ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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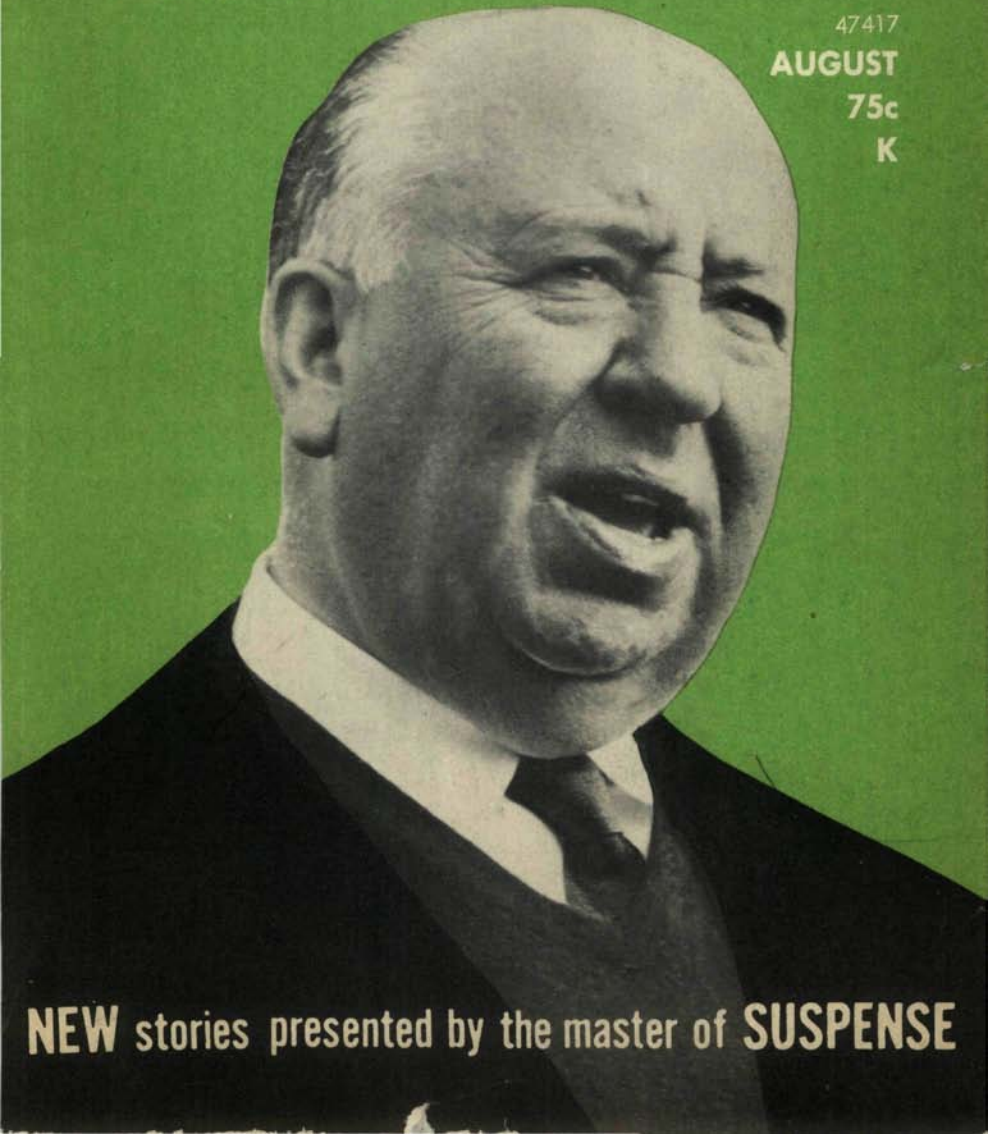

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

August 1975

Dear Reader:

Dog days are here—I am quite Sirius about that. The trespassing of the neighbor's pet is as nothing when considered in the light of this month's lead story by Donald Olson. You may afterward even come to welcome the comparatively docile beast from next door, if ever that is possible.

That is not, by far, the only tale herein with bite. Every story this month is new, as you expect from this magazine, and *I* expect each to gnaw at you mercilessly. The drama extends through George C. Chesbro's latest novelette, *The Dragon Variation.*

Speaking of bite reminds me of the time: lunch. I would have enjoyed a picnic out in the grove, but then I have read *Days of Sirius.* Perhaps it will be cooler in the office anyway. At least there are no ants in the carpeting.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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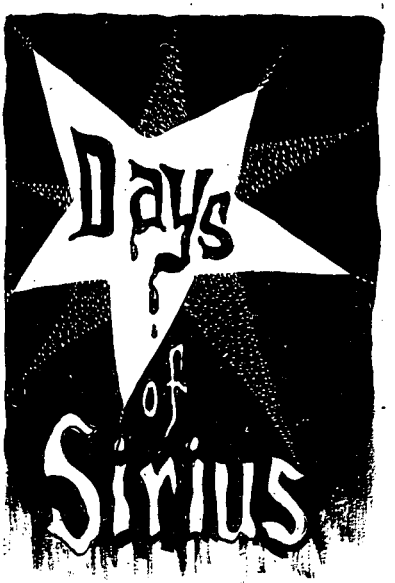
SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 8, August 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. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408. Printed in the U.S.A.

A new challenge may emerge from a stirred-up brew.



They had stopped for lunch a few miles east of Wellsboro when the state police caught up with them.

"You folks have a Doctor Gaddis traveling with you?"

Linda's father stepped forward. "What's wrong, Trooper?"

"Not sure. Got a call to intercept you. Some kind of medical emergency in Philips Mills. They want you back there. Something about a dog."

There were no ill-natured protests, even from thirteen-year-old Robbie or fifteen-year-old Joy—they weren't that kind of family—and if Linda felt a certain amount of regret that the long-planned vacation trip in their camper had to be postponed, she kept it to herself. It was obvious that neither her husband Tom, co-publisher and editor of the *Tri-County Register,* nor her father, the only doctor in Philips Mills, shared her disappointment.

"Must have something to do with the little Monahan girl," Doc speculated, although there should have been no complications in the child's case. She had been coming home from picking strawberries near Preacher's Creek when she'd been attacked and severely bitten by a dog which had so terrified the youngster she could give no clear description of it to Sheriff Mike Boles. All he could learn was that the dog was "big and red," a description that could have fit scores of dogs around Philips Mills, and it was only because Jules Otter's place was close to the path the little girl had

taken that Otter's setter, Lady, fell under suspicion.

Sheriff Boles had gone to see Otter, a sixty-nine-year-old herb gardener who kept pretty much to himself and whose dog had never caused any more trouble than its master. Otter had told the sheriff that Lady was the gentlest dog between Pitchfork and Glade Springs and wouldn't bite even if provoked. Boles had listened to the man's story, patted Lady on the head, submitted to having his hand licked in appreciation, and went away satisfied.

Two days later Otter's dog was found hanging from a pear tree at the end of Otter's orchard. She had been tortured to death.

"Only decent thing they did was kill the poor animal," Tom had told Linda. "But Jules Otter . . . Lord above, honey, I never saw a man go to pieces like that. Quiet chap ordinarily. Nearly went mad when he saw what had been done to Lady. He was ready to kill whoever did it. And you know something? Right at that moment I'd have lent him the gun to do it."

"Have they any idea who did it?"

"Not yet. Someone who thought the dog was to blame for what happened to the Monahan girl, most likely. They've sent the dog's brain over to the vet's in Pitchfork to be checked for rabies."

Doc Gaddis had given the Monahan girl antirabies shots and she had recovered quickly from the psychological shock of the attack. An examination of the dog's brain had disclosed no pathological condition.

Now, as the camper rounded the last twisting turn through the Eastern Gap leading into Philips Mills, Tom spotted Sheriff Boles' car waiting to meet them. His deputy Roy Hannus was with him, along with Tom's partner Jed Slater, an ordinarily jovial young man whose manner was now even graver than the sheriff's.

"Trooper didn't tell us much," Tom said. "Just mentioned trouble."

"Trouble, hell!" thundered Boles. "It's a disaster. We—listen!"

The speed with which young Hannus whipped out his service revolver and spun around toward the nearby trees startled Tom even more than Boles' air of alarm.

The sheriff's voice was unsteady, his eyes exploring the wooded slopes on both sides of the road. "Listen, folks, it's not safe to stand here jawin'. You follow us into town . . . to the clinic. We got the worst of 'em there. Slater can ride with you and fill you in."

Jed held up his hand as they started firing questions at him inside the camper.

"Just let me tell you what we know. Happened just about noon over at the grove on Preacher's Creek. You folks were about the only ones who didn't make the town picnic. And you're damned lucky you didn't. We'd all sat down to eat, laughing and joking and filling up our plates, everybody having a real good time. Then it just sort of happened. Somebody said, 'Hey, look at all

the dogs up there. Guess they want to join the fun.' Bunch of them, must have been twelve or fifteen, maybe more, lined up on the ridge looking down at us. Then—*whoosh*—like a canine charge of cavalry! Hell, you never saw anything like it, Tom. I've seen one or two mad dogs in my life but this was something else again. They were mad for blood and they ripped into the crowd like a pack of starved wolves. By the time we got folks into the cars there were five dead bodies lying there in the grove. All old folks. Both the Pettigrew sisters, old Maude Hollister, Abel Jones, and Lydia Bisby."

They were in the village by the time he finished his grim account of the tragedy, a village full of shadows and silence, normal end-of-day shadows, but a silence as unnatural as the silence of birds on a spring morning, a silence that drove spears of foreboding into the hearts of the returning travelers and made them gaze with wordless horror at the empty windows of the old white frame house on Main Street where the Pettigrew sisters had lived together for over sixty years, and at the windows of the mortuary across the street where they now lay side by side in death.

The only sign of life was in the clinic on the corner of Main and Cedar, which gave the appearance of a refugee camp or of a makeshift hospital set up in a battle zone where the guns were for the present ominously quiet. Nurse Lucy Whitford was very much in charge; Linda thought she even looked a mite disappointed when Doc Gaddis walked in and she had to surrender her position.

"Sorry to spoil your trip, Doc," she greeted him, not ungaily. "Things are pretty well squared away here. Doc Fletcher from the Springs was here but we didn't need him once everybody had been treated. Most of them are fit to go home now but we didn't want to release them till you had a look at the situation."

Doc decided to keep only about seven of them at the clinic for observation, releasing the others, who were escorted to their homes by Sheriff Boles, his deputy, and half a dozen armed young men.

Later, Boles and Hannus, along with Doc and Jed Slater, sat drinking coffee at Tom's house on Beechview Road.

"Hell, Tom, I just don't *know*," the sheriff kept repeating. "Ain't been time to sort things out properly. They've sent one of the dogs we shot over to Pitchfork for a brain analysis. Doc Andrews is going to drive over here with the

report in the morning. Some of the animals folks have identified. Town dogs. Jim Pettit said his beagle's been acting peckish for a couple of days. Off his food, moody, irritable. Ain't been home for the past twenty-four hours. Others have had the same story to tell."

Robbie wound his arm protectively around his beloved mongrel, Micky Dooley.

"Then it could be a rabies epidemic," Tom said.

"Could be? Hell, man, it *is*."

"I don't know a lot about rabies," Slater said, "but the disease is fatal, I know that much. If these mutts are rabid they'll all die."

"Die horribly," added Doc, who liked all animals and often wondered if he wouldn't have been happier as a vet.

"Meantime," Boles said, "I wish you'd tell all your readers, Tom, to keep their dogs inside, away from any others, till this epidemic's over."

Linda poured Tom and Hannus another cup. "And poor Lady, Jules Otter's dog. She wasn't even mad."

"The first case," Doc said. "Almost as if it were a warning."

Hannus eyed him, alert for some special meaning in his tone. "What do you mean, warning? You don't think that anyone—"

"I just mean it was like a—well, like an announcement of what was coming."

Everyone left soon after and Linda sent the kids off to bed. She and Tom were about to follow after watching the late news on television when a shattering crash came from the back of the house. They both ran to Joy's room. Tom pulled the door open and for the space of perhaps a half second literally did not believe the sight his vision registered: a wolf-sized black and tan schnauzer had hurtled through the half-open window, scattering glass all over the floor, leaped through the wide-open bathroom door, and was now up on its hind legs against the sliding shower door behind which Joy was screaming.

As Linda flew past Tom, his hand shot out and pulled her back just as the dog turned its head. Tom slammed the door shut as the animal bounded toward it, his claws raking the panels from top to bottom.

"Daddddddddyyyyyy! Help me!"

"Honey, listen! Don't panic. Just do what I say. I'm going to get my rifle. Stay in the shower."

"Daddy, hurry! *Please!*"

Tom's fingers dug into Linda's arm. "Bang on the door. Keep

him busy. Keep banging away."

In seconds he was back with his hunting rifle, sliding a cartridge into the chamber. He waved Linda aside.

"Okay now. Grab the knob and when I give the word pull the door wide open. Fast. Pull it right back on you. Stay behind it. Don't let go of the knob."

"Tom, that rifle jams. You said—"

"Just do what I said!"

Kneeling in front of the wall directly opposite the door, he aimed the rifle, drew a bead dead center of the panels. "Now!"

Linda swung the door wide open. Tom yelled. The dog, caught by surprise, paused only an instant, then with a hoarse growl leaped at Tom. The gun roared and the schnauzer dropped, its slavering drool of madness spilling over Tom's hand.

Early the following morning Dr. Andrews, the vet, drove over from Pitchfork with a report on the dead dogs.

"Negri bodies in each and every brain."

"*Negri* bodies?" Linda asked. She had been helping her father and Nurse Whitford at the clinic, where at the moment Doc Gaddis was working on old Sam Block, cauterizing several deep bite wounds with carbolic acid. He had come hiking into town from his cabin with no idea anything was wrong, getting as far as the post office when a pack of dogs rushed him from the alley behind Dibble's General Store.

"Substances visible in the microscope where rabies is present," Andrews explained. "They were all rabid."

A meeting followed in Sheriff Boles' office; Roy Hannus, two troopers from the Pitchfork barracks, Tom, Mayor Collins, Reverend Strecker, Lucy Whitford, Doc Gaddis, and the vet were all there.

Andrews announced what the rest of them already knew, that they were in the midst of a rabies epidemic. "How it started or where is anybody's guess. Infected animals are as good as dead. You've got to destroy the ones you can."

"Gotta find 'em first," said Hannus.

"Once the disease has developed they'll die in three or four days. So you've got to contain it. Any healthy dog's got to be kept isolated," Andrews continued.

Reverend Strecker, who owned the most beautiful collie in town, looked worried. "But how do you know if a dog's coming down with rabies?"

"They're moody, touchy, don't want to eat. That's the first stage. Then they get irritable and excited. They'll snap and growl and run around. And they'll bite. They'll bite anything or anyone. Last stage is paralysis, death."

The vet read apprehension in the minister's eyes. "Your dog showing any of these symptoms, sir?"

Strecker took a deep, troubled breath. "As a matter of fact, yes."

"Then you better have the sheriff destroy him. Right away."

"No! I mean—Solomon's not just an ordinary dog. He's an exceptionally fine, gentle animal."

"Not anymore, sir. You can either destroy him or have him die in the sheerest agony imaginable."

Lucy Whitford aimed her words at Tom. "When you write all this up in the *Register*, Tom, I hope to goodness you tell folks what I *tried* to tell 'em. Hardly anyone listened to me when I had my Penny inoculated against rabies. None of this would have happened if they'd done like I did. It oughta be the law."

Tom agreed. "In most places it is."

The mayor turned to Doc Gaddis. "What about serum and all that? Not going to run short, are you?"

"Already ordered more from Tri-County Medical Lab. We'll be fine long as we can count on this thing running its course in another couple of days."

On Saturday morning Doc called Linda just after Tom went off to work. Had she heard from Lucy?

"Lucy? Isn't she at the clinic?"

"No. And I need her. I need her badly."

"Dad, is something wrong? Something else?"

"Well . . . I'm not sure. But I've got my hands full and I need Lucy. Rung her three times now. Run over there and pick her up, will you, dear?"

Robbie touched her arm as she hung up. "What is it, Mom?"

"Not sure. Your grandfather sounded awful worried. I've got to fetch Lucy. She must have overslept. Maybe you'd better call your dad and let him know where I am in case he should call."

"I better go with you."

"Don't be silly, Rob. I'll be okay."

She reached Lucy's bungalow a few minutes later, saw the nurse's car in the drive, gave a couple of beeps on the horn. Lucy's bedroom shades were still down. Linda waited only a moment or two, then went to the door. When her ring wasn't answered she felt in the flower box for the key and

opened the door of the bungalow.

The house was a shambles of broken glassware, ripped fabrics, overturned furniture. Controlling an impulse to race back to the car, Linda tiptoed upstairs.

Lucy was sprawled naked on the bed, her face and body a mass of bites and claw marks, her throat torn open.

Linda screamed.

Backing from the room she thought she heard something, a sort of harsh, gasping sound, with such a human quality about it she followed it to its source in the kitchen.

Lucy's cocoa-colored, flop-eared spaniel, Penny, lay on its side, its spine horribly contorted, a thick foamy accumulation of saliva dribbling from its rigid jaws, its great sad-scared brown eyes staring glassily upward.

Linda screamed again.

His nurse's death was a severe blow to Doc but he was a professional and his business was not with the dead.

"I'm puzzled," he confided to his daughter, "and worried. The Monahans are inside there with Cathy. Her voice is husky and she's having convulsions. I don't understand it."

"But what is it?"

"Rabies. Hydrophobia."

Linda stared at him. "But you've been treating her. Ever since she was bitten."

"That's just it. In spite of the treatment she's developing the disease."

"Impossible!"

"In medicine, honey, nothing's impossible. I've called the ambulance at Pitchfork but it's out on call. Someone's got to take Cathy to the hospital." His voice broke. "Not that it'll do any good."

He answered the question before she asked it. "There's no *cure* for rabies. Only preventive measures to make sure it doesn't develop. Once developed, it's fatal."

The door opened and Mrs. Monahan looked out. "Doc, Cathy's having another spasm. When will the ambulance get here?"

"We can't wait, Mary. You'll have to drive Cathy there. Right now."

Overhearing this, Hank Monahan brushed his wife aside. "Doc, what the hell you been shootin' into my little girl? You said she was out of danger. What's wrong?"

Doc spread his hands. "Hank, I don't know. Failure of the Pasteur treatment is less than one half of one percent."

When they had taken Cathy away Doc called Linda into the

infirmary, leading her to the side of Sam Block's bed.

"Sam? How you feelin'?"

