed half a dozen empty magazines from weapons, then lifted the end rifle from the rack and retreated the way he had come.

As he passed the office he saw that the CQ was still sleeping peacefully, lying on his back with one arm shielding his eyes from the light. Lord waited in the shadow of the entrance until the sentry had passed. Then he moved out, crouching low. He now had three weapons—two pistols and an automatic rifle—but he didn't have so much as one round of ammunition. That was his next target.

An ammunition bunker had been hollowed out of the ground between the barracks and the arms room. It was nearly hidden by foliage. Only a three-foot round door secured by a heavy brass padlock was above ground level. The pit had been designed to hold emergency supplies.

Lord dropped to his knees beside the door and placed the M-16 and extra magazines on the grass. One bite of the boltcutter's jaws and the lock's shackle fell away. He pulled open the door and looked inside with the aid of a pencil flashlight. He could see cases of mortar rounds and bazooka rockets on the bottom, but what he wanted was all within reach of the opening. He pulled out a metal box of ammunition for the M-16, a small box of .45 caliber rounds, and a few hand grenades.

He was interrupted by the scrape of feet in the distance and knew the guard was returning. He got up and faced the approaching man. It was too late to retreat without being seen, so he walked toward the sentry with his head down. He held his left hand palm-up in front of him as though examining something he had just found. He advanced on the sentry without looking up, and his odd behavior took the man off guard.

The sentry managed to say, "Halt!" but that was all. He had let Lord get too close. Before he could get out another word, Paul Lord had disarmed him and knocked him senseless with his own weapon. At Fort McNair, as at most stateside military installations, guard duty was assigned to the most inexperienced men, and the weapons they carried were unloaded. Lord knew this, but it wouldn't have made any difference if the circumstances had been different. He had overpowered his share of fully-armed combat veterans, too.

He turned and dashed back to his pile of loot, gathered everything up and trotted to where he'd left the boat anchored. Now that he didn't have to worry about the sentry sounding an alarm for a few minutes, he was able to move without trying to be completely silent. He dumped everything into the waiting boat and was halfway across the channel before the sentry regained consciousness and staggered toward the nearest barracks.

At 7:30 in the morning, when an FBI man knocked at the front door of Paul Lord's rented home in Silver Spring, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., Lord had already concealed his loot in his garage and treated himself to a long, hot shower. He hadn't been to bed, but he was fully alert.

"Yes?" he asked, without stepping back to invite the agent inside.

The FBI man held out Ruth's handbag. "This was found in Rock Creek Park beside the abandoned limousine."

Lord took the bag and allowed himself a small smile. "Good. I was worried about that."

The agent frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Without the handbag and the identification she carried, the only way the kidnappers can know they have the wrong woman is if someone tells them."

The agent started to ask something else, but Lord had already closed the door.

At 10:30 a.m., as soon as the early-morning rush had ended, and well before the lunch-hour customers would arrive, a lone bandit robbed a branch of the Riggs National Bank in Washington. No shots were fired, but the robber was obviously prepared to shoot if it came to that. He was armed with two .45 caliber automatics.

At two in the afternoon, during a similar business lull, another branch of the same bank was robbed. The total loot was in excess of $80,000, and it had been the same man both times. Movies of the holdups were shown on television, but they didn't help to identify him. He had been dressed in black from head to foot, and his face had been covered by a woolen Navy watch cap with eyeholes. It had been pulled down to form a hood.

The only thing witnesses could be certain of was that he wore a wide wedding band, something the hidden cameras confirmed. He hadn't worn gloves, yet he'd left no fingerprints. Everything he had touched, he had taken with him.

The following day there were two more bank robberies, bringing the total amount stolen to $217,000; but that wasn't what had the TV commentators screaming. This time shots had been fired. As the bandit was backing out of the side entrance of the second bank, he ran into a woman who was trying to enter. The bank guard took the opportunity provided by the confusion to dive for the revolver he'd been forced to throw away. As he came up with the weapon in his hand, the bandit fired once and a bullet tore into the guard's shoulder. The force spun him around and knocked him through a plate-glass window.