The old man smiled but with apparent effort, rubbing his hand along that part of his thigh where he'd been bitten. "It's tinglin', Doc. Itchin' and tinglin' somethin' fierce." He twisted to one side, then almost immediately onto his back again. "Can't you give me somethin' to relax me, Doc?"

Doc prepared an injection, administered it, then signaled Linda to follow him back to his office where he faced her with a look somewhere between desperation and defeat.

"Sam's got all the symptoms, Linda. In spite of the treatment."

"And he's not the only one—that what you're saying?"

"I don't even dare think it, but . . . yes."

"They've all got it—and they're all going to die?"

The answer was written plainly on his anxious face.

The news, when it came, could not be kept secret. The entire village soon learned that Cathy Monahan was dead and several bite victims mortally infected with the disease and universally allergic to both the Pasteur strain and the Semple vaccine.

Relatives were soon forced to endure the sight of their loved ones gripped by hideously painful muscular spasms, their nervous systems so inflamed and sensitive a sudden loud noise would send them into violent convulsions, saliva streaming from their mouths, their throats aching with thirst, yet unable to drink, so dreadful was the very thought of the pain that would accompany any attempt to swallow—that symptom of the disease which accounted for its name: hydrophobia.

No one knew what to believe anymore. The infected dogs were not dead nor even dying, while the traditionally dependable serums and vaccines were totally inadequate for the human victims.

Panic was inevitable, invading the town and attacking minds as savagely as the mad dogs attacked bodies.

One morning Tom was in his office at the *Register* working on his daily editorial when Granny Juul was announced.

Everyone knew Granny Juul, resident witch, local eccentric, a stargazing fortune-teller who made a living of sorts mapping the destinies of the gullible at four bucks a sitting, and the gullible came from as far away as Niobe Junction, Effortville, Plato Switch. She claimed to be part Seneca and a distant relative of the great

Cornplanter, and one could believe it, looking at her black hair and eyes and high, sharp cheekbones.

"You gotta give the folks a message," she informed Tom without preamble.

"About what?"

"Evil Spirits."

Tom grinned. "Don't you think folks have got enough to worry about, Granny, without evil spirits?"

The corners of her mouth turned down sternly. "Evil Spirits is the cause of all the trouble, mister. Them dogs is possessed by devils. These here is the dog days. Don't you know about dog days?"

"Dogs get distemper more frequently in hot weather."

"Hah! Ain't none so ignorant as the educated. Dog days, mister, come with the risin' and settin' of the Dog Star. *And Sirius is a'risin'!* Romans. They knowed. And the 'gyptians and the Greeks. Twenty days before and twenty days after the risin' of the Dog Star, then is the Evil Spirits free to roam the streets of the wicked. Call it an epidemic if you please, but you mark my words, mister, it'll not come to an end till August the eleventh. Nothin'll help. Nothin' *can* help."

Tom had to admit the old crone could put on a good act. Pure vaudeville. "I'm afraid that's not the sort of news that would ease our readers' minds, Granny."

"Tell 'em to repent! Tell 'em to lock their doors and pull down their shades and git down on their knees an' pray for forgiveness for their sins. Or else it'll happen agin, next year, and the next and the next. Tell 'em—" she leaned closer, black eyes snapping, "—tell 'em to seek out the Evil One who's brought this curse on the town. Seek him out and destroy him!"

"And who is this Evil One?"

Granny Juul's withered lips formed a sly, oracular grimace. "They know, mister. They know. But they're still too feared to name him."

After she had delivered this extraordinary message and gone away, Tom debated running a short informational story about the ancient belief in dog days and those superstitions it had spawned, but decided some might consider it untimely levity while others, the more susceptible, might only agitate themselves further by dwelling on such rubbish.

Since he had made no mention of Granny Juul's visit to anyone outside the paper, he was surprised when Luther Puckett sought him out at the town meeting in the Grange Hall that eve-

ning and said, "What's this I hear about Granny Juul comin' to see you this mornin'?"

Puckett's manner annoyed Tom. "Is that such hot news?"

" 'Tis if Granny give you information to pass on to the townsfolk and you ain't done it."

"What Granny Juul had to say wasn't the sort of responsible news the *Register* cares to print."

The matter was hardly worth discussing at all and Puckett's air of pugnacious gravity seemed absurd.

By now others were closing in around them.

"We heard different," Puckett retorted. "We heard Granny Juul *knows* somethin' about the plague."

The word struck with a disagreeable twang against Tom's consciousness, and he saw that most of the faces around him were as solemn and hostile and frightened as Luther Puckett's.

"Plague?"

The word slid audibly from mouth to mouth and then broke loudly from Puckett's coarse lips. "Plague, dammit! Plague! Ain't no common type of rabies. We all know that. People are dyin', mister. My boy, he's dyin'. Folks ain't supposed to *die* of rabies—not when they been given shots."

At that point Sheriff Boles called the meeting to order and once he'd got them all quieted down he introduced Dr. Jim Andrews, the vet from Pitchfork, a spare, leathery, deep-voiced young man whose manner quickly captured the audience.

"First off, what is rabies? Comes from the Latin word for madness or rage," Dr. Andrews explained. "It's an acute infectious disease of animals caused by a filterable virus and spread to other animals and humans by the bite of an infected animal or through saliva touching an open wound. There's two kinds—two known kinds, I should say—the excited kind and the paralytic kind. In some cases the paralytic kind doesn't always kill the animal. There's an incubation period of from several days to months, ordinarily, before the disease develops. Death usually follows three or four days after it develops. As Doc Gaddis here will tell you, there's certain first-aid measures that must be taken soon as a person's been bitten—cauterization of the wound followed by treatment with Pasteur or Semple vaccine."

By now murmurs of impatience were rising from the listeners. Most of these facts they already knew; it wasn't what they wanted to be told. Andrews held up his hands to quiet them.

"Now, we all know we've got serious complications on our hands. There seems to be a combination of the paralytic and excited type of rabies affecting these animals, caused by some rare form of the virus the health officer in Pitchfork has sent to the university for analysis."

Aware that he had offered nothing but the most negative, dismal news, and having no idea how to soften its impact, he abruptly sat down. Fresh noises of dissatisfaction spread through the crowd.

Sheriff Boles got to his feet. "Till this thing is under control all we can do is double our precautions. And one other thing . . ." He paused, like a politician reluctant to announce an unpopular decision. "*Every* dog, sick or well, *must be destroyed.*"

To his surprise no one immediately challenged this radical proposal until, from the fringe of the crowd, a very small female voice spoke up, "Sheriff, some dogs *can't* be destroyed."

All eyes turned toward the speaker, a tiny white-haired woman of eighty. Boles lowered his voice respectfully. "Sorry, Mrs. Bascomb. There can't be any exceptions."

The voice gathered strength. "But you *can't* kill Prince, Sheriff. Why, Prince is my husband's *eyes*. He'd be as good as dead without . . ." Her voice faltered, died away, as if the consequence of such an act were inexpressible.

The sheriff looked at Mayor Collins, who was studiously examining his fingernails.

"Sorry, Mrs. Bascomb," Boles repeated. "But you wouldn't want to risk Mr. Bascomb bein' killed . . . the way some of the others have been killed."

The voices rose now in a babble of disagreement, the crowd splitting, taking sides, tempers flaring, and then just as suddenly the voices grew still as the front door opened and closed and a strangely clad figure stood there in the shadowy vestibule regarding the curious faces rather like an oracle regarding her assembled votaries.

Granny Juul, enjoying the drama of her entrance, made no move to come forward until the sheriff, growing annoyed, spoke up sharply, "Well, Granny? You joinin' the rest of us folks?"

Only then did she glide forward, hitching her cloak about her shoulders like a Greek toga.

A woman's voice rang out shrilly: "Tell us, Granny Juul! Tell us what to do."

Head thrown back, Granny Juul's coal-black eyes raked the crowd. "Cleanse this town of its

wickedness. Destroy the Evil One."

Luther Puckett stepped forward. "Name him! Give us a name, Granny Juul. Point him out. Is he here among us?"

Granny Juul shook her head, gold earrings flashing in the lamplight. "The Evil One don't mingle with common folk. He bides alone, lurkin' in the shadows. Find him! Find the Evil One and when the Dog Star sets, the foul spirits will depart and won't never return no more."

Suddenly, while the fortune-teller's melodramatic utterance still gripped the crowd, a fearful howling rose from the street outside, followed by a series of high-pitched human screams. Everyone rushed to the windows.

A blue convertible with an out-of-state license had stopped for the single traffic light on Main Street and from out of the shadows a pack of mad dogs had leaped upon it, ripping and biting through the canvas top, one of them seizing a baby in its slavering jaws and shaking it as it would shake a cat or rabbit, while the others, mauling the blonde woman driver, had pulled her half out of the car before Sheriff Boles and Roy Hannus could get clear shots at them.

When it was over Tom looked around at the ring of pale, stunned faces. Granny Juul's was not among them.

It was the worst night of all. The ghastly howling of blood-crazed dogs echoed through the moon-silvered streets, torturing the sleepless citizens with fantasies more horrible than the most dreadful nightmares. Looking out her bedroom window Linda saw that one of the beasts had somehow climbed atop the roof of the Winsteads' ranch house across the street and was crouched there, baying at the sky.

"That star," she said to Tom. "That terribly brilliant star . . ."

"Sirius. The Dog Star. Brightest star in the heavens."

"But is it always that bright? I've never seen a star that bright before."

"You just never noticed it," he said, and then he was silent, thinking of Granny Juul's foolish, inflammatory words, rubbishy drivel that could yet affect the mind so eerily. Beyond the housetops the turgid, shallow Allegheny flowed as mysteriously as the river Nile, Jubal Summit looming beside it under the moonlight like one of the pyramids of ancient Egypt. How *had* the epidemic started? Was it a microbiological accident, or was it wholly inconceivable

that something like an epidemic of rabies could be a pathological expression of some more subtle, insidious violation of natural laws, a rebuff from some angry spirit, a punishment for some gross example of human impertinence?

"Tom? What are you thinking about?"

He stirred, moved away from the window. "Oh, nothing."

"Joy, where's your brother?" Linda asked the next morning.

"I don't know, Mom."

"I haven't laid eyes on him all morning. You sure you don't know where he is?"

They were very close, Joy and Robbie. She didn't want to squeal on him and yet he *had* been gone much longer than he'd promised. "He went to feed Micky Dooley."

Robbie's dog had disappeared the day after the public decree to destroy all dogs had been announced. The boy had been upset, but now, looking back, Linda realized that he hadn't been as disturbed as he might have been.

"Mom, you know how he feels about Micky Dooley. He couldn't let them kill him. So he hid him where no one would find him."

"Where?"

"The old Winslow place."

Linda rushed to the phone and called Tom, who stopped by the house just long enough to pick up his rifle and some shells.

"I'm going with you," she cried.

"No, you're not."

"Darling, be careful! And *find* him. Please."

As he drove out of town he knew he should have called the sheriff first, well aware of the danger of venturing into the hills alone, even in the shelter of a car.

Clouds were building up around the mountaintops but the air was sultry and windless, and despite the risk he drove with the windows down. Since the Winslows had died no one lived on Pudding Hill and the county hadn't got around to fixing the bridge over Preacher's Creek, so it was necessary to leave the car at the foot of the hill and continue on foot.

No sound, not even an echo, returned to him from the woods bordering the road as he called out Robbie's name every few steps.

He was in sight of the tumbledown Winslow place when the happy cry rang out, uncannily close: "Dad!"

He couldn't see the boy. "Robbie?"

"Dad, be quiet! I'm up in a tree about sixty yards from you. They're all around here, waiting for me to come down."

Suddenly a branch high up in

one of the maples alongside the road shook violently, provoking a chorus of barks from the invisible dogs.

It was like Nam again, the threat of a V.C. ambush, the fear of mines. He studied the terrain and weighed the options, thinking he might be able to pick off one or two—but suppose the rest of the pack didn't scare off?

He moved to the other side of the road from Robbie, climbed the bank through milkweed and Queen Anne's lace and took shelter among the trees.

He cupped his lips: "Robbie! Can you hear me?"

"Yeah, but so can they."

"I'm going to lure them out into the road."

"Dad, there's a passel of 'em."

"Just stay put till I tell you."

He dug in, belly to the ground, rifle nestled against his shoulder. He hooted, whistled, jeered, until they ventured out of the trees, crept down the opposite slope, then, snapping and drooling, into the road.

He picked off two of them, a German shepherd and a tan retriever, but the others weren't fazed, yelping and running about wildly in the road. Tom shot down two more and the message seemed to penetrate. Snarling and whining, they began trotting up the road toward the Winslow place.

"Robbie! Any more on that side?"

"No. They've all gone."

"Then climb down and wait for me."

Tom slid down the bank, eyes on the retreating dogs, as Robbie ran down the opposite bank and joined him in the middle of the road.

"You okay, son?"

"Sure, Dad."

"Not bitten?"

"Heck, no. But I sure came darn close."

Something was wrong now, though. Up ahead, adjacent to the Winslow place, the dogs had stopped.

"There's lots more of 'em there, Dad. They're after Micky Dooley. But they can't get to him. I made sure of that."

Canine reinforcements!

There were at least twice as many now, and they seemed to be massing for an assault back down the road.

"Son, we've got to make a run for it."

"We can't outrun them."

"Not by the road, no. But listen. We can get over the ridge there and down to the creek, where it's deep and pretty fast-moving. If we can reach the creek we've

got it made, buddy. Now, let's go."

They began walking very slowly backward, side by side down the road, edging always toward the right-hand bank. The pack started after them, not running, but loping, wolflike, heads down.

When they reached the foot of the ridge dividing the road from the creek, Tom said, "You first, son. When I give the word, run. Run like hell. Straight for the creek."

"No way, Dad. I'm not leaving you here."

"Don't argue. I'll be right on your tail."

As if sensing their plan, the dogs broke into a run.

"Now! Go, boy!"

Robbie dashed up the slope toward the crest of the ridge, provoking the dogs to a frenzy. Tom's rifle cracked once, twice, again. Then he tossed it down and followed Robbie, taking advantage of that few seconds of confusion in the canine ranks.

He scrambled up the loose turf, sometimes on hands and knees, pausing at the top of the ridge only long enough to look back at the pack in full howling pursuit, their blood-quickening wails spurring him to superhuman effort as he saw Robbie top the ridge and plunge down the gully wall toward Preacher's Creek.

They made it just in time, the lead dog literally snapping at Tom's heels as he hurled himself into the swift water and fought his way to Robbie's side in midstream.

Yapping wildly, the dogs ran back and forth along the bank but didn't venture to follow their prey into the turbulent current.

Their luck held when they reached the bridge: the car was on the opposite side of the river from the dogs.

Robbie, scolded and well-fed, was asleep when the phone rang. Linda answered it, then hung up and called to Tom. "It's Mike Boles. Luther Puckett and half a dozen cronies are holding a meeting at the Grange Hall."

There was quite a throng assembled by the time Tom got there, and even before going inside he could hear Puckett's loud, raspy voice.

"Ain't no good arguin' against it, Sheriff. We know the truth now, and I ain't standin' by and seein' my boy die less'n I do all I can to save him."

Tom shouldered his way to the sheriff's side. "What's it all about, Mike?"

Boles jerked his arm toward Puckett. "Bloody fool's got all these folks believin' Jules Otter's

behind this epidemic business."

Puckett, red-faced and sweating, pushed forward. "It's true. We've put it all together and it adds up. Sure, we all made a mistake in thinkin' Otter's mutt bit little Cathy. Honest mistake. But Otter swore revenge. We all know it. Some of the boys was right there when he did it. Swore he was goin' to make this town pay for what was done to his dog. Started the very next day. He knows all about poisons and herbs and stuff. He infected the dogs. And they spread it."

Tom scoffed. "What put that cock-eyed notion in your head, Puckett?"

Puckett ignored him. "We're wastin' time, Sheriff. We know what has to be done and we're gonna do it."

The crowd roared approval. Puckett turned to Greg Bessemer and his two boys. "You fellas are delegated to go get Otter. You fetch him down here. We're gonna—"

"You're gonna get on home," snapped Boles, "or you're gonna be jailed for incitin' a riot."

Puckett grinned. "All we aim t' do, Sheriff, is haul Otter in here for a little questionin'. We figger Otter's got an antidote for that poison he brewed up. He's gonna give us that antidote."

When Boles moved to pull his revolver he was seized and held tight by four of the Puckett vigilantes.

A half hour later Jules Otter was dragged into the Grange Hall and pulled up to the dais where Puckett and his buddies sat in judgment. Otter was more angry than scared, and he laughed derisively when Puckett started questioning him.

The crowd turned ugly.

"You ain't got no friends here, Otter," Puckett growled. "We all know you swore vengeance against this town."

"Not against the town," Otter retorted. "That's a damn lie and you all know it. I swore I'd get the devils who murdered my Lady. And I will!"

"We know what you swore to do. And what you did. You're the Evil One. Granny Juul warned us about the Evil One."

"Granny Juul is a conniving—"

"Shut up! All we want to hear from you is the truth. Even if we gotta do to you what was done to that mutt of yours."

Tom, Hannus, and the sheriff were all under restraint now, powerless to stop the beating when it began. It was a bad beating—a mean, vicious, bare-knuckled bully's beating. Still Otter didn't crack. His failure to whine

and grovel and confess only enraged the crowd further.

At last, when Otter's face was raw-fleshed and swollen, Puckett, breathing hard, roared out against him.

"You'll talk, you murderin' buzzard! You'll talk when your spine starts bendin' in two like my Sonny's over there in the clinic. When you can't open your jaws to swallow your own spit, you'll talk. Tie him up and toss him out in the street, you boys. We'll let 'em take a nip or two at him and then drag him back in here."

Tom didn't believe it, didn't believe these ordinarily humane and peaceable friends and neighbors could stand by and permit such an atrocity as this. However, he knew they were scared, mortally scared, because their loved ones were condemned to death and this one man, now tied hand and foot and lying in the middle of Main Street like a sacrificial victim, might possibly be able to save them.

Perhaps it was the fresh blood on Otter's face, or perhaps it was because some sort of mysterious climax was being reached in the progress of this frightful epidemic; whatever the reason, less than fifteen minutes passed before the dogs appeared, mad and ravening and suicidal in their defiance of the guns that blazed at them almost as soon as they had fallen upon Otter's helpless body. What they left of him was hardly enough to carry to Jenkins' Mortuary.

That same evening Sonny Puckett died in the clinic, but not before confessing that he was the one who had killed Jules Otter's setter.

Something else died in the town that night: the will to struggle against fate. The citizens gave up. They waited. They waited behind locked and barred doors and barricaded windows. They no longer trusted their doctor, their sheriff, their mayor, their editor. They had delivered themselves up to the most ancient of superstitions, to the belief in divine rage and evil spirits. They remembered what Granny Juul had told them and they did not venture into the empty sun-baked streets until the eleventh of August had passed; until dog days, that period of time named after the heliacal rising and setting of the Dog Star Sirius, had ended.

Perhaps it was coincidence or perhaps there was something to be said for the superstition; in such matters who can be said to *know*? In any event the epidemic had spent itself, and for weeks

thereafter scores of dead dogs were found in the woods and fields around Philips Mills.

How Micky Dooley, tied securely in an upstairs room of the old Winslow place, managed to survive without starving to death remained a mystery, although Robbie did find evidence that mice, venturing across the floor of that room, might not always have survived the journey.

Weeks after it was all over, Sheriff Boles, Tom and Jed Slater were having a beer together at the Victoria Bar and Grill.

"Funny thing," Jed was saying. "Folks going about their business like it had never happened. Yet nobody's ever going to forget it."

"Or ever know just why or how it started," the sheriff said.

Jed leaned forward, rubbing his jaw. "Maybe—I don't believe it, mind you—but maybe Jules Otter did have something to do with it. The guy did dabble in herbs and chemistry and all that. And, man, I saw his face when he swore vengeance for what was done to Lady."

Tom shook his head. "Jules Otter wasn't the only one who messed around with such things."

Boles smiled. "You mean Granny Juul and her potions?"

"Well, someone started the rumor about Jules Otter. And you *know* who started all that talk about the Evil One having to be destroyed."

"Nah. No way. Granny Juul, hell, she's just a harmless old fortune-teller. She wouldn't have no cause to stir up a brew like that."

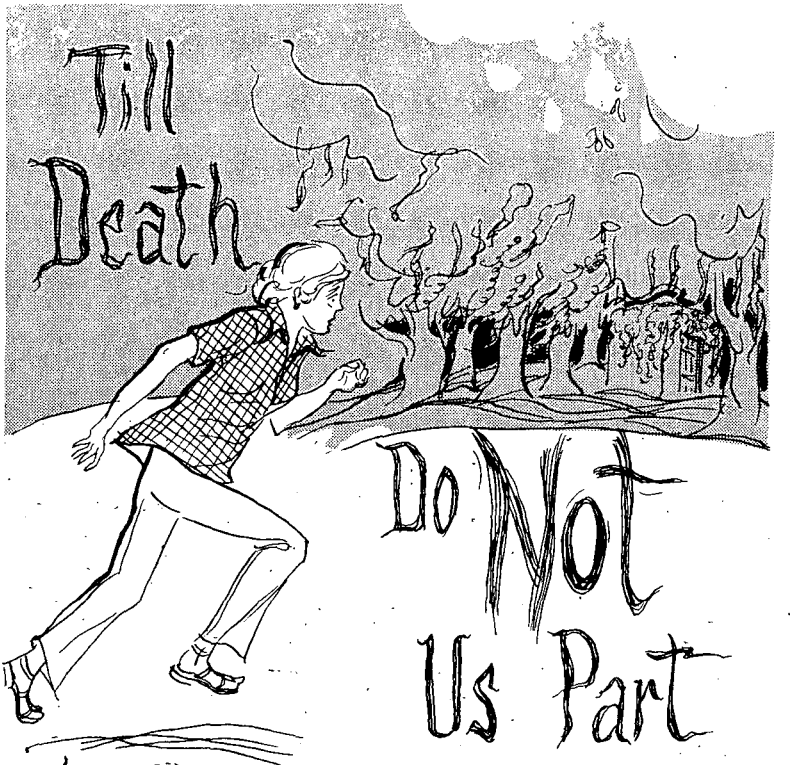
Tom laughed and finished his beer. "I'm only teasing, Mike. Besides, she and Jules were distant cousins."

"Like hell they were."

"Oh, it's a fact. I found that out from the morgue at the paper. Matter of fact, she was the closest relative he had. Did you know that she's inheriting Jules Otter's house and everything he owned?"

The sheriff, who had hoped that he had earned several months of comparative inactivity, returned Tom's gaze with a cheerless frown. "No," he drawled. "I didn't know that."

If one is resourceful, good use can be made of even the most unlikely instrument.



by Talmage Powell

As constable of Grande Isle Parish, Louisiana (Jerem Jenks is the name), I'll naturally stick to bald facts when I write the official report. I've pieced together details of the killing out at the Deveau

place without much trouble. It was a simple, direct act of violence. Once it was started, it had to end in blood. In physical terms, we've never had a messier killing in the parish; but it was tidy in one respect, leaving none of those wearisome questions about motive and identity that cause a lawman sleepless nights and a case of heartburn.

I'll write up the details with impersonal attention, the same way I'd give directions to a motorist passing through our back-bayou country, but I'm not sure the bare facts will tell the full truth or its complete meaning. Ten dollars plus ten dollars equals twenty dollars—but that doesn't explain the latent power in the printed paper, what the twenty dollars will buy. The significance depends on the druthers and desires of whoever owns the twenty. The visible fact of the money is only the beginning of the truth concerning it.

In my own mind, Robert Deveau's love for his wife had a lot to do with what happened. Yes, I know that Robert died thirty years ago. I know that my notion is fanciful, but I believe it. I don't think his love died with his flesh. It was a part of her, always. It was there when she needed it most. His devotion, through her undying memory of it, steadied her, directed her; and an earthly portion of him protected her and kept her safe . . .

The background of it all goes back quite a way, almost forty years. Robert Deveau was a strapping, black-haired, sun-darkened young man descended from those French Acadians who fled British rule in Nova Scotia almost two hundred years ago and trekked all the way into the Louisiana wilderness seeking freedom.

Robert's was a working plantation, and he was rarely seen lolling on the veranda of his comfortable old colonial house sipping mint juleps. His muscles were hard and his hands were calloused. He was outgoing and generous, honest and compassionate. The way the parish felt about him, he could have had any local political office for the asking.

He met Valerie during a business trip to New Orleans and spent every weekend down there until he married her a few months later.

They went to Europe for about a month, and Grande Isle awaited their return with the usual small-town expectancy and curiosity. They settled into married life on the modest Deveau plantation, and Grande Isle quickly had its answers about her. Robert Deveau

couldn't have made a better choice. Tall, lithe, chestnut-haired, strongly beautiful, Valerie made Grande Isle her home with such a natural ease and unpretended warmth that folks soon disremembered she hadn't been born in the parish. I figure that Robert was the key to that. Robert was her home, just as she was his. The two of them could have been at home in Baltimore or Borneo, just so long as they were together.

About the eighth year of their marriage, they went up to the Great Smoky Mountains near Asheville for a short summer vacation. One night as they were returning to their rented cottage, the brakes faded on their car during the long drop down the steep mountain road. The car hurtled into a tight hairpin curve even as Robert reacted to the emergency. It plunged down the mountainside, rolling over and over with glass shattering, metal rending, and hot oil and water spewing from the engine's guts.

Robert was knocked out the first time the car turned over. When he groaned back to pain-filled consciousness, he knew he was badly hurt. His stomach, chest, and head felt as if a team of Louisiana mules had walked across him. From the numbness in his left leg, he suspected what his groping fingers confirmed. He had broken the left femur, the big thigh bone, just above the knee. The sharp, jagged end had punctured the flesh, and blood was coursing down his calf.

The first shock of pain began to build in the fractured femur, but it wasn't as important as the emptiness of the car.

"Valerie . . ."

He realized that he was lying awkwardly on his side against the top of the car. It had come to rest upside down. The door near his face had sprung open during the long and violent fall.

"Valerie . . ."

Had she been thrown clear, escaped relatively unharmed? With the prayer on his lips, he dragged himself out of the car.

He lay for a moment fighting off faintness, dwarfed by the hugeness of the moon-washed mountains and their desolate silence. He sucked at the clean air and found a little strength.

Raising his head, he saw her face, not a dozen feet from him; just her head and shoulders. The rest of her was pinned between soft, loamy ground and the curve of the topsy-turvy front fender.

He crawled toward her, the sight of the stillness of her features killing his own pain for a moment. His trembling hand

touched her lips, her throat, the place where the fender pressed down on her.

He looked up the long, moon-spangled slope, seeing the trail of broken brush and shattered saplings the car had plowed. Against the heights was the dark band, like a black scar on the mountain's face, made by the road cut. Perhaps he had strength to crawl the distance up to the road. Maybe there'd be the luck of a passing car he could stop for help. He had a chance to save himself before he bled to death from the leg wound. A chance with strength and just the smallest bit of luck . . . but, he knew, he didn't have the time. If she was still alive at all, Valerie wasn't breathing under the weight and pressure of the fender. She couldn't wait for help. She was suffocating now.

He dug his hands into the earth under her shoulders and started tearing it away. Inch by inch he gave her room, somehow hanging onto consciousness and sanity. Each handful of dirt he grubbed out loosened the clamp against her chest a little bit more.

He heard a faint popping sound, the recoil of cramped muscles within her rib cage, and with a shuddering gasp, the first thread of air streamed past her lips and into her lungs. It was followed by a stronger gasp, and then another, and in a few seconds she moved her head a little and moaned.

She was trying to speak his name, and he said weakly, "I'm here, Valerie."

"Oh, God, Robert . . ."

"Can you manage? Wiggle out?"

"I'm hurt, Robert. My arm . . . my stomach . . ."

"Try, Valerie. Work your way out. A little at a time. That's it. Keep trying. You'll have to do it . . . I'm plain tuckered. Give me a minute . . . just a minute . . . to rest . . ."

His eyes closed slowly, and the last drops of life oozed through arteries and flesh sliced by the razor-sharp end of the broken femur bone.

When Valerie brought his body back, Grande Isle closed up for the day and joined her mourning. His service was held in the community church, and the long procession of cars wound its way the ten miles out to the Deveau place.

Robert was interred in the family mausoleum, which stood a hundred yards to the rear of the house in a grove of live oaks. The burial place was like a dozen others in the parish, a thousand others in our part of Louisiana where

the nature of the swampy soil rules out below-ground burial. It was an almost-crude blockhouse built from stone. Weather had pitted and stained it and ivy smothered the walls. The sheet-iron door that was pulled open to admit Robert Deveau to his own niche in the dark crypt was blackened with rust. His father and mother were in there, his grandparents and their parents—and no doubt in that moment Valerie Deveau thought that in some distant day there'd be room for her. In keeping with custom, if it should be necessary, the bones of a long-dead Deveau would be pushed to the rear of a niche to make room for the new arrival.

Meantime, there were the pieces of her life to pick up, and she did so with the quiet brand of Deveau courage. She ran the business of the plantation on a reduced scale. She kept up old friendships. She drove into Grande Isle once a week for her volunteer day at the parish's small hospital. If her thoughts or wishes strayed beyond the plantation, she never showed any sign of it.

She might have married again, a dozen times. A lot of the parish bachelors made the try. As far as she was concerned, however, the male gender began and ended with Robert Deveau, before whose tomb she placed a basket of fresh flowers once each week.

The years burnished her hair to smooth gray, added wrinkles to the corners of her green eyes and full-lipped mouth, and tugged faintly at the animal beauty of her body; but she was structured not to grow old with bent back and rheumy eyes, and she remained a striking woman, even after thirty years of widowhood.

My mind was far and away from anything connected with the Deveaus the day Carlin Soulard drifted into Grande Isle. As constable, I didn't fancy his type. He was a hulking youth with hair like dirty frayed blond ropes hanging to his heavy shoulders. His stubbled face was brutish and habitually sullen. He wore dirty jeans tucked into run-over boots and a filthy green T-shirt with "Make War—To Hell With Love" stenciled across the chest. I figured he'd smoke pot and spit on the floor.

He came from beyond Chad Bayou, where the Soulards were a sizable interbred Cajun clan that existed on its knack for poaching, making moonshine, waylaying the infrequent stranger, and stealing from one another.

Once previously, Carlin had drifted into Grande Isle. His sojourn had stretched to sixty days

in the local jail after a drinking bout with a home-grown tough had ended in a fist fight. This time, I hoped, he was just passing through, but on the third straight day that he chalked his cue in the Little Andy Poolroom & Beer I decided to mention that our jail food had improved none at all, inflation being what it was.

He was crouched over the second table, running a rack of balls. He didn't see me right away, moving around the table, sighting his next shot.

He extended his left arm, bridging his cue stick, and I said, "Just make sure you won't end up behind the black ball, Carlin, the eight ball."

He jerked a dark look over his shoulder, then straightened and turned, fingering the heavy end of the stick. "Well, blast me! It's the old-timer. Old friend Constable Jenks."

"Have some bad blood trouble over your way, Carlin?"

"Now, whatever would give you an idea like that, Mister Lawman?"

"Just figured you'd had to make tracks to stay out of Chad Bayou for this long."

Half a dozen loungers in the place had perked up. They drifted over to lounge against the wall and take in the scene with a stirring of interest and curiosity.

"Stayed out once for sixty days," Carlin said. "Ain't forgot that, old-timer."

"We aired the cell after you were gone, Carlin."

His eyes went a shade darker in their heavy sockets. Then he winked at one of the bystanders. "Real comic you got for a local fuzz. Real funny, ain't he?"

One of the loungers laughed, uncertainly. Carlin shot him a look and the laugh broke off in mid-note.

"Only I ain't letting him set me up." Carlin swung his gaze back to me. "Just shoot your mouth off all you like, old gray fuzz. You ain't egging me into giving you an excuse to invite me back into your lousy pokey. I'm a free citizen and I know my rights. That's a public street out there and this is a public place. Now get yourself a cue stick and stand the hell out of my way."

"Where you staying, Carlin?"

"The Bide-A-Wee Tourist Cabins on the edge of town. I registered right and paid for my flop. Don't get any ideas about vagrancy charges, high mucky-muck policeman. I got money. Here. Look." He fished a small roll of bills from his jeans and jammed them under my nose. "You want to count it, oh mighty chief of the

gestapo? You got my permission."

I raised my hand and pushed his aside with my fingertips. "All right, Carlin. I don't need to count it, seeing as how there's nothing visible except a few singles. I wouldn't be surprised if you lifted it off a cousin or uncle and had to run like hell. In any event, I don't imagine you've got enough there to last you long—and I'd suggest looking for some honest work before you go broke in Grande Isle."

"I'll be right over and apply for the job of deputy constable, oldtimer."

He thought that was rich, and I left him standing there laughing and slapping his thigh.

Late the next afternoon, as I pieced it together later during the investigation, Jeff Moseby showed up in the Little Andy. A lanky swamp cypress logger, Jeff had recently lost the first two fingers on his right hand in a sawmilling accident. Today, he'd had outpatient treatment and rebandaging of the finger stumps at the parish hospital. With a wave of his bandage, he offered to stand a round of beer for the half-dozen loafers in the Little Andy. The group included Carlin Soulard.

Jeff was fond of describing his accident in bloody detail, and today he had a spin-off bit of news. "Mrs. Deveau was doing her day at the hospital. She wrapped the fingers when the doctor was through. Made me a real interesting proposition, too."

Buster Toutain smacked the lips in his big, greasy-looking face. "She's still quite a piece, I bet. Play your cards right, Jeff-boy, and she might open the wall safe in her house for you. I hear it's loaded with a million dollars and a quart jar of diamonds. Just give her what she—"

Jeff's good hand shot across the pine plank table and grabbed the wrinkled collar of Buster's poplin shirt. "You hear a lot of crud, because that's all you listen for, Buster. You could wash your mind in a sewer and it would come out twice as clean. You don't talk like that about Mrs. Deveau when I'm around, understand?"

Buster sensed that most of the men at the table were in solid agreement with Jeff. Valerie Deveau was that little part of itself that Grande Isle didn't care to have dirtied.

"I didn't mean nothing," Buster muttered, straightening his collar as Jeff slowly released him.

"The hell you didn't—and one of these days cruddy talk is going to land you in trouble." Jeff's eyes swept the group about the table. "Fact is, Mrs. Deveau and me got

talking about how hard it is to get help these days and how tough and dangerous swamp logging is. Nobody out there nowadays but her and the caretaker. Plenty of good land lying fallow, she says. Told me if I wanted to put in a cane crop I'd keep the long end of the shares, her not needing money in particular."

Jeff paused to eye his bandaged hand. "I might just do it. Get me a small crew and quit making cypress stumps before I lose more than a pair of fingers."

Carlin Soulard took it all in. During the evening, when Buster was oiled with beer, Carlin drew him out about Valerie Deveau's life style and the wall safe in her house. Then Carlin returned to his grubby room in the ramshackle Bide-A-Wee Tourist Cabins and did some long thinking. About daybreak, he slipped unseen out of Grande Isle on his battered motorbike.

He hid the cycle in the weeds behind an old billboard on the county road and hiked across Deveau land until he had a wide, clear view of the house from the concealment of a thicket.

Carlin lay sweating as the sun climbed higher in the cloudless summer sky. At first he brushed off the swarms of insects that came to feed on him, then simply endured them while a growing thirst began to burn his throat. In a state of mild torment, he fueled a personal hatred for Valerie Deveau. It would make the robbery easier, and if he had to kill her, he could do so.

He watched the caretaker ride a power mower over the vast side yard. A stalwart, work-hardened, middle-aged figure, he broke the chore twice to walk to an outside faucet located against the north wing of the house and take long slow swallows of cool water. Cursing the man under his breath, Carlin held his impatience in check. He buoyed himself with the thought of the right moment, when she would be alone, when the safe would be open. Allowing for the exaggerations of gossip, Carlin was convinced that the wall safe would at the least contain the plantation's cash on hand, several thousand dollars. Even several hundred was more than he had any prospects of seeing in a lump during the rest of his life.

At last he saw her come out on the veranda with its tall, slender white columns. She called to the caretaker, who was finishing up the side yard. He got off the riding mower and walked across to stand in the shadow of the veranda. They talked for a moment, and the man returned to the

mower and rode it out of sight around the rear corner of the house. She turned and went back inside.

With a ripple of tension passing through his muscles, Carlin crawled through the thicket, shaving the distance between himself and the grounds. He heard a car's engine surge to life and a few moments later a big blue station wagon nosed along the driveway, the caretaker at the wheel, alone in the car.

Carlin watched the station wagon follow the long curve of the driveway past the sheltering rows of tall Australian pines. Swiveling his head, he watched a distant humpback in the county road that was visible from his hiding place. In three or four minutes, the station wagon moved over the low rise and then was out of sight. Clearly, Mrs. Deveau had sent the caretaker to Grande Isle on an errand.