Paul Lord got up from where he'd been watching the replay of the afternoon's events on television and clicked off the set. The coffee table in front of the couch was piled high with banded currency. He transferred it to a large suitcase and frowned. The case was a long way from being full. He closed it and slid it out of sight between the back of the couch and the wall.

Next he picked up the telephone and dialed the number he'd been calling a dozen times a day since his wife was kidnapped. "Any news?" he asked as soon as the phone was answered.

"No," Zoltan Lenny replied. "They haven't called back yet."

Lord dropped the phone into its cradle. He had to think. Every bank in the District of Columbia would have police hiding in it tomorrow. He was sure of it, but he couldn't stop, so he was going to have to change the pattern.

The next morning the bandit in black raided a bank in College Park, and eluded a police chase across the campus of the University of Maryland. In the afternoon he avoided the District of Columbia again and showed up in Arlington, Virginia. This time he hit it lucky. It was the 15th of the month and the bank was prepared to cash government payroll checks for the civilian employees of the Pentagon. The loot from this one bank came to almost $300,000, and his total for three days was $554,000.

Victor Cowles paced the floor around the cage. Ruth sat on the dirty mattress, watching him apprehensively. He was sorry now he'd given Zoltan Lenny a week to raise the ransom. A rich guy like that wouldn't need a week. Maybe a day would have been enough. Every day had certainly seemed like a week. There had been nothing in the papers, but that made him uneasy, not con-

fident. The cops weren't going to ignore the dead driver. He wished he had a radio or TV to tell him what was going on.

"Hey, Bruce!" he called. When the sleepy-eyed Bruce appeared, he said, "Keep an eye on the broad. I'm going to go make a phone call."

This time when Paul Lord arrived at the Lenny mansion there wasn't the same feverish activity as the day of the kidnapping. There was only one unmarked FBI car parked in front, and the butler took his time answering the door. He was led to Lenny's office where the millionaire and two FBI agents Lord hadn't seen before were waiting. A tape recorder was on a table beside the kidney-shaped desk.

"Do you want to hear the call?" one of the agents asked.

Lord stared at him for a few seconds. "That's why I drove all the way out here," he said in a level tone.

The agent pushed the play-back button and the reels began to turn.

Zoltan Lenny's voice was the first to come from the speaker. "Yes?"

"Do you have the money?" The voice was gruff, disguised.

"Yes, I do."

"All of it? And all in old bills?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I want you to bring it to me."

"No."

"Don't get smart, mister! You want to see your daughter again?"

"You can have the money, but *I* won't bring it."

"I want *you* to bring it."

"The point is not negotiable. You have my daughter; you are not going to have me as well. I'll send a man with the money anywhere you say, but I will not bring it myself."

"Scared, huh? Okay. You get your car back yet?"

"The Rolls-Royce?"

"Yeah, the big white one."

"Yes, it's here."

"Okay, listen good. At midnight I want one man in the car with the money. He's to cross Chain Bridge into Virginia and follow Glebe Road. At Columbia Pike he should turn right and drive to Bailey's Crossroads. Make a left there and drive to Alexandria. He's to keep driving back and forth along that route until he sees a green light flashing at him. When he does, he should stop and hand over the money. You got that?"

"Chain Bridge . . . Glebe Road . . . Columbia Pike . . . Bailey's Crossroads . . . Alexandria," Lenny repeated the order and was

rewarded with a click from the distant receiver.

The agent turned off the machine. "The call came from another exchange. That's all we know for sure. With direct dialing it's almost impossible to trace a call."

"I'll be borrowing your car tonight," Lord told Lenny. It wasn't a request.

"Yes, certainly."

Lord looked thoughtfully at the agents. "Just the two of you, huh?"

"Yes. A high-priority case came up," the leader said apologetically.

"I'm not complaining. The two of you are more than I want, but maybe the fact that only two of you are here will explain why. Nothing is more important to me than my wife. I'm not putting her safety in the hands of people who don't value it as much as I do. This is just one more case to you, and not a very important one."

"That's not so. We regard all cases as important."

"Mister, if those guys had really kidnapped the daughter of Zoltan Lenny, would there be only two of you in this room tonight?" He waved his hand impatiently, cutting off the reply. "Don't bother saying anything. I already know the answer. Just don't interfere. I want my wife back, gentlemen."