Crouching, Carlin snaked his way out of the thicket, ran across the side yard, and pressed his back against the side of the house. Breath was shallowing out now, eyes and ears straining.

He heard the soft, rattling slam of the back screen door. Running to the rear corner, he saw her walking toward the grove of live oaks a hundred yards away. She was carrying a basket of flowers, and he guessed she had been in the kitchen cutting and arranging them.

He turned and padded quickly along the side of the house, sprang upon the end of the veranda, and entered the house through the front door.

After the heat and insects, the foyer was a pleasantly cool invitation. He didn't pause, darting into the long, sunken livingroom. One by one he looked behind pictures on the wall, tested bookcases. At last he stood with fists clenched, teeth grinding. Was it just a made-up thing, this wall safe of hers?

He looked once more about the livingroom, his gaze stopping at the archway opening into the dining room. He hurried in, looking at the long table and arranged chairs, the tall bay with its soft draperies at the farther end of the room, the buffet closer at hand. Over the buffet hung an oil painting of a bowl of fruit. He crossed to it, touched the picture. It was hinged at the top, and when he swung it open a soft laugh caught in his throat. An almost frenzied joy built in his eyes as he studied the dial of the compact and very secure-looking wall safe. He lowered the picture silently.

Slipping into the hallway, he

hurried to the kitchen. He gave it a quick survey: cabinets, countertops, stove, refrigerator, walk-in cooler, large worktable, the huge old copper sink with its sideboards cluttered with flower cuttings and a couple of gardening tools where she'd arranged the basket.

He looked out the rear window and drew in a thin breath. She was returning, only a few yards from the house, no longer carrying the basket.

He pressed himself against the wall beside the screen door and counted the approaching footsteps. He clenched and raised his fist, and when she stepped inside he slammed his knuckles against her cheek.

A small note of pain jarred from her. She reeled, twisted, tripped over her feet, and fell in an awkward heap near the sink. She was numbed for a moment. Then she pulled herself up, holding to the edge of the sink and looking over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were slightly glazed, more from shock and sudden terror than from the force of his blow.

"What do you want?" she managed in a hoarse whisper.

"Just open the safe, lady, that's all." He'd moved out from the wall and stood now near the center of the room, hands cocked on hips, staring at her defiantly.

She was perfectly still for a moment. Clearly, she was thinking, this could well be the last day of her life. She would live until she had opened the safe; but looking at his brutishness and the temporary loss of sanity in his eyes, she was certain that he wouldn't leave a living witness to his crime.

He mistook her silence. "Don't get crazy ideas," he warned. "You'll open the safe, one way or another. Easy or hard."

"I believe you," she said.

"And don't try to stall or con me. Won't do you any good to claim there's only some papers or something like that in the safe. I know what safes are for."

"No, I wouldn't try to lie to you about the safe."

"That's on the track, lady. Now let's get moving."

He stepped back and slightly to one side to make way for her to go ahead of him. She moved her hands, both of them, more quickly than he could blink. She grabbed flower cuttings, shears, heavy knife all in a motion from the sideboard and flung the lot of it at his face.

The wet stems, leaves, and petals showered against his cheeks; the knife sailed past his ear; the heavy shears crashed against the bridge of his nose.

With a yelp of pain, he grabbed his face and stumbled backward a step. He heard the snap of the screen door. "Damn you! I'll really fix you now!"

He stumbled to the door, feeling the warm coursing of blood from his nose. He squinted his eyes back into focus and saw her running hard across the back yard toward the ivy-grown mausoleum and live oaks a hundred yards away.

Snorting out a spray of blood, he ran out to catch her, taking long strides, his mouth a confident and determined gash.

She was wearing workaday clothing, blouse, slacks, sandals, and she was much faster than he'd expected—a tough, hardy plantation woman.

He narrowed the gap between them steadily. Nearing the mausoleum, she cast a look over her shoulder, her mouth a wide hole laboring for breath.

He forced a little more speed. A few seconds now and he would trap her against the old family tomb. He could see the bright splash of color of the flower basket where she'd set it against the rusty sheet-iron door.

With a quick shift she darted around the mausoleum. OK, he thought, but it wouldn't do her any good. Beyond the crypt he'd glimpsed only open fields of palmetto, sage, stunted brush that offered her no ready place to hide.

He burst around the rear of the mausoleum and stumbled to a halt. The fields yawned emptily. She'd disappeared, just like that.

He stood briefly, catching breath through his mouth and blood-encrusted nose. Then a cold smile crimped his lips and he turned slowly. Simple, he decided. Since she didn't head across the field, she had to duck around the tomb, hoping to beat it back to the house.

He ran to the front of the mausoleum, looking toward the house and seeing no sign of her in that direction either. Again he halted, more indecisively.

He scanned in all directions carefully, even among the lower branches of the spreading oaks. A tremor of anger and frustration ticked the corner of his mouth. He tilted his head, straining his ears for the cracking of a twig, the rustle of a sage clump, sounds that would tell him that she was now in back of the mausoleum. Round and round, he mused, while she keeps the vault between us . . . but it wouldn't work, of course. He'd charge, overtake her, or reverse directions suddenly and have her come charging around a corner straight into his grip.

Then a slow frown began to creep between his eyes. He had the feeling that he was seeing something he shouldn't. A wrong detail. Something out of place.

The basket of flowers! His breath caught. The basket was tilted over on its side now—and the door of the mausoleum was slightly ajar.

"Well, I'll be diddle-damned!" he breathed to himself. His gaze inched over the weather-blackened sheet-iron door. Her only hiding place . . . She'd slipped around, ducked inside, hoping that he'd search the fields and give her a chance to get back to the house, a telephone, a gun.

He let out a laugh. Bending, he picked up a small pebble, threw it, and listened to it ring against the sheet-iron door.

"You hear that, lady, that little old rock?" he called out. "It means you're not so smart after all. You've blown the deal. It means I'm coming in and drag you out. This time I won't fool around. I'll whip so much hell out of you, you'll be begging to open that safe."

He grasped the ragged edge of the door and swung it back hard, and lunged at the indistinct form of her there inside the dense gloom of the mausoleum.

His fist was raised to start giving her the message without any more question marks. As his hand came smashing down, he glimpsed a countermovement that she made. His eyes were still focusing from the brilliant sunlight outside, but he saw that she was holding something. A weapon.

As his weight crashed against her, the weapon in her hand was driven home, straight through the wall of his stomach, biting deep into his entrails.

His scream shattered against the stone walls. He fell back, grabbing at the sudden fire in his guts. He collapsed outside the mausoleum and lay thrashing in the sunlight.

Her half-incoherent phone call brought me to the Deveau place in record time. When I arrived, she was sitting on the front steps, her body bent far over, her arms wrapped around her shins, her cheek pressing against her knees.

She heard the police car skid to a stop on the driveway gravel and struggled to her feet as I got out of the car and ran over to her.

A sob racked her body. She reached toward me for support. "Constable Jenks . . ."

"It's all right now, Mrs. Deveau." I put my arm about her shoulders. "It's all over. Everything's under control, and Dr. Simmers is on his way."

Physically she was unhurt, but

she needed Doc's help to get through the aftermath of shock.

As if on cue, Doc's dusty car rolled up, and when he took over with Valerie Deveau, I hurried around the house, crossed the back yard, and came to a halt a few yards from the Deveau mausoleum.

Although I expected it, the sight of Carlin Soulard's corpse stopped the breath in my throat. His death anguish had twisted his body out of shape, jutted his eyes, peeled his lips far apart.

My unwilling gaze was held by the pattern the blood had made on his shirt and pants as it had spurted from his abdomen. His dead hands still clutched the weapon protruding from his belly.

I forced a movement of my eyes and ventured a look inside the crypt. The scene of violence took shape in my mind, the way it must have happened. She slipped inside the crypt, hoping Carlin Soulard would search for her out across the fields . . . But if he didn't, if he cornered her, she was desperate for a way to defend herself . . . She lifted the lid of Robert Deveau's coffin a few inches . . . Her fingers closed on the left femur bone with its lower end broken to jagged razor sharpness on a mountainside thirty years ago . . . And when Carlin hurled himself on her, she used the bone as a strong and desperate woman would have used a sharp dagger . . .

I stood for a hushed moment, just thinking about it. Why'd she hide in the crypt? For the logical reason that it was the only hiding place? Or because the memory of Robert was strongest there, to strengthen and steady her? And the weapon—had she thought of it for the logical reason that it was the only available weapon? Or because the suggestion came from an unseen source?

I shook the questions out of my head and started toward the house. My mind was made up on at least one thing: Doc Simmers—not the faithful constable of Grande Isle—was going to have the job of removing the weapon from Carlin Soulard's body.

Advanced age gives rise to all manner of confusion . . . or does it?

Obligations

by Beatrice S. Smith

The funeral service for Rob Ramsey was held at the new, bright little Catholic church on Evergreen Road in the village of Northfield where Rob had been born. Sheriff Wilhelmina Pride noted without surprise that at least two hundred local residents were in attendance. Most of them were friends of Rob's deceased parents, small-town people doing what was expected of them.

Wilhelmina looked with approval from one to the other of them during the unfamiliar ceremony. Joe and Ada Williams. Ed Schwartz. Flora Melhuse. Chet and Bertha Krueger. Good, decent people, they had even taken Rob's wife Cindy under their wings since the accident. Cindy had been a complete stranger until six months ago when Rob returned with her to Northfield from wherever it was he'd been for the past twenty years.

Wherever it was hadn't aged Rob much, Wilhelmina mused, as she followed the congregation up and down from the kneeler in the back pew. Forty-one years old this coming May, Rob was still incredibly handsome—or had been. For an instant, the bloody mess that had been Rob Ramsey floated, unbidden, through Wilhel-

mina's mind. But she blanked it out immediately, concentrating instead on Cindy.

Cindy. Short for what? Wilhelmina wondered. Cinderella? She looked like somebody's stepchild—a small, thin waif, with long mouse-colored hair stringing around a pale, woebegone face. Who in the world would have dreamed that Rob Ramsey would finally pick such a wife? Cindy had probably appealed to his vanity, Wilhelmina decided. Rob had always needed adoration to give him confidence. Poor, stupid man. Well, it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered. Rob was dead. Dead! Wilhelmina still could hardly believe it.

The priest was standing up there in front of the altar, chanting the prayer for the dead, as the altar boy swung a censer filled with burning incense past the casket—*Rob's* casket. The smoke suddenly made Wilhelmina's eyes water. She dabbed at them, surreptitiously, hoping no one thought she was crying over Rob. Actually, she felt nothing at all.

"Sheriff," a voice hissed from behind her, as the Mass was nearing its end.

Wilhelmina turned. Ned Zander, her deputy, cupped his hand near Wilhelmina's ear and whispered, "We got the bear."

Wilhelmina got up quickly, effortlessly, in spite of her girth, and followed Ned outside.

"She was a big sow," Ned continued. "Had nearly two inches of pure fat over her rump."

"All bears get fat before denning," Wilhelmina said, squinting in the fall sunshine. "Who shot her?"

"Olaf Hanson. But he didn't shoot her. He set a trap over by the dump where it happened. He lives nearby, you know."

Wilhelmina stiffened. "Olaf set a *trap*? By whose authority?"

Ned hesitated. "Nobody's. I guess he thought he was doing folks a favor. And he was too, I'd say."

"I wouldn't!" Wilhelmina snapped. "Trapping bears is against the law in this state." She snorted. "It probably isn't even the same bear!"

"Yes, it is." Ned moistened his lips. "Old man Hanson found Rob's ring in the bear's stomach."

"Rob's ring?" Wilhelmina repeated, frowning.

"Yes. You know that black onyx one with the little diamond that he always wore."

Wilhelmina breathed an almost inaudible "Oh," and ducked her head for an instant, then abruptly headed for the police car.

Ned followed close behind. "I

guess rings aren't so easy to digest as flesh and bones." He shivered. "I never saw such a mess as when you and I picked Rob up that night. Why, he—"

Wilhelmina whirled. "No need to go into that, Ned," she said sharply, then more calmly, "Where is it?"

"The bear? Old man Hanson butchered it. He likes bear meat, he says."

"I meant the ring." Wilhelmina's voice was impatient.

"Oh, the ring. I got it here. Old man Hanson said I should give it to you." Ned reached two fingers into his shirt pocket and plucked out a black onyx ring and handed it to Wilhelmina. "Look. It isn't bent or dented or anything. And the diamond is still there. Can you imagine that?"

Wilhelmina took the ring, looked at it briefly. A long examination wasn't necessary, for the ring was familiar. She herself had given it to Rob as a birthday present when he was eighteen. It had taken her months to pay back the money her father had reluctantly loaned her. "From a secret pal" was all she had written on the birthday card. How young and foolish she'd been! It hardly seemed possible that she and that other girl were the same person.

"I don't think we ought to tell Cindy where the ring was, do you, Sheriff?" Ned was saying. When Wilhelmina didn't respond immediately, he added, "We could just say we found it at the site of the accident or something like that, couldn't we?" He turned an anxious face toward Wilhelmina.

"I'm not sure what to do," she said. "I'll put it away until I decide. Right now I'm going out to see Olaf."

Ned cleared his throat. "Ah—Sheriff—"

"Yes?" Wilhelmina turned.

"You—ah—aren't going to call the warden or anything, are you? I mean," he added quickly, "Olaf Hanson is an old man, practically senile. I don't think arresting him would do much good, do you?"

Wilhelmina sighed. "I guess not. But I'm certainly going to give him a good talking to. He had no business trapping that bear. Somehow he considers himself above the law. He—" She broke off. "Do you want a ride back to town, Ned?"

Ned bobbed his head. "If it isn't out of your way. The wife's driving mine to the cemetery."

"And you're not going?"

"I would, but I have to work." Ned glanced at Wilhelmina. "Aren't you going?"

"To the cemetery? No, not this time," Wilhelmina said quietly, her face expressionless. "Hop in." She gestured toward the big station wagon, then climbed into the seat behind the wheel.

They rode in silence for most of the way. Ned looked from time to time at Wilhelmina, whose profile was severe, with broad planes, a high-bridged nose, a strong, full jaw, and a thick head of hair, prematurely white and cut short. Ned was ten years younger than Wilhelmina and obviously uncomfortable in her presence, though he'd been working with her since she was elected eight years ago. He was so fidgety, in fact, that Wilhelmina felt an unfamiliar impulse to make small talk. But she wasn't naturally gregarious and could think of nothing to say.

A few minutes later she pulled up in front of the hardware store where Ned clerked on his off hours. "This all right?"

"Fine, Sheriff, thanks." Ned raised his hand in a kind of salute as he hopped out of the car. "I'll be here if you want me for anything."

Wilhelmina nodded, waved, smiled absently. She sometimes wondered if she had made a mistake in appointing Ned her deputy. He was efficient enough, but unable to hide his shock at the sight of violent death, too prone to overlook misdemeanors, too lenient in all of his dealings. The trouble was, people knew his weakness and often took advantage of him—as Olaf Hanson had, for instance. Or was the way Olaf behaved her own fault? Wilhelmina thought that perhaps it was.

Ten minutes later she turned into Olaf's front yard, scattering chickens and setting up a clatter of barking dogs.

"Easy, Duke, easy," she murmured to a collie that trotted beside her, growling, as she walked toward the house.

Olaf met her at the door. He was a big man in his late seventies, stooped, with a long bony face, sparse tobacco-stained teeth, and large knobby-jointed hands. "Howdy, Wilhelmina. I been expectin' you," he said, holding open the door.

The house smelled of stale coffee, improperly dried oak, and stale sweat. Wilhelmina ran a finger back and forth under her nostrils, angry for noticing, wishing such inconsequential things didn't bother her quite so much. Olaf was a decent man, she reminded herself, making do as best he could on a small pension. What did it matter how his house smelled? As old and arthritic as he was, he did well to keep a roof

over his head without any help.

"How's your ma these days?" Olaf asked, as he lowered himself slowly into an ancient armchair.

Wilhelmina, still standing, shrugged. "About the same. Some days she knows me, some days she doesn't. But she's happy enough, I think."

"You was a good girl to come back home and take care of your ma, Wilhelmina. Your pa would of been proud of you." He snorted. "Most kids nowadays ship the old folks to the county home soon as they start slippin' a little." He took a plug of tobacco from a package and stuffed it into his mouth. "Guess I'm lucky I never had any kids." He looked up quickly. "Not that I woulda minded one like you."

Wilhelmina smiled. "I'm no kid, Olaf. I'll be forty-one in June."

The old man shifted his tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other. "That's a kid, as far as I'm concerned." Then brightly, "You want a cup of coffee? I got some from breakfast."

"No. No, thank you. I'm in a hurry today."

"You're always in a hurry," the old man grumbled. "Your pa never was. He always had time to chew the rag a little."

"I know." Wilhelmina sighed. Her father had been dead eight years and people still compared the differences between them. It annoyed Wilhelmina sometimes. Not often. She was well aware that it was mainly because she was Sheriff Herb Pride's daughter that she herself had been elected. The fact that she had been a policewoman in Chicago for ten years helped too, of course. But not as much as being her father's daughter. A folk hero, that's the way the townspeople had regarded Herb Pride, a paragon of wisdom and virtue, who not only was a good friend and fine lawman, but cooked and cleaned and took care of his daughter and invalid wife as well.

Olaf had been a close friend of her father. They had been born on adjoining farms, had gone to the same one-room school, hunted, fished, trapped together, belonged to the same Lutheran church, all those things. Was that why she had decided not to arrest Olaf for trapping the bear? Or was she becoming mushy like Ned? Wilhelmina scowled. It wasn't because she thought Olaf had done the right thing, that was certain.

"Here." The old man held out a cracked saucer. "You look hungry. Have a piece of candy."

Wilhelmina glanced at the small star-shaped chocolate candies wrapped in foil. "Ummm," she

murmured appreciatively, picked one, unwrapped it, and placed the foil on the table.

"Still fond of them little chocolates, ain't you, Wilhelmina?"

Wilhelmina nodded, chewing, swallowing. "Yes. Dad used to buy them for me by the pound."

"I remember." The old man rubbed a bent finger over his right eyelid. "He was a good man, your pa, the best friend I ever had."

Silence for a moment, a silence too fragile for Wilhelmina to break; then she said, quietly, "Olaf, you had no business trapping that bear."

The old man shifted his tobacco once again. "That old sow was the one that killed Rob Ramsey. I found his ring. Didn't Ned tell you?"

"Yes, Ned told me," Wilhelmina replied. "But you didn't know that before you trapped her."

The old man grunted. "What's the difference? Ain't all bears supposed to be killers?"

"That's nonsense. You know it and so do I. Bears aren't any more vicious than other predators."

"Other critters don't kill people," the old man countered.

Wilhelmina frowned. "Neither would bears if people would quit feeding them and trying to make pets out of them."

"Yeah, you're right. Dang city folks don't know nothin'." Olaf wiped a dribble of tobacco juice from his lower lip. "But Rob Ramsey was born and raised here in bear country same as you and me. He shoulda knowed better than to sleep out there by the dump at night. Them bears been hangin' out in that exact same spot for years."

Wilhelmina took another chocolate. "Rob wasn't much of an outdoor type, even when he was young," she said, chewing slowly, reflectively.

"What was he doin' out there by the dump, then?"

"Taking pictures. Photography was his hobby. He was trying to get some action shots of the bears."

"Well, if'n it was action he wanted, he sure got it." Olaf shook his head. "He shoulda asked somebody first 'fore he started foolin' around out there."

"I warned him," Wilhelmina said quietly. "But he just slapped me on the back and laughed, as he always did."

The old man narrowed his eyes. "You was kinda sweet on Rob once, wasn't you, Wilhelmina?"

"Why—it was just a high school crush. Lots of girls were crazy about Rob Ramsey." Wilhelmina reached for another chocolate, her eyes blank.

The old man snorted. "Don't kid me. You was busted all to pieces when he took some other gal to the prom that time."

Wilhelmina blinked. "Who told you that?"

"Your pa. He used to come here and set and talk by the hour 'bout you." The old man took out a soiled handkerchief and blew his nose. After stuffing it back into his pocket, he said, "You gave Rob that black ring I found, didn't you?"

"Dad told you that too?" Wilhelmina's face remained impassive, but it took some effort. She was surprised how much the small betrayal hurt. Yet, how could she blame her father? With a chronically ill wife, he likely had no one in whom to confide except Olaf. "That was a long time ago," she said softly.

The old man rubbed the stubble on his chin, shut one eye. "Only five, ten years. That ain't long."

"It was twenty-four years ago, Olaf. I was seventeen at the time." Wilhelmina smiled ruefully. "And a pretty dumb seventeen at that."

"Not dumb. No, you was never dumb, Wilhelmina." The old man leaned forward. "Neither your pa nor me could ever figure what you seen in that Rob Ramsey. Why, he wasn't worth your little finger, girl!" Olaf declared loudly.

Wilhelmina chuckled. "You and Dad weren't prejudiced, by any chance?"

"Nope." The old man leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "You never forgot him, did you, Wilhelmina?"

"Dad? Of course not!"

"No. I mean Rob Ramsey. You never forgot him. And when he came back here to Northfield to live, you was awful happy at first, even if'n he did have a wife, weren't you, Willie?"

"Don't call me that," Wilhelmina said, her voice rose.

"That's what Rob called you, ain't it?" The old man smiled the sly, self-satisfied smile of superior knowledge.

"No—yes. I don't know. I've always hated it. It's a silly name."

"Especially for a girl," Olaf said. Then gently, "That was the trouble, wasn't it? Rob never thought of you as a girl. You was always 'Willie' to him. And when he come back after all them years, he acted the same, slappin' you on the back, treatin' you like you was a man. It 'bout tore your heart out, ain't that right, Wilhelmina?"

"Olaf, no, I—" Something seemed to have happened to her throat. The words wouldn't come out.

"It don't do no good to lie to

me, girl. The only person Rob Ramsey had eyes for was that skinny little wife of his. And after all them years of waitin', you just couldn't take it no more, ain't that right?"

"No, Olaf, no—"

The old man broke in, "That's why he was murdered, ain't it?"

Wilhelmina stared at the old man, wide-eyed. Then she got hold of herself and said calmly, "What's the matter with you? Rob's death was accidental. He was camped out by the dump, waiting to take pictures of the bears, when one attacked him."

The old man shook his head. "Bears don't attack people less'n they have a mighty good reason. You and me know that, don't we, Wilhelmina?"

"What are you talking about?" Wilhelmina said, her voice sharp.

"I'm talkin' about these." The old man reached over and picked up several pieces of foil from the table and held them out flat in his palm for Wilhelmina to see. "I found a bunch of these inside the bear—besides the ring, I mean."

Her face colorless, Wilhelmina looked first at the candy wrappings, then at the old man.

"Yep," he continued. "When I seen these little bits of tinfoil, I knowed they come from them little chocolate candies you like."

Wilhelmina didn't answer. There was a dazed, unbelieving look in her eyes.

The old man continued: "Somebody musta give them candies to Rob before he bedded down that night, knowin' full well that this time of year before dennin', bears can't get enough to eat. They're huntin' to fill their bellies all the time. And they're lazy like the rest of us. They'll sniff out the nearest tidbit, 'specially if'n it's sweet, and tear apart whatever is 'tween them and it, no matter if it's human or not. Ain't that right, Wilhelmina?"

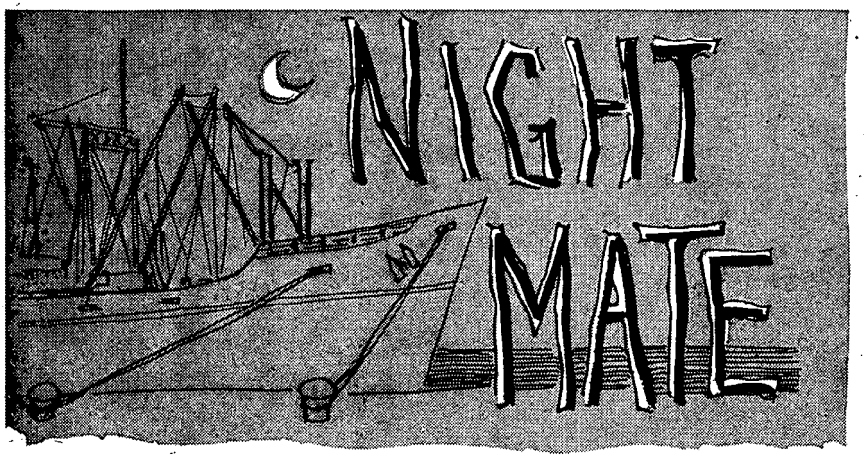
"No—" Wilhelmina choked. "That's crazy, Olaf!"

"No, it ain't crazy. It makes a lotta sense!" The old man spoke with passion. "After all you been through on account of that no-good Rob Ramsey, he deserved what he got!"

"Olaf—you—"

"It's no use talkin', Wilhelmina. I done it, just like I told you. And I ain't one bit sorry, neither." The old man reached out and patted Wilhelmina's arm. "Now run on home like a good girl, and tell your pa to come over. I want to talk to him."

Starting a new family tradition may be the only way out—but not for long.



The two homicide detectives regarded the report as another in the pattern of recent apartment robberies and murders, but the scene of the crime wasn't quite what they had expected to find. The two rooms and the kitchen hadn't been ransacked, nor had anything been taken or disturbed, and the only sign of a felony was the gray-haired man of fifty or so slumped in the chair before the silent television console.

While awaiting the arrival of the medical examiner and the lab crew, the two detectives compared notes with the two patrol-car officers who had been first to reach the building, and then questioned the superintendent.

"Mrs. Dobie called me on the intercom around nine o'clock and said she'd heard what sounded like a gun going off in the next apartment, 3K. I went up right away. The door was shut, and I couldn't hear no one inside, y'know. So I rang the bell. I got no answer, so I rang again, and then I heard him moaning, just like that."

The superintendent, a short, stubby man in a checkered work shirt, made a moaning sound. "So I rushed back to my apartment

for my duplicate keys and let myself in. I found Mr. Powers lying just like he is now. I went and looked at him and saw that hole in his forehead. I thought he'd shot himself, y'know, but I couldn't see a gun anywheres. He moaned again, so I figured I'd better get an ambulance quick, and the police too. So I dialed 911 on his phone. Then I went back and asked him who did it. Y'know, in case he kicked off before you got here. He looked up at me kinda funny, and shook his head, like he didn't want to tell me. Then he

by Patrick O'Keeffe

said—I could hardly hear his voice—he said, 'Maybe he'll change his mind and try again.' That's all he said. Then he kicked off, just like that."

The long-haired detective said, "You told the police officer that Mr. Powers worked as a night mate. What kind of a job is that?"

"It's aboard a ship. As I got it once from Mr. Powers, the law calls for a licensed mate to be on a ship all the time she's in port and not laid up. The regular mates get their nights off, y'know. So the steamship line hires men in their place for night watches, like Mr. Powers. He was retired from the sea with bad health. Took night-mate work to go with a bit of a disability pension, y'know."

"He lived here alone?" queried the other detective, with shorter hair but shaggy sideburns.

"That's right. Never been married. He told me last year his brother died out in California somewhere, and he'd got no other family."

"Any close friends?"

"He never mentioned none."

"Visitors?"

"Maybe now and then some guy who looked like he might be off a ship. I remember him going out the front door once with a guy and saying they'd stop off for coffee somewheres on the way to the ship. They got a taxi. Mr. Powers always took taxis at night going to a ship and coming back early in the morning. Y'know, afraid of getting mugged."

"A girlfriend?"

"I never saw one. The only women I've seen going into his apartment is Mrs. Dobie and a few other women tenants. They play bridge and take turns using each other's apartments."

"Any reports of strangers in the building this evening?"

The superintendent wagged his head: "I was in my apartment from around eight o'clock on, so I didn't see any myself. I didn't come out till Mrs. Dobie called me. Whoever the guy was, he sure picked the right time if he didn't want to be seen coming or going. Tenants with dogs to walk are generally in before nine o'clock, and hardly anyone goes out at night, unless they have to, y'know."

"Would you have any notion what Mr. Powers meant when he said, 'Maybe he'll change his mind and try again'?"

"Gee!" the superintendent said, looking mystified. "You got me there."

The detectives then went into the next apartment and questioned Mrs. Dobie. She was a small, forty-year-old widow, garrulous,

henna-haired, and already arthritic.

"It's dreadful," she said, in a shrill, trembling voice. "I was lying on the couch watching my TV program, and all of a sudden I heard what sounded like a gun in Mr. Powers' apartment. I wasn't sure. I had the TV on loud. I'm a little deaf, too. I wondered if I ought to do something. There's been all that in the papers about people not doing anything at such times. I thought how terrible it would be if a burglar had shot poor Mr. Powers, like what's been happening, and I didn't do anything about it. I'd never forgive myself. He's such a nice man, and simply a marvelous bridge player. Why, the last time he was my partner—"

"What did you do after hearing the shot?" Longhair asked patiently.

"Why, I called the super on the intercom. He said he'd come up right away. I stood watching for him with my door open a little, but I kept the chain on. I wasn't taking any chances, with all the terrible things happening these days. Why, only last week I read about a woman who—"

"Did you hear anyone else in the apartment with Mr. Powers before you heard the gunshot?"

"Not a thing. Besides, they'd have to be talking pretty loud for me to hear them above the TV."

"During your card games, or at any other time, did you hear Mr. Powers speak of anyone who might want to harm him, or anyone who might have threatened him?"

"Why, no." Mrs. Dobie looked as if she were profoundly shocked by the very idea. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to harm poor Mr. Powers. He was such a friendly man. Never said a single thing against anyone. He never talked much about his private life, or his health, which we all knew wasn't so good. Nor even about his work on the boats, though sometimes he'd tell us about something funny that maybe had happened on the boat the night before."

"Did he ever mention someone he knew who might change his mind about something or other and try again?"

Mrs. Dobie shook her head slowly while searching her memory. "Never a one that I can think of."

The two detectives returned to the slain man's apartment. "If Powers was alluding to his killer when he said he might change his mind," Longhair commented, "then obviously he was a male. At least we know that much."

"And in not wanting to name him," the other detective ob-

served, "he couldn't have been sticking to gangland code, since he appears not to have had any such connections."

"So all we have to do is find someone who Powers thought might change his mind and try again, and wanted to protect. It's as simple as all that."

"And with the odds-on that he's connected with ships or the sea." The detective sighed gloomily. "How many thousands of ships pass in and out of New York City's hundreds of miles of waterfront yearly?"

Powers had first made the acquaintance of the man the detectives sought on a sweltering summer evening a few weeks before. The big Forth Line freighter had docked early that morning from a voyage to Mediterranean ports, had paid off in the afternoon, and was virtually deserted except for the night mate and the night engineer, along with the few deck and engine-room hands needed to assist them.

Making a round of the freighter to familiarize himself with her layout in case of emergency, such as fire, Powers stopped outside the open door of a cabin in the deck-officers' quarters marked "Cadets." Inside, a tall young man was stuffing oilskins and seaboots into a canvas seabag; a packed suitcase lay open to one side.

"Quitting the ship?" Powers inquired pleasantly.

The cadet looked around at the night mate querulously, wiping his forehead on his khaki shirt sleeve. "Going ashore to sit for my license."

Powers beamed. "I wish you lots of luck."

The cadet grunted. "I'll need a deckload of it."

Powers regarded him curiously. The cadet was lanky and sallow-faced, with gray-green eyes set so deep as to give the impression of looking out from behind a peephole. "You don't sound very confident."

The cadet shrugged. Jamming a pair of cotton work gloves into the seabag, he growled, "I failed on my first try. I was told to go back to sea for a while and put in more study on the job. A fat lot of good it did me aboard this hooker!"

Powers nodded sympathetically. "Plenty of work and little time for study, I'll bet."

"You can keep on saying that. Also, I got little help from the mates here. Too busy with their hobbies—stereo, painting—what they think is painting. The third mate fools around with model trains. The junior cadet is a guitar

maniac, always banging away on it. He's off ashore to a rock-and-roll joint, so the cabin is bearable for the time being."

Scowling, the cadet glanced around at the emptied drawers and locker, and then drew the strings of the seabag tight and knotted them. He took a pack of cigarettes and a box of safety matches from his breast pocket and perched on the edge of the lower bunk. "I'm weak on navigation," he said wearily. "I get mad when I get stuck on a problem and want to give up the whole thing. If it weren't for my father, I'd never have gone within miles of a ship."

Powers moved into the cabin and sat astride a canvas-seated stool, in the fringe of the breeze from the fan. "Your father is a seafaring man?"

The cadet exhaled smoke from his nostrils. "He was commodore of the Seely Line before he retired a couple of years ago."

Powers was strangely silent for a moment or two. "You mean Captain Stoner?"

The cadet nodded. "Stoner's my name—Chris. Maybe you knew my father."

"I heard of him when I was out on the West Coast. I never sailed with him, though." Powers paused. "Don't you like the idea of following in his footsteps?"

"Not one bit. I wanted to go in for electronics engineering. I've fooled around with the stuff from the time I was a kid. But there's always been a captain in the family from way back, a kind of family tradition. Bill, my elder brother, was the one cut out best for keeping it up. He'd always wanted to go to sea. He was murdered on his last ship. So it fell to me to keep up the tradition."

"Your brother was *murdered*?" Powers echoed, as if questioning the word.

"That's what it amounted to. My brother was a cadet, too. One morning the chief mate told him to go down one of the holds and work with the sailors cleaning it. My brother told him he was sick. The chief mate reported it to the captain, but the captain told the chief mate to order him to turn to, and if he didn't, he'd log him for disobeying an order and give him a bad report when he went up for his license. Bill fell off the ladder to the bottom of the hold and was killed."

"I'd hardly call that murder," Powers said reproachfully.

"What else would you call it?" the cadet demanded, his eyes flashing in their deep sockets. "Sure, Cap'n Sands logged it as an accident, but a couple of sailors

went to my father with the truth when he came in from sea. My father went to the Coast Guard, but the Coast Guard said they'd investigated the accident and saw no reason for reopening the inquiry."

The cadet turned bitter. "Anyway, the result was that my father went to work on me to keep up the family tradition. I was only twelve when Bill was murdered, but as soon as I was old enough, my father got me indentured to this line as a cadet. My father was sick with disappointment when I flunked my first exam for a third mate's license. I would have quit right then, but my father wouldn't hear of it." The cadet's eyes suddenly burned with hatred. "I've never run across Captain Sands, but if I don't make it this second time, he'd better not be around."

Powers waited until a long deafening screech from a passing towboat had died out beyond the open portholes and then asked, "Where are you taking the exam?"

"Right here in New York. I'm checking into a hotel tomorrow. I mean to put in a week or two at navigation classes first, before I sit for a license."

Powers rose from the stool, and taking a pencil from his shirt pocket, he turned to the desk and scribbled on a scrap of paper, then handed it to the cadet. "That's my name and address, and phone number, Chris. Any time you need help with navigation problems, I'll be glad to give you a hand. Give me a ring first and find out if I'm on the four-to-midnight watch or the midnight-to-eight." Powers smiled. "I was considered a bit of a whiz at navigation when I was sailing."

The cadet read the slip without enthusiasm, then glanced up curiously at the heavyset night mate with his round, rugged face and friendly eyes. "If you were so good, how come you ended up like this?"

"Poor health, Chris. High blood pressure, ulcers. I came back East and went into small craft for a while, such as skippering chartered fishing boats taking anglers down the coast. That fizzled out when the boat sank after a collision. So I swallowed the anchor altogether."

Almost four weeks went by with no ring from young Stoner on Powers' telephone. That was enough time for the cadet to have attended classes and taken the examination for his Coast Guard license. Wondering how Chris had fared, but not knowing what hotel he had checked into, Powers telephoned the marine superintendent of the Forth Line and inquired

hopefully but fruitlessly about him.

"I'm waiting to hear from him myself, Powers. He hasn't been told the result of the exam yet."

Next evening Powers' telephone rang, but when he answered it, the only response was a click as the party calling hung up. Seemingly, someone had dialed the wrong number and suddenly realized it at the moment of connection, or else a burglar was checking out the apartment in advance.

About half an hour later, Powers' apartment bell was rung by someone at the street entrance to the West Side building. Powers rose from the chair facing the television console and answered on the intercom.

"It's Chris Stoner," the voice from below announced.

Powers pressed the button to release the street-door lock, and waited with his apartment door open to greet the cadet. As young Stoner stepped from the elevator, his face was taut, a wild kind of look in his deep-set eyes.

"Something wrong, Chris?" Powers asked, as the cadet came toward him.

Young Stoner brushed past him into the apartment without answering. Concerned, Powers closed the door and went back to his chair and switched off the television set. He gestured toward another chair. "What's happened, Chris?"

The cadet remained standing. It had been showering on and off during the evening, and he was wearing a rain hat and a light raincoat, with one hand thrust into a pocket.