Sitting at a scarred wooden table in the kitchen of the farmhouse, Victor Cowles fastened a piece of green tissue paper over the lens of his flashlight with a rubber band. Then he turned the light on and off rapidly a few times to test it. Satisfied, he got up and stuck it into his hip pocket.

The sound of digging came from the open door. Victor went to it and looked out. Bruce was stripped to the waist and busy with a pick and shovel. He stood in a rectangular hole about four feet deep that he had dug behind the building.

"Go down another foot or so, then make the hole more square," Victor ordered.

"Square?"

"Yeah." Victor grinned. "We wouldn't want anyone to come along later and think it looked like a grave."

Paul Lord crossed Chain Bridge exactly at midnight. He drove several miles below the speed limit, sweeping his glance from one side of the road to the other as he went. He wanted to be sure to see the flashing green light.

Victor watched the white limousine go by and examined the

other traffic carefully. Everything looked cool. That's what he had expected. Zoltan Lenny wasn't about to let anything happen to his only kid, not over a mere half-million. That was chicken feed to him.

Victor waited until he saw the car returning, then stood by the side of his car with an automatic pistol in one hand and his flashlight in the other. He pointed the light at the Rolls-Royce and turned it on and off several times. The limousine swung off the road and joined him on the blacktop beside the ticket booth of a closed drive-in theater.

Paul Lord, dressed entirely in black, climbed from behind the wheel, then reached back inside for his large suitcase. He brought it to within fifteen feet of Cowles before Victor told him, "That's far enough. Just set it down and lift the lid."

Lord squatted beside the case and worked the catches and straps by touch alone. He didn't take his eyes off the pistol Victor held at his side. Victor liked that. It showed respect for the fact that he held the aces.

One look was all Victor needed. He'd hit the jackpot! His mouth was suddenly dry and he wanted to get the transaction completed. "Okay. Close it up," he said, "then get the hell out of here. We'll let the girl go in a few hours."

He waited until Lord turned and started to walk back to the limousine before raising the pistol from his side. Then he took careful aim at a spot between the retreating shoulder blades and cocked the hammer with his thumb.

Paul Lord must have been waiting for that sound because he threw himself to one side, twisted around, and ended up lying prone with a cannon in each fist. Victor found himself looking down the pistol barrels while his own weapon was still pointing high and to the left.

"Drop it!" Lord ordered.

Victor let his pistol fall. "You're making a mistake," he said hurriedly. "You won't get Lenny's daughter back this way."

"She's not Lenny's daughter. She's my wife. And if you were going to shoot a deliveryman to keep from being identified, you're not about to let her go willingly, no matter how much you're paid." He lowered his aim slightly and then both pistols spit flame.

Victor felt the shock of his kneecaps being blown away, and the next thing he knew the asphalt was rushing up to meet his face. Even before the pain began,

he cried, "Get me a doctor! I'm dying!"

"Yes, you are," Paul Lord agreed quietly. "But you have something to tell me first."

"We have half a dozen cars stationed along the delivery route and a helicopter running without lights overhead," the FBI agent told Zoltan Lenny. "You didn't think we'd let him meet the kidnappers alone, did you?"

"I didn't know," Lenny said, making a face and shrugging. He felt uneasy in situations where he couldn't predict the outcome, so he tried to give the impression that his lack of knowledge was unimportant.

"We have a standing rule never to interfere as long as there's a chance that the victim will be released unharmed. But that doesn't apply in this case. Paul Lord isn't being very realistic, so we have to be. Once the kidnappers realize Lord doesn't have the ransom money with him, there's no telling what will happen. We must be ready to act."

"I had assumed he intended to pay the ransom," Lenny said.

"Sir, that's half a million dollars we're talking about. Where could he—" The agent stiffened as though he'd just received an electric shock. He snatched the telephone from Lenny's desk and pushed the buttons as fast as he could.