"Now and then," the cadet said grimly, "I run across someone who knows my father, as might be expected, like I did you. The day after I went ashore to prepare for my exam, I met a man who knows my father and who also sailed with my brother. A guy named Falker. He's now second mate of a tanker. Maybe you remember him."

"The name sounds familiar."

"It ought to. He was one of the two sailors who went to my father with the truth about my brother."

"Now I remember," Powers said quietly.

"I happened to mention you, as another West Coast man I'd run into lately. He told me all about you."

"Chris," Powers said, after a heavy silence, "I'd have told you myself that first night we met, but I was afraid of stirring you up when I saw how you felt about your brother. I wanted to help you if I could."

Young Stoner's eyes blazed.

"You were afraid of letting me get to know you were the chief mate of my brother's ship and it was you who murdered him."

"Listen to me, Chris. I don't know what Falker told you, but the truth is that your brother wasn't sick. He was shamming. It wasn't the first time, and I was determined not to let him get away with it again. He didn't like working down the hold. Captain Sands asked me for my opinion on his supposed sickness, and I gave it to him."

"He wasn't shamming. Falker and the other sailor swore that my brother had had dizzy spells that morning."

"Your brother didn't mention them to me or to the captain. None of the rest of the crew corroborated them with the Coast Guard after your father took up the matter. The captain and I had good reason to suspect that Falker and his pal were lying and trying to work off a grudge against us for confiscating cigarettes and other stuff they'd intended smuggling ashore in foreign ports. Captain Sands fired the pair of them at the end of the voyage."

"They weren't lying, Powers, and you know it. Falker told me that on the way along the deck to the hatch my brother told him he'd reported the dizzy spells to you, but you kept it from Captain Sands. It was you who murdered Bill, and you let Captain Sands take the blame. And you had the gall to offer to help me keep up the family tradition after fouling up our best hope of doing it."

"Chris, believe me, I meant it. I've always felt bad about your brother. Time and again I've wished I'd let him get away with shamming that morning. It's what really brought on my poor health, fretting about it. The night I met you—it seemed like a good chance to make up for it. If I can still help you, if I can do anything to—"

"I don't need your help or anybody else's any longer." A look of intense hatred and frustration distorted the cadet's face. "It's all finished. I got word today I'd failed again. The family tradition is ended, Bill murdered, four years of my life gone up in smoke. Now it's your turn."

The cadet withdrew his hand from the raincoat pocket, gripping a small revolver.

Powers started up in dismay. "For God's sake, Chris, don't be a fool. You've still got plenty of time to—"

The cadet fired. As the night mate dropped back into the chair, the cadet stared at him for a moment or two, then darted to the

door, satisfied his work was done.

Among the papers of the dead man, the two homicide detectives found the slip that had assigned him to his last ship. She was another Forth Line freighter, berthed at a Brooklyn Pier. Their inquiries on board elicited little beyond that Powers was one of the two night mates assigned to the ship and that he hadn't turned up for his midnight watch. The captain and the mates were startled and sorry to hear that he had been murdered, but they could tell scarcely anything about him, having known him only as another of the Forth Line's night mates.

"Try the marine superintendent," the captain suggested. "He'll know more about him than we do."

The marine superintendent was a stout, impatient-appearing man who received the two detectives with concern. "I was horrified when I read about Powers in my morning paper. Powers of all men! He was one of our most dependable night mates."

"Had you seen or spoken to him in the last day or two?"

"I rarely saw him or spoke to him. The port mate was the one who assigned him to a ship, and he only came to the office to pick up his pay from the cashier. Strangely, though, Powers telephoned me two days ago."

"What about?"

"To inquire about one of our cadets he'd met aboard ship a few weeks ago. The cadet came ashore to sit for his third mate's license, and Powers was anxious to know if he'd passed. He knew the cadet's father."

"Did the cadet pass?"

"I didn't know at the time, but next day the cadet phoned me that he'd failed and intended to quit going to sea. It was his second failure, and he sounded most distraught."

The two detectives exchanged glances. "Do you have his address?" Longhair asked.

The marine superintendent reached for the intercom switch. "Some hotel, I think. My secretary will know."

One who stalks game must be prepared for the kill.

It had rained earlier in the day. Dark gray clouds filled the sky and seemed to press ominously close to the ground. Gusts of chill northern wind chased dead leaves across the damp grass. Without exception, the wire frames that had been set up to hold floral wreaths at some grave sites had been blown over, spilling dying flowers and brightly colored satin and nylon ribbon onto the wet grass or muddy, raw earth.

Wilson Block stood with the collar of his dark topcoat turned up and the brim of his black hat turned down against the cold. The weather was terrible, but even on sunny days cemeteries were cheerless places. During his 63 years, Wilson Block had buried over 40 wives, so he was an expert on cemeteries. Mount Calvary outside Buffalo, St. Louis' Oak Grove, San Diego's El Camino and a few dozen others had received business as a result of his activities.

There had been a time when almost every grave had an elaborate headstone or piece of statuary sitting atop it. Now that was seldom permitted except in the older sections. One was allowed to mark a loved one's location in the new areas, of course, but the stones usually had to be small and flush with the ground. Grass-cutting equipment could then be driven directly over the graves, thereby reducing maintenance costs to the minimum. It was all very unfeeling, and Wilson Block was re-

pelled by it. Although he was a multiple murderer, he was not insensitive.

He held a silver-mounted, ebony walking stick in one gloved hand. He had owned it for over 30 years. There was a time when he had strolled jauntily along the boardwalk at Atlantic City, spinning the stick like a baton. When he had gone to New York City to visit his broker he had liked to stride purposely through the financial district, gripping the head tightly and reaching out to tap the sidewalk every 15 or 20 feet. Now, however, the stick had become less of an ornament and more of a necessity. He would never walk anywhere unless he had the stick to lean upon and furnish support.

The woman was standing beside a fresh mound in the next section. She was about 40, five-foot-two and weighing a rounded and matronly 130 pounds. Her long, dark hair had a streak of gray. Because of the ban against large markers, Wilson Block had a clear view of the woman despite the 50 yards that separated them.

This was her fourth visit to the grave site in a week. She always came alone and never seemed to know what to do with herself. Sometimes she'd stand, shifting her weight from one foot to the other; sometimes she knelt and pulled out the weeds that were taking root.

After seeing her for the second time, Block had waited until she left, then approached the grave. There was no marker yet, but he was sure she had lost a husband. The woman's nervous activity was the tip-off. He had noticed that women stand quietly beside children's and friends' graves, but seem driven to movement by a dead spouse. Perhaps it was because they were merely spectators of the lives of children and friends, while the loss of a husband left a giant void in their lives that had to be filled.

Block had no way of knowing how accurate his theory was, but its application had made him extremely wealthy. It was a tool that worked for him and that was the only test that mattered.

When he had committed his first murders 40-odd years before, he had found his victims through lonely-hearts advertisements in newspapers and magazines. Soon, however, this became both time-consuming and dangerous. Many amateur fortune hunters and inept murderers began to compete with him for the more promising victims. This was hardly satisfactory, so he was forced to look for something different.

He found his next method of selection by chance. He had moved to a new city—immediately after a funeral—and had wanted to establish himself as a young widower as quickly as he could. There was a church a few blocks from the home he had rented, so he began attending services. Within a month he had been introduced to half a dozen widows and twice that many spinsters. All he had to do was choose.

Churches made an excellent hunting ground; nevertheless, they still fell short of being perfect. For one thing, the women he met were seldom wealthy or even comfortably well-off. The spinsters were invariably almost destitute; and the widows, even those who had collected modest insurance

claims, as often as not had spent the money before Block got to them.

Despite the weakness of churches, Block might have continued to use them if it hadn't been for the invention of the computer. Before computers, it had been a simple matter to give himself a new name and insure his wives, carefully selecting a different insurance company each time; but as soon as electronic data-processing became widespread, the companies began to pool their claims information and investigate beneficiaries more carefully. It was no longer possible to change his identity every time he moved, and it was no longer safe to collect the insurance of his wives. If he did either, the new electronic marvel would quickly single him out for human attention.

He could no longer marry a woman for her own insurance money, so he had to do it for her former husband's. What better place to find a fresh widow than a cemetery? he figured, and that's where he began to stalk them. If a woman had an insurance policy of her own, and most of them did, he always had her sign it over to a charity or close relative, thereby alleviating the possibility of suspicion later. He took whatever real estate, stocks or cash there might be and considered the loss of the woman's insurance money as a necessary operating expense.

The woman at the grave in the other section straightened her shoulders and seemed to take a firmer grip on her handbag. Wilson Block had wondered how long she was going to stand there. He was chilled to the bone. He turned and started down the walk toward her at the same moment she left the grave and began to walk in his direction. He timed it so that they reached the intersection at the same time and turned toward the entrance together.

The woman seemed a bit startled to find him walking beside her. She glanced up at his face and then quickly away.

"You do not have to be frightened," Block said. He had a very deep and mellow voice that women had always found comforting. "I have been visiting my wife."

The woman nodded without saying anything, but she made no effort to increase her pace. Then, as they reached the entrance, she blurted, "My husband is buried here," and hurried away.

Wilson Block watched her go. As first contacts went, that had been about average. What was

unusual, however, was the fact that he had found her very attractive. No woman had stirred him quite so much since he was in his twenties. Another positive factor had been the woman's clothing. Her coat, shoes and handbag had been new and very expensive, but they hadn't been so new that they could have been purchased with sudden, recent insurance wealth. She had been used to comfortable living even before her husband died.

The following day Wilson Block exchanged a few more words with the woman, including their names. She was Mrs. Elizabeth Ayer and her husband had been dead a month. So far, so good.

Within a week, Block was riding back to the city in her car instead of using a bus or taxi. He had a perfectly fine sedan of his own, but he never used it at times like this unless his target didn't have transportation.

He invited her to lunch one day and she accepted. From then on, his progress was swift. Block had always been able to fascinate women. He played whatever role they seemed to need. He prided himself that all of his wives had died happy. Soon there was no more "Mr. Block" and "Mrs. Ayer." It became Will and Betty.

He found her to be a thoroughly charming woman. Unlike all of his previous conquests, she didn't exert a silent pressure to be entertained, and she didn't whine about her misfortune, or try to play upon his sympathy. She held up her end of every conversation with ease, and seemed to make every effort to have him feel comfortable.

The day Wilson Block took her hand in his and said, "Betty, I love you and want you to marry me," he meant every word. He always did. Acting is believing.

Neither of them had relatives or friends, and they had only a few acquaintances. There was no need to delay the wedding for the sake of appearances. Betty never even suggested it. Wilson had already filled the void left by her dead husband. He was sure she saw marriage as the next logical step.

Wilson also told her he'd like to move to another town. This way, as he explained it, they could leave the past behind them, and their honeymoon cottage would also be their new home.

"A wife's place is wherever her husband wants to be," she answered and kissed him.

More from habit than design, Block checked to see if the new community had a medical examiner. He found that it did. Had he been planning an immediate mur-

der, that would have been a problem. He far preferred cities and towns with elected and untrained coroners. A coroner will often diagnose brucine or strychnine poisoning as a heart attack, but no trained medical examiner would. For a medical examiner, Block had always had to arrange carefully staged accidents, something he found extremely bothersome.

Happily, for once in his life he wanted a wife more than a funeral. Betty was everything his other wives had never been, and he suddenly realized she was everything he needed. He was 63. He had all the money he would ever need. It was about time he retired, and he couldn't pick a better time. Betty hung onto his every word, catered to his every whim. He'd never had it so good.

He found himself enjoying domestic life. If his first marriage had been half as satisfying, he might never have hastened its end. Betty had absolutely no faults. She cooked to rival a *cordon bleu* chef. She kept a spotless house, but never nagged him for his sloppy ways, and she baked well enough and often enough to keep a constant stream of neighborhood children at the rear door.

The only household duties she reserved for him were the ones that traditionally fell to the male: he fixed leaky faucets, replaced blown fuses, and carried out the garbage at night.

One evening three months after they moved into their new home, he picked up the bag of kitchen scraps and took it outside. He carefully descended the concrete rear steps, but placed his foot on a child's roller skate that had been left on the walk. His leg flew out from under him, the bag of trash soared high, his arms went wide and he toppled backward. His startled cry ended abruptly when his head struck the edge of a concrete step with a sickening thump.

Betty stood at Wilson's grave and felt very unhappy. She hated cemeteries. During her 41 years she had buried over 15 husbands, so she was an expert on cemeteries—but she didn't like them.

Crimes of violence have variously been described—probably correctly—as "chaos of thought and passion," and "fever in the mind."

The G-String Corpse

by Charles Boeckman

Detective Mercer Basous of the New Orleans police department left his car at the curb of a narrow street in the Vieux Carré. He hurried along close to the weathered brick walls of the ancient buildings, seeking shelter from the rain that drizzled down on the glistening cobblestones; a most gloomy morning to investigate a possible homicide.

He arrived at his destination, The Gables, one of the many excellent restaurants in the French Quarter. It was a favorite of Basous'. If one must look into an act of violence on such a cold, gray morning, he philosophized, at least he was able to do so among pleasant surroundings.

The restaurant was not yet open for business, so he entered a courtyard and knocked on a side door. It was opened by Anthony Pizano, owner of The Gables, a good friend of the homicide detective.

"Basous!" exclaimed Pizano. "I'm really glad to see you." He appeared nervous and disturbed.

"Good to see you, Anthony," Basous greeted, carefully wiping his shoes on a mat. Then he said, "What a miserable day!"

This side door opened into the kitchen. The stoves and ovens were cold now. Cooking utensils hung silently from racks over the tables. Dishes were stacked. It was quiet and deserted, but in a few hours the room would be teeming with cooks and waiters scurrying around to cope with the noon business.

Basous' long, homely face softened with the memory of the many excellent meals he had enjoyed from this kitchen, but he forced himself to stop reminiscing and attend to business. "Now what is this about a possible murder, my good friend?"

Pizano took an umbrella from a rack and led the way back out through the courtyard to the curb. "I was taking some trash out this morning, and when I lifted the lid on the garbage can, I saw this . . ." He raised the lid.

Basous looked into the can. He murmured an exclamation in his mother tongue, Acadian French, reached into the can and pulled out a woman's robe. It was covered with blood.

"Do you have any idea who this robe could belong to?"

"Yes. Shelly Lyons."

"Shelly Lyons? 'Miss Nudity'? The stripper who works at the Godfather Club on Bourbon Street?"

"Yes. She lives in an apartment in this building, above the restaurant. The tenants in the building use the garbage cans out here. Since she's the only woman living in the building, it must belong to her." Then he added, "After I saw the robe in the garbage this morning I went upstairs and knocked on her door. There was no answer. I became alarmed and phoned you."

"Well, that was the right thing to do, my friend. Let's try her door again. Maybe she's a sound sleeper."

They crossed the courtyard to a winding stairway that reached the second floor where the apartments were located. In the hallway, Pizano indicated the residence of Miss Lyons.

Basous hammered on the door, but got no reply. "You are the landlord of this building, are you not, Anthony?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have a passkey to these apartments."

"Yes, but I didn't want to use it without having the police present. A landlord can get into a lot of trouble these days over things like that."

He proceeded to unlock the door and they entered the apartment. The livingroom was tastefully furnished. It contained, in addition to other furnishings, a thick white carpet, an expensive console television and some sophisticated record and tape-playing equipment.

"Miss Lyons must earn a good living," Basous observed. Then his eyes fell on a large nude painting of Shelly Lyons. It was a misty, ethereal impression, executed with delicacy and sensitivity. "What an incredibly beautiful woman," Basous murmured.

Her features were flawless. Her hair was a soft, pale cloud. Her deep-blue eyes were luminescent, her skin so delicate as to be almost translucent. Her moist lips were parted. Basous almost expected her to whisper something intimate to him, so convincing was the effect.

"Yes. She has a lot of class for an exotic dancer. Smart, too." Pizano waved his hand toward a bookcase filled with books on a wide range of subjects, from biographies to the arts.

"Who did the painting?"

"Nathanial Dowling. He's one of the tenants in this building. Has a small shop on Royal Street."

"Yes, I know the place."

Basous gazed at the painting for another moment with the worshipful expression of a homely man gazing on an unattainably beautiful woman. Then he resumed his professional manner. "Let's see the rest of the apartment."

When they entered the bedroom, Basous exclaimed, *"Mon Dieu!"* and Pizano, a devoutly religious man, gasped and crossed himself. Blood was splattered over the floor and furniture, makeup bottles had been swept from the vanity to the floor where many had smashed, bedclothes were half-pulled from the bed, a bedside table and lamp were overturned.

They searched the rest of the apartment, but found no trace of Miss Lyons.

Using his handkerchief to pick up the phone, Basous got his partner, Lieutenant Roy D'Aquin, on the line and requested that the detective meet him here, bringing along a man from the police laboratory.

Then Basous asked Pizano, "Now, who are the other tenants in this building?"

"There are two other apartments. One is occupied by a traveling drug salesman, Harold Black. He's only here on weekends. The other tenant is the artist, Nathanial Dowling."

"Let's go see if Mr. Dowling heard anything last night."

They knocked on the artist's door, but got no reply.

"Well," said Pizano, "he sometimes spends the night in his shop. Has a cot or something in the back room. Miss Lyons might have been the only person in the building last night."

Basous thought about the bloodstains and said, "Not the only person. Well, we might as well go downstairs and wait for D'Aquin."

Down in the restaurant kitchen, Pizano made a pot of Louisiana coffee, strong and black with chicory, and served it to Basous with a platter of French pastries.

Basous' long, horselike face reflected an expression of pure ecstacy as he tasted a croissant. "Anthony, you have absolutely the best pastry cook in the city. Now then, let me ask you this: who would know Miss Lyons intimately—could give us information about her personal life?"

"Hmm. Well, I suppose you could begin with her employer, Isaac Iwanski, who owns the Godfather Club. He's been something of a parent to her since she came to the city five years ago and began dancing at his club."

"Bien!" said Basous. "Now if I could have just one more *gâteau à l'abricot* . . ."

D'Aquin arrived presently with the laboratory man. Basous set the man to work on the bloodstains in Miss Lyons' apartment, instructing him to search thoroughly for fingerprints. Then the two detectives left in Basous' car.

"First," he said, "I want to pay Nathanial Dowling a visit. He lives in the same building and might have heard something last night." Basous drove carefully through the narrow, wet streets of the old city, his windshield wipers snapping busily at the steady downpour.

Nathanial Dowling, a pale, slender man in his mid-thirties, had an ascetic face with aquiline features and cold, blue eyes. He was a type still found in some regions of the South, the last of a long, decaying line of aristocrats dating back to the plantation era. His ancestors had owned slaves and fought in the War between the States. Now Dowling, a bachelor, stocked his antique shop with the last of the family heirlooms stripped from the family's decaying mansion. He also dabbled in art. His shop was a dusty junk heap cluttered with bric-a-brac. Interspersed among the antiques were his oil paintings.

Yes, he said, he was acquainted with Miss Lyons on a professional basis. Six months ago, he'd needed

a model. She had posed and he'd given her the painting as payment since he couldn't afford a model's fee. No, he was sorry, he couldn't give them any information about unusual sounds that might have come from her apartment last night, since he spent the night here. He showed them the cot in a corner of a back room which served as his painting studio. He was sorry to hear she was missing and hoped she would turn up not seriously injured. He said it without a great deal of concern.

"A haughty man, that one," D'Aquin muttered as they drove away. "He made me feel like a tradesman who should come in the back door."

"I don't think he's ever quite forgiven his *grand-père* for losing the Civil War," said Basous. "Let's see if Isaac Iwanski can tell us something about the beautiful Shelly Lyons."

The Godfather was one of those small, bare-skin joints on Bourbon Street that looked tired and seedy by daylight but brightened up at night with flashy neon, perspiring go-go dancers and a small but loud band.

The two detectives found the proprietor, Isaac Iwanski, in his office, a cluttered room not much larger than a closet. Iwanski was a spidery little man with a shiny bald head. He wore suspenders. When informed that his star performer was missing under circumstances that indicated foul play, he went all to pieces. "My God!" he cried. He paced around the tiny office in a state of agitation. Then he collapsed in a chair, weeping openly. "I loved that little girl like she was my own daughter. This is terrible."

"We don't know for certain what has happened to her, Mr. Iwanski," D'Aquin said. "She may be quite all right."

"Oh, no!" Iwanski cried, gazing at them with tearful, grief-stricken eyes. "She's been killed. I'm not surprised. She's been expecting it. For months that poor girl has lived in terror. It's that rotten husband of hers. He said he'd kill her. Well, now he's done it."

"She was married?" Basous asked with surprise.

"Yes. Separated for the last year, though. But he wouldn't leave her alone. Kept threatening her, hounding her. I told her it was a mistake when she married that no-goodnik. 'Papa Isaac,' she told me (she always called me 'Papa Isaac,'), 'I'm in love.' Then she told me who it was—Grove Niblo. 'Oh my poor child,' I said to her, 'you've picked yourself a life of trouble.' But she wouldn't listen. She was a woman in love."

"Grove Niblo," Basous repeated, again surprised.

"Sure. You're a policeman. You know him—a syndicate hoodlum, a man deep in organized crime. What a tragedy she should ever get mixed up with that man. He was crazy-jealous all the time. Never gave her any peace. Made her stop dancing. Mistreated her constantly. A year ago, she left him, but he swore to get her back. He vowed he'd never let another man have her alive. What a pity she didn't meet young James Turner first."

"James Turner?"

"Yes, the nice young medical student she's been dating the past two months. Those kids want to get married but that lousy gangster, Grove Niblo, won't give her a divorce. He made life hell for her. And now he's killed her." Iwanski took out a handkerchief and wiped his streaming eyes. "Five years ago she came to me, a country girl from the bayou. I taught her everything. Now she's gone . . ."

"Mr. Iwanski, what time did she leave the club last night?"

"It was a slow night. We didn't do a second show. She left early—about eleven-thirty."

The two detectives walked out of the small Bourbon Street nightclub. Basous paused on the sidewalk to look up at the giant posters of Shelly Lyons that adorned the front of the club. "A beautiful, beautiful woman," he sighed.

"Iwanski has good reason to cry," said D'Aquin. "Shelly Lyons was his drawing card. Without her, he's got just another hole in the wall."

They walked through the rain to the car. Inside, D'Aquin drummed his fingers against the steering wheel impatiently while Basous, in his slow, methodical manner, opened his notebook and carefully made his preliminary notes. When he had finished writing, Basous closed the notebook and said, "Now I suppose we should pay a visit to Mr. Grove Niblo and Mr. James Turner."

Niblo owned a restaurant in the French Quarter which was a legitimate front for his underworld operations. He was a swarthy, handsome man of mixed Italian, Spanish and French ancestry, a mixture not uncommon in this city. He wore tailor-made suits, imported shoes and diamond-studded cuff links. His demeanor was cool and guarded when the two detectives were ushered into his office. His air of cool self-containment dissolved when Basous informed him of the disappearance of Shelly Lyons.

Niblo became as agitated as

Iwanski, but in a different manner. His dark eyes flamed, his face flushed. Hard ridges appeared along his jaw. He stood up, trembling. "I want that girl found," he said in a hoarse whisper. "And she'd better be alive, or somebody's going to be very dead."

He walked to a window, staring out at the falling rain. One clenched fist slowly, rhythmically beat against the glass pane.

"When did you see Shelly Lyons last?" Basous asked.

"I don't know—a week ago, I guess," Niblo choked.

"We've been told you made some threats to her."

He turned, his eyes blazing with fury. "She was my wife. It's none of your lousy business what goes on between a man and his wife. I love that woman more than anything else in the world. I wanted her out of that lousy nightclub and back with me where she belonged. I told her something like this would happen, her standing up there naked with men looking at her—" He choked with rage.

"Where were you last night?" Basous asked.

Niblo glared at him. "If you're going to start asking questions, copper, I'm calling my lawyer."

Basous' voice suddenly became firm. "When you get him on the phone, tell him, since you're unwilling to cooperate, we're taking you in on suspicion of abduction and possible murder. You were overheard threatening Miss Lyons. That makes you suspect number one."

Niblo had picked up his phone. He hesitated, then replaced it. He made a superhuman effort to gain control of himself. Finally he said, "All right. I was here last night, working on my books. I've got the I.R.S. breathing down my neck."

"Anybody here with you?"

"Sure. One of my boys, Eddie Gavatos."

Basous gave him a long, measured look. The Acadian's face was solemn and stern. He said slowly, "All right; I'm not going to book you—yet. We'll see if Miss Lyons turns up."

Niblo's gaze locked with Basous'. "She'd better turn up," he whispered. "I'm not waiting for a bunch of fumbling cops to try and find her—"

Basous warned him, "You and your hoods keep out of this, Niblo. It's a police matter. Otherwise you'll have more than the I.R.S. on your back."

When the two police officers returned to their car, D'Aquin observed, "That's not much of an alibi. Those punks who work for Niblo will swear to anything he wants them to."

"I know. Well, let's pay a visit to the other man in her life, this medical student, James Turner."

From the college registrar, they obtained the address of James Turner. He lived off-campus in an apartment. His late-model sports car was parked in front.

"Not exactly the average, poor struggling student," D'Aquin muttered.

Turner was a clean-cut young man in his mid-twenties. He appeared shocked and grief-stricken when Basous explained the circumstances of Shelly Lyons' disappearance. Yes, he readily admitted that he and Miss Lyons had a serious romance going. They planned to get married if she could get a divorce. He'd had lunch with her yesterday. No, he had not seen her last night. He was here all night, cramming for an important exam. No, he admitted, there was no way he could prove that, since he lived alone.

D'Aquin asked some questions about his background. Turner explained he was from a wealthy family in the East, which explained his expensive car and comfortable apartment. Then, as the detectives were leaving, Turner tearfully begged them to notify him the minute they found out anything about his missing fiancée.

"D'you think he's telling the truth—about studying last night?" D'Aquin wondered when they were back in their car.

"No way of telling. He doesn't have any better alibi than Niblo. But there's no apparent motive—"

"Lover's quarrel, maybe?"

Basous shrugged. "That's a possibility."

They decided that the laboratory man should have completed his work by now, so they returned to Shelly Lyons' apartment to conduct a thorough search. An interesting item turned up in a desk drawer—a copy of an insurance policy in the amount of $100,000, payable to Isaac Iwanski in the event of the death of Shelly Lyons.

D'Aquin whistled softly. "Now we have another suspect with an excellent motive. Old man Iwanski might have been shedding crocodile tears. If Shelly married James Turner and stopped taking her clothes off at the Godfather, Iwanski might as well close his doors. So, he knocks her off and retires with a hundred grand."

"Another possibility," Basous agreed. "Although it's not entirely unusual for a club owner to insure a regular act that is valuable to his business."

There were no further developments of importance in the

Shelly Lyons' disappearance case that day; but early the following morning, Basous' chief telephoned him. "Your missing stripper was found in a shallow bayou a few miles from the city this morning. At least part of her. Her head and hands are still missing."

Basous replaced the telephone and stared up at the ceiling, remembering the painting of that beautiful woman. His long face was sad.

Basous dressed, had breakfast, and went to the morgue. The body still wore the stripper's working clothes: pasties and a fringed G-string. "Miss Nudity," the stage name of Shelly Lyons, was embroidered on the brief garment.

The woman's torso had been found by two fishermen. A search party was sent out to drag the bayou for the missing parts.

Shelly Lyons had perhaps the best-known body in New Orleans. Thousands of men had feasted their eyes on every micrometer of her bare skin but, ironically, now it was difficult to establish positive identity from the trunk alone. It had lain partially submerged in the stagnant bayou water for some twenty-four hours. Crayfish had done their work. The three men who knew her best, Isaac Iwanski, Grove Niblo and James Turner were brought down to view the body. Iwanski fainted, Niblo flew into a hysterical rage and James Turner wept—but none could swear positively that they were looking at the mortal remains of Shelly Lyons. Basous had the painter, Nathanial Dowling, examine the body, reasoning that an artist had a special knowledge of the human figure. Dowling observed that the general build and bone structure appeared to be the same, and in his opinion this was the torso of the woman he had painted.

The bloodstains on the robe found in the garbage can and in Miss Lyons' apartment matched the corpse's blood type—AB. Added to all that, there was the matter of the G-string costume which was positively identified as belonging to Miss Lyons. So the official decision was that—pending location of the head and hands—the torso found in the bayou was that of Shelly Lyons.

The laboratory reported finding no fingerprints of value in the apartment. The killer had either worn gloves or wiped everything carefully.

An autopsy was performed that afternoon. At its conclusion, the medical examiner handed Basous a bit of surprising news. "This woman was probably dead from a

drug overdose before she got chopped up. She was filled with enough heroin to finish off even a long-time user." Then he added, "There is no evidence of rape or sexual molestation."

That evening, Mercer Basous had dinner at The Gables. Basous had discovered from past experience that his mind worked best over a good meal. Since he was a bachelor and had few expenses, he could afford to indulge his chief pleasure in life: good French cooking.

He ate slowly, savoring an excellent meal that consisted of turtle soup, a main dish of baked eggplant stuffed with shrimp and crabmeat, and a dessert of crêpes suzette. The meal was concluded with *Café Brûlot Diabolique.* As he enjoyed the meal, his mind toyed with the many puzzling aspects of the case on which he was working. Finally, as he sipped the steaming *Café Brûlot,* he came to some conclusions. He paid his check, leaving a generous tip.

The next morning, he and his partner discussed the case. "Roy," he said, "I'm having serious doubts that the torso we found is that of the missing Lyons woman."

"But the blood type matches the stains in her room. And that G-string costume—"

"That's just it! The G-string. As we both know, it's not uncommon for a murderer to cut off his victim's hands and head so she can't be identified and traced to him. But in this case, why did the murderer go to all that trouble to hack her up and yet leave the identifying G-string on the torso?"

"Well . . . that *is* curious. Unless, of course, our murderer is a pathological sex nut who gets part of his kicks from dismembering his women victims. There are those kinds, you know."

"True enough. But then consider the medical examiner's autopsy report, that the woman died of an overdose of heroin. I've phoned Iwanski, Niblo and Turner, the three men who knew her best, and they all insist Shelly Lyons was not a user. Then there is the matter of the bloodstained robe put in the garbage can where it would surely be noticed, as if the killer wanted to advertise the murder."

"Hmm. Then who the devil did we find in the bayou wearing Shelly Lyons' G-string?"

"A very good question. It beats me. But something went on in that apartment that we haven't begun to guess at yet, and it very well may have involved a second woman."

"So what do we do now? If you

ask me, we've run into a dead end in this case. We have a body wearing Shelly Lyons' dancing costume, who may not be Shelly Lyons. We have three suspects, all with possible motives and not very substantial alibis, but no way of linking any one of them directly with the crime—"

"Correction, *mon ami,* we have four suspects."

"Four?"

"Yes, we've been neglecting another party who was intimately involved with Shelly Lyons—Nathanial Dowling."

"Nathanial Dowling? But all he did was paint her picture."

"*All* he did, you say? Do you think a man could spend days, perhaps weeks, painting that gorgeous woman in the nude without becoming intimately, passionately involved with his subject? I tell you something, Roy, when I looked at the painting of that beautiful creature, I said to myself, 'Basous, this is a crime of passion. Here is a woman who could drive men to desperate, even insane acts.' Yes, a crime of passion. It has to be! And Dowling is one of the men who could have got caught up in that passion."

"Okay, so let's have a closer look at the gentleman."

The two homicide detectives made a trip to Royal Street. They found Dowling's shop open, but in charge of a temporary clerk, a middle-aged woman who said her name was Mrs. Harriet Preston. She explained that Nathanial Dowling sometimes spent the day at the old family place some miles from the city. When he did, he called her to come in and mind his shop. She expected him back by late that afternoon.

They then toured the neighborhood, asking discreet questions about the habits of Nathanial Dowling. They learned from a parking lot attendant that Dowling always left his car—a blue, 1968 station wagon—at this lot around the corner from his shop when he was in town.

The two police officers spent the major part of the day with other duties, but late that afternoon Basous stopped by the police laboratory where he obtained a can of luminol and a quartz lamp. When it was dark, he and D'Aquin went around to the parking lot on Royal Street. Dowling had returned from his trip to the country. His station wagon was on the lot. Basous warned the attendant to keep his mouth shut about what they were doing. Then they carefully looked over the station wagon. A preliminary flashlight examination did not reveal any-

thing incriminating, but when Basous sprayed the rear floor area with luminol, then shone the quartz lamp with its strong ultraviolet radiation over the area, numerous spots luminesced, indicating dried blood that had been partially cleaned away.

With his pocketknife, Basous carefully trimmed off a small portion of the rubber mat which contained one of the blood spots. They then took the small mat fragment to the laboratory. Basous requested the forensic man to determine, if possible, whether the blood was of human or animal origin, and if human, the nature of the blood type.

Basous had his answer the following afternoon. The blood was of human origin. It was type AB.

"Let's go arrest the scoundrel," D'Aquin said.

They obtained a warrant and headed for Royal Street. "It's all very circumstantial," admitted Basous. "But now, if we arrest Dowling and impound his car, he may be shaken up enough to talk. His alibi about spending the night at his shop when Shelly Lyons disappeared is too weak to stand up. And with the bloodstains in his car . . ."

Dowling was not in his shop, however. Mrs. Preston explained that Mr. Dowling had again driven out to the old family plantation. From her, Basous obtained directions to the place.

Basous and D'Aquin drove over the Huey Long Bridge and headed south, into bayou country. The afternoon grew old and the warmth of the sun died. Gray shadows of dusk began staining the silent depths of the swamps around the road. The dead arms of swamp cypress trees were bone-white and draped in funereal cloaks of dripping Spanish moss. A wraithlike mist was rising above the dark, still waters.

Following the convolutions of the winding bayous, the road at last brought the two detectives to the oak-fringed entrance of the old Dowling plantation grounds.

They proceeded down the ancient, private roadway that had once known the shuffle of chained slaves, the rumble of ox-drawn sugarcane wagons and the marching of Civil War troops.

Before them loomed the haunted ruins of bygone splendor, all that was left of the Dowling plantation home. The final rays of the sun in a dying burst of color tinged the decaying columns, galleries and wings with a soft diffusion of rose tints. Great sweeping shadows stretched over the ruined gardens behind the structure while pockets of darkness multiplied in

the recesses of the galleries, doorways and windows.

Surely such a great old house where so many lives had been lived, love affairs consummated, fortunes made and lost, had to be haunted, thought Basous with a shiver. He could easily be convinced that ghostly forms of plantation belles in hooped shirts were moving behind the broken shutters to the music of the quadrille.

The architecture of the house was Louisiana Creole classic style with Greek Revival and Georgian influences, cast in the mold of its own time and location. The great Ionic columns, like the last desolate outposts of an army long since gone, stood in solemn dignity against the ravages of time and weather, but crumbling masonry, boarded-up windows, sagging galleries and broken shutters mutely admitted the decay of a century. Basous knew that inside the forty rooms the constant damp air must have coated the plastered walls with a tomblike green mold. The very air around the old house was heavy with melancholia.

A light burned in a single downstairs window.

Basous parked, and the two detectives walked through the weeds to the window. Basous looked through the dusty pane at an incredible tableau.

The beautiful Shelly Lyons sat before a massive dining room table. She was dressed in an evening gown of sorts, that left her shoulders bare. It looked like a dress from a bygone age that had been stored in an attic trunk. Her arms were securely tied behind her to the large chair upon which she sat. Her wide, terror-filled eyes followed the movements of the other occupant of the room—Nathanial Dowling.

Dowling, attired in a dinner jacket, held a glass of wine in his right hand. He raised it in a toast. Basous heard his voice faintly through the closed window: "To the new mistress of the Dowling plantation."

Shelly Lyons was crying. "Please . . . let me go home."

"You are home! You're going to live here with me forever. My darling, beautiful wife. We're going to restore this place. Once again it will take its rightful place among the great homes of the South." Nathanial Dowling looked around, his eyes burning feverishly. "We'll plant cotton, sugarcane. We'll entertain royalty." He gulped the wine. Then he knelt beside her, throwing his arms around her. "I'll never let you go from this place. You're mine forever. I knew when I painted your exquisite body on

canvas that somehow I had to possess you . . ."

"Crazy," whispered D'Aquin. "He's completely wigged out."

Basous ran around to the door, pounded on it and shouted, "Open up, Dowling. It's the police."

From the window, D'Aquin shouted, "Watch out! He's got a gun!"

Basous jumped back off the gallery. The door burst open. Nathanial Dowling stood there, his face contorted, his eyes filled with madness. In each hand was an ancient dueling pistol. He fired. The ball shattered the air inches from Basous' head. The detective rolled away from the porch, going for his own pistol. Dowling's second shot and the report from Basous' Police Special rang out simultaneously. Dowling fell against the door casing. The dueling pistols slipped from his grasp. Then he crumpled to the gallery, dead.