Ruth Lord's face was smudged with dirt and streaked from crying. She had neither a mirror nor makeup, and the cousins hadn't allowed her to wash. Her left cheek hurt and she was sure she had a livid bruise, but somehow she managed to be attractive. At least Bruce Cowles didn't seem to be repelled by her appearance. Whenever Victor was away in the car, as now, Bruce would stand holding the bars of the cage and stare down at her.

"Where has your friend gone?" Ruth asked.

"To get the money," Bruce answered expressionlessly.

"The ransom?"

He nodded once—a short, choppy motion.

Ruth didn't know about the hole Bruce had dug, but she did know that Zoltan Lenny wasn't going to pay half a million dollars for her release. A look of terror crossed her face, but she quickly suppressed it. She had to get away somehow before the other man returned empty-handed.

"You will let me go when he gets back?" She forced herself to smile.

He didn't answer for a moment,

then said, "Yeah, we'll let you go."

"Let me go now. Please! I don't like your friend. I'm afraid of him. I won't tell anyone about this place, and you can say I tricked you and ran away. He won't know."

"He'd know. Victor is real smart."

"No, he won't." She put her hand over his on the bars. "Please? I'll . . . I'll be nice to you before I go."

Bruce seemed to focus his dull eyes for the first time. "You will?"

"Yes, yes, I will," she said quickly, bobbing her head up and down for emphasis.

Bruce fished in his pocket and found the key to the padlock. He opened the door of the cage and stepped inside. "Will you let me hurt you?" he asked.

Ruth couldn't keep her lower lip from trembling. "Yes," she answered, and moved close and let him put his arms around her.

Paul Lord heard the low-flying helicopter and looked up, but he couldn't see anything. His upward vision was obstructed by the drive-in's canopy. He had no doubt the chopper was searching for him, though. He should have known the FBI wouldn't let him handle this himself. If the kidnapper hadn't chosen a meeting place that was shielded from above, the spot would have been crawling with agents already. As it was, the chopper must have missed seeing him turn and cars were probably being dispatched to search for him.

Lord left Victor's battered body on the ground behind the white limousine. He transferred the M-16 and his extra magazines from the Rolls-Royce to Victor's car. Then he shot away from the theater, leaving the suitcase on the asphalt.

Victor had told him about the farm. He had been very anxious to tell him anything he wanted to know. At first Victor had been reluctant, but at the end he was blurting out answers before Lord had the questions completed.

The farm was less than ten miles away. He could be there in minutes. He leaned on his horn and shot past the occasional other traffic as though it were standing still. He saw a couple of cars he was sure held FBI men, but they hardly gave him a glance. Until they found the Rolls-Royce, that's the only car for which they'd be looking.

He slowed when he knew he was getting close to the place where he'd have to turn. He watched for the roadside mailbox and the name Victor had told him

to expect. When he found it, he swung right onto the farm road. Halfway to the house, he was met by Bruce, running down the middle of the road, waving his arms.

Lord pulled up and got out. The headlights blinded Bruce until he reached the car. When he saw it wasn't Victor coming back, he looked around vacantly, confused.

"Where is she?" Lord demanded.

Bruce didn't say anything.

"Did you hurt her?"

Bruce smiled stupidly and nodded.

Lord pulled the trigger on the M-16 and held it back until the magazine was empty. He was firing his fourth full magazine into what was left of Bruce's body when the first Federal agents arrived and carefully disarmed him.

Two miles away, Ruth Lord came staggering, scratched and bleeding, out of a field. She was picked up by a passing truck driver. He rushed her to the police station in Arlington, Virginia. She told them that Bruce Cowles had let her escape while the other kidnapper was away collecting the ransom.

There was no trial for Paul Lord. He was allowed to plead guilty to one count of bank robbery, the one where he had wounded the guard. The judge took into consideration all extenuating circumstances and sentenced him to five years in prison. Ruth met another man and divorced Lord before he'd served a year.

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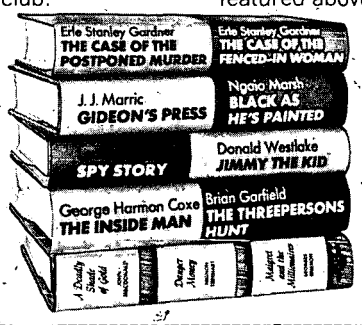

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