Basous slowly arose as D'Aquin came running around the corner of the house, his gun drawn. He stopped when he saw Dowling's body. "Are you all right, Mercer?"

"Yes," Basous said, and he thought this had surely not been the first fatal duel between two men over a beautiful woman on these grounds.

When they untied Shelly Lyons, she threw herself into Basous' arms, sobbing hysterically. He thought it would probably be the only time in his life fate would arrange for him to hold such a beautiful creature, and he made the most of the moment.

When she had calmed down sufficiently, Miss Lyons told them the incredible story of what had happened in her apartment that night. "Ever since I posed for Dowling, he's looked at me in a way that gave me the chills. He never made an outright pass, but I'd catch him following me down the street, or sitting in his car, watching me leave the apartment, staring at me. I had him figured for a nut. Well, the night it happened, I was about to go to bed when I heard a knock on my door. It was a friend, Linda Butler. Linda is one of those lost souls who drift around the country these days. I'd met her a few months ago when she danced at the club for a while. She'd just gotten back into town and was looking for a place to crash for the night. I felt sorry for the girl. She has no family; just goes from one guy to the next, whoever wants her. I told her she could sleep on my couch. Then she went into the bathroom. I'm not surprised she went in there to shoot up. Like a lot of drifters, she was a user. I knew it. What

could I do? She came out of the bathroom, floating. But then she keeled over. I could see she'd OD'd. It scared me, and I ran out of the apartment to get help. Nathanial Dowling was just coming up the stairs. I ran right into him. He went back to my apartment with me. By the time we got back there, Linda was already dead. I was going to call the police, but Nathanial was looking at Linda, then at me, and getting this crazy, wild expression on his face. He knew I've been having trouble with my husband, Grove, that Grove has been threatening me and I was afraid of him. He pointed out that Linda was about my size and build and that she had no family and nobody would miss her. He said he could make it look like it was me, instead of Linda, who was dead. Then I could go hide on that old plantation home of his and Grove would never bother me again, thinking I was dead. I told him he was out of his mind and I'd never do such a crazy thing. But I guess he'd made up his mind that this was a way he could kidnap me and hold me prisoner and nobody would come looking for me, if the whole world thought I was dead. He forced me into his car and brought me out here and kept me a prisoner. When he went into town, he locked me in a cell where they punished runaway slaves back in plantation days. He told me what he'd done to Linda, that he'd convinced everyone I had been murdered. Nobody would ever search for me. He was going to keep me here forever, make me his 'wife' . . ." She choked.

Later Shelly Lyons said she couldn't bear to keep the oil painting of her done by Nathanial Dowling. It had too many bad memories. She gave it to Basous in appreciation for rescuing her. From then on, it occupied a hallowed place on Basous' apartment wall, and sometimes when he looked at it, he could understand Nathanial Dowling's madness. *I could almost do something like that myself, to have such a woman,* he thought with a sigh.

One can but hope the reader will not literally go "full circuit" in respect to the power company which "serves" him.

Understanding Electricity

by John Lutz

Glistening with chrome and tinted glass, the headquarters of the Powacky Valley Light and Power Company soared needle-like fifty stories heavenward, as if taunting the lightning. In the building's top floor were the spacious, ultramodern offices of the company's top executives, and in a tasteful outer office sat the moderately attractive, though impeccably groomed, Miss Knickelsworth. She smiled with her impeccably white teeth, lighting up her whole mouth, if not her face and unchanging wide brown eyes, and said, "Mr. Appleton from out of town is already in the conference room, Mr. Bolt."

B. Bainbridge Bolt, president of Powacky Valley Light and Power, revealed his own capped dentures, nodded, and strode briskly past her and through a tall doorway. He was the "human dynamo"-type executive in image and action, and was proud to think of himself as such.

Behind Bolt, Elleson of Public Relations entered the office with a PR smile for Miss Knickelsworth as he strode through the tall doorway.

Five minutes later young Ivers, regional vice president and renowned hard charger, went into the conference room. The smile he flashed on Miss Knickelsworth was his bachelor's best, but she responded with the blank expression that had earned her the company title of "Miss Resistor" two years running.

Grossner of Advertising followed Ivers in, then old Stabler of Customer Relations, who was something of a fixture with the company. The tall doors were silently closed on the outer office wherein sat Miss Knickelsworth, and after orderly hellos and introductions the immaculately attired, somehow similar men all sat down at a long, tinted-glass conference table with gleaming chrome legs and trim. The table matched the glass and metallic decor of the large room. Everyone had his accustomed place at the long table but for Appleton from out of town, who remained where he'd been sitting at ease in his chrome-armed chair at the opposite end of the table from B. Bainbridge Bolt, who cleared his throat and drew a slip of paper from his attaché case.

With a nod to Appleton from out of town, Bolt said, "There is some business to be discussed before we get on to Mr. Appleton's investigation of yesterday's five o'clock power failure . . . if Mr. Appleton agrees."

"Surely," Appleton said, nodding ever so slightly his handsome head of flawlessly combed graying hair.

"We have something of a public relations problem," Bolt went on, "concerning our last raise in the rates for electricity. Let me read you this note that arrived in the morning mail."

He placed gold-rimmed reading glasses on the narrow bridge of his nose and glanced commandingly at each man. The note read:

Gentlemen:

I was shocked by your letter stating that my monthly bill was ten days past due. At your current rates, I'm afraid that you find me a little short. However, I do believe ten days is rather a brief period of neglect and that it does not behoove a company of your stature to conduct yourself in such a negative manner. In farewell, I regretfully must fuse and refuse to send your requested remittance, and as another futile outlet for my frustration I have wired my congressman direct.

Tired of plugging away,
A. C. McCord

Bolt lowered the slip of paper, sat back and sipped on a glass of juice from the silver tray Miss

Knickelsworth had left on the table.

After a pause, Stabler of Customer Relations said, "The work of a madman in its phrasing, but other than that it seems the usual sort of letter we receive."

"There's one other difference," Bolt said dramatically. "This is a suicide note."

"That should solve part of our problem right there," young Ivers said. "Especially since this McCord was obviously unbalanced when he wrote such a letter."

"How did he commit suicide?" Stabler asked.

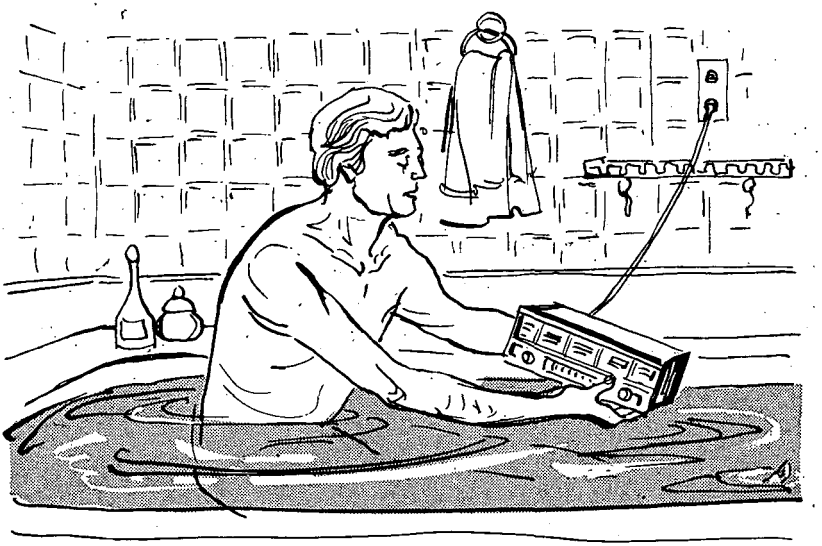
"He wrote and mailed this note yesterday," Bolt said, resting his large clean palms on the metal table trim. "He left a carbon copy in his home; then, during our Karl and Karla Killowatt commercial before the five o'clock news yesterday afternoon, he pulled his radio into the water in his bathtub with him."

Grossner of Advertising looked concerned.

Bolt sat unnaturally still, as if waiting for something.

"Wait a minute!" young Ivers said. "Is this McCord—"

"Still alive." Bolt finished the



sentence without a question mark.

"Of course!" Elleson said. "The power failure at five yesterday! It must have coincided with his pulling the radio into the tub with him."

"Almost," Bolt said. "McCord was found stunned, in a state of shock, but still alive. He'd also left a message for a reporter friend, explaining what he was going to do, and his story was written up in the papers for tonight's late edition."

"But the man's obviously a maniac," Ivers said.

"Remember," Grossner cautioned, "our last rate increase was legal, but not what an uneducated public would call ethical."

"They were notified of the public hearings," Ivers said, referring to the public notices in the newspapers that Elleson and Grossner had cleverly worded for maximum confusion.

"There were the necessary three people at the meeting," Elleson said. "The vote constituted a majority."

"No one is arguing the legality of the last increase," Bolt said sharply, to stop that area of discussion. "That and the subject of this meeting are poles apart. What we have here is a problem in maintaining some rapport with the public, and I've taken some steps to insulate us from any critical comment."

"If the story will be printed showing us in an unfavorable light," Ivers said, "it seems that the cat is already out of the bag."

"What I have done," B. Bainbridge Bolt said, "is change the nature of the cat."

Elleson the PR man nodded approvingly, though he resented not being consulted on the matter. Appleton from out of town chuckled softly.

"We have taken space in both daily newspapers to remark on the silver-lining-in-every-cloud aspect of a power failure saving a life," Bolt paused.

"There's a switch," Ives said brightly.

"Excellent," Elleson said admiringly, but he wondered if it was.

"Agreed," Grossner said, "but won't it also draw further attention to the incident?"

"To continue," Bolt cut them off reprovingly, having successfully sprung one of his little conversational traps, "we will then explain how Powacky Valley Light and Power is generously paying for the would-be suicide victim's complete recovery."

"Great!" Grossner said. "Really socket to 'em!"

"I believe we will have gone full circuit," Bolt said smugly,

"transformed a lemon into lemonade."

Everyone laughed as always at the familiar lemon analogy.

"But how do we know he *will* recover?" Ivers asked. "People who unsuccessfully attempt suicide usually try again."

Bolt shrugged. "Doesn't matter. The whole thing will be out of the public's collective mind in a week or so. This McCord ought to stay alive that long. Right now he's confined in the psychiatric ward at State Hospital at our expense, undergoing electrotherapy treatment."

"Can you be sure of that?" Appleton from out of town said.

"Of course," B. Bainbridge Bolt said.

Appleton smiled indulgently. "I mean, what if he escaped? What if he somehow made his way here, to Powacky Valley Headquarters?"

"I get it," Grossner said. "He could do something drastic—generate some tremendous adverse publicity."

"Not only drastic," Appleton said, "but fantastically daring and grand."

Bolt squinted at Appleton: Several throats were cleared.

"Security isn't very tight here," Appleton said. "An imaginative man could find out things, make his way to the top."

Bolt leaned forward in his chair and cocked his head. "You're not—"

"Correct," Appleton from out of town said. "A. C. McCord, at your service."

Ivers' eyes widened. "But . . . where's Appleton?"

"Tangled up in some high-voltage lines, actually," McCord said, placing a small black box on the table. He smiled. "I took the liberty of attaching some wires to the table and chairs," he said, "so together you can all experience with me, one of your many customers, the unpleasant sensation of being overcharged," and he pressed a button on the box.

"Watt now?" Miss Knickelsworth asked herself in the outer office, as her electric typewriter suddenly went dead.

In the same vein as the following, one might say he never really knows what his nose knows.

The Greatest Cook in Christendom

by S. S. Rafferty

Don't believe the sign outside Rooney's that says, "Bar and Grill." The *bar* is legitimate-enough advertising, but the *grill* is pure fiction. No one, not even Rooney, has ever eaten there, or ever will; but there is a law in this state that came in after Prohibition was sent to the showers that says all drinking establishments must serve hot food. It was one of those nut laws to appease the drys.

However, to uphold the law, or at least give it a nod, all the newspaper people that congregate at Rooney's go through a ritual upon entering the joint.

"What's on the menu?" a reporter, who is probably hiding from his editor, will ask the owner. Rooney will then go through a recitation of edibles that would put a Waldorf headwaiter to shame.

"No Coq au Vin Blanc?" the reporter will say, dutifully.

Rooney's face will sadden as he says, "Sorry, only the Vin Rouge."

"Well, I'll just have bourbon and soda, then," the reporter will say dejectedly.

One morning around 3 o'clock, when four of us were sitting in a back booth, an old wire editor, Opie Hooter, remembered the time way back when a pilgrim somehow wandered into Rooney's.

That in itself is a noble accomplishment, because the place is tucked away in a blind alley that separates two competing dailies and a Sunday rag. It is convenient only to the press and the downtrodden.

"In comes this poor lost soul," Opie was telling us, "and he asks for the menu. Old Rooney gives him the spiel, and the dumb cluck actually orders something. Rooney looked like he was going to have a heart attack. But he's thinking fast, because this guy could be a new state liquor inspector. Rooney beats it back to the rear storeroom. In those days, it had a sign on it that read 'Only Kitchen Personnel Allowed Beyond This Point.' Rooney lurks around in there for a few minutes, and then comes back out with a look of dejection on his puss. In soul-struck tones, he tells the customer that he's out of Clams Casino, or whatever the numbskull ordered. Undaunted, the boob selects another dish from Rooney's litany. Now Rooney really has a problem. He knows if he tells him he's out of the new dish too, the guy will probably just order something else. Believe me, fellows, this guy had tenacity written all over him."

"Why didn't he just toss the bum out?" Sid Genderman asked Opie. Sid is a sports writer, so naturally he doesn't follow details.

"Because the creep might be a state snoop," Opie tells him, and goes on with the drama. "Suddenly, Rooney gets a brainstorm. A beaut. He goes into his act and zips back to the nonexistent kitchen, and when he comes out again he has a look of horror about him. 'My chef just dropped dead!' he tells the starving goon. 'No food will be served today.' Now, you'd think that would end it, but no, this fella is a bulldog.

" 'That's terrible,' he says. 'I was with an ambulance unit with the AEF in France. Maybe I can help.' Rooney rolls his eyes toward heaven and tells him the chef is beyond help.

" 'Well, at least I can tell you if he really is dead,' the cluck says. 'It takes an expert eye. He may just be unconscious.' "

"So Rooney was stewing in his own nonexistent soup," Buzzy Lang, the rewrite man on the *Blade*, says with a laugh.

Opie breaks into a sardonic smile. "Not on your life. Rooney is ever resourceful. Back in that phony kitchen, he knows that Oscar Creegan, a *Blade* linotype operator, is sleeping off a two-day binge. Oscar is his ace in the hole. Now the pilgrim starts making for the storeroom door, and Rooney

points to the sign. 'Can't break a house rule,' he tells him, but to satisfy pilgrimboy, Rooney says he will be happy to bring the body out for inspection. I don't know if the cluck was really trying to help or he was just plain morbid, but he gives Rooney the sign to highball the remains into view."

Opie took a short sip from his rye and a long pull on his beer and winked. "It was put-and-call time, and Rooney zips into the storeroom again and ties an apron around Oscar's ossified body and, to insure his cooperation, gives him a thump on the dome with an old chair leg. Then he respectfully dragged Oscar on stage. The cluck looks at the motionless form, pulls back its eyelids, and then puts his ear to Oscar's chest. 'He's dead, all right,' the cluck says, and leaves Rooney to grieve in loneliness while he goes off in search of sustenance."

"Well, if that guy was in charge of death tags with the AEF," Sid Genderman said, "we'd better get ourselves over to France with some shovels, because that guy didn't know his business."

"Not necessarily," I put in. I work the police beat, and have seen a few corpses and have talked with enough medical examiners to know a few things on the subject. "Determining a body's lifelessness isn't as easy as you may think. Oscar's respiration was probably minimal if he was loaded with booze, and also comatose, courtesy of the chair leg."

"The eyes should have given it away," Sid came back at me. "A coroner down in Mobile told me that the pupil shrinks and is uneven at the rim. I saw it for myself, too. Some bush-league outfielder went to work on an umpire with a number five Louisville Slugger over a bad call. That umpire's pupils were ragged, let me tell you."

Buzzy Lang was toying with his gin and "it" as if his mind were somewhere else. Then he looked up at us suddenly. "That guy—the cluck—couldn't have been with the AEF."

"Why?" I asked him.

"Because I was in the first scuffle overseas myself, and we used the needle test. A needle, a bright one, pushed into any muscle of the body, won't tarnish if the body is dead."

"And if the body says 'Ouch,' it's not," Genderman said, slapping the table.

"No. I mean it. It's a foolproof, one hundred percent test."

"Nothing is one hundred percent anything," Opie said.

"You know," I said, "that yarn

about the dead cook reminds me of a time back when I was working a one-sheet weekly out in Christendom, Nevada."

I looked up at the small owlish man who had just come over to the booth.

"Hiya, Doc West, have a seat."

His name is really Richard Sparks, but he's one of the two city medical examiners. He covers the west side, while a counterpart takes care of the east. To keep it simple, we call them Doc West and Doc East. He squeezed in next to Genderman and ordered us all a round.

"We could have used you a few minutes ago, Doc," Buzzy said. "We were discussing how you can tell for sure if a stiff is a stiff."

"No thanks, that's a trade secret. Go on with your story," he urged me.

"Well, you won't have to give away any inside dope on this one, Doc, because we knew this cook was dead. In fact, he was burned to a crisp in a fire. And he would have gone to a peaceable grave if it weren't for Doc Biggs and his X-ray machine."

I looked over at Doc West and said apologetically, "I'm not putting the knock on your profession, mind you. Doc Biggs wasn't a real doctor with a Latin certificate hanging on his wall. He studied some to be a vet, and was pretty good with snakebites and digging bullets out of prospectors after Saturday night debates."

"Sounds like a colorful practice," Doc West chuckled.

"Oh, Christendom was a colorful place, all right. Most of the silver mines were payed out, but there was just enough left to attract the normal cast of scoundrels. Well, I guess Doc Biggs decided to upgrade his standing, so he ordered an X-ray machine from Carson City. Now, it's ironic that the chef and the X-ray machine arrived in town on the same day. Anything new in a small burg can count on the populace giving it the cold shoulder, but the X-ray won hands down. When folks heard that this contraption sent electrical rays through the body, they avoided it like a nest of rattlers."

"He should have called it something less ominous," Opie Hooter said, "like a bone camera. That's the whole secret of advertising."

"Maybe," I went on, "but nothing could convince Christendom that the thing wasn't infernal. Doc Biggs was reduced to experimenting on chickens and cats to prove how harmless it was, but he didn't get any human takers.

"However, the town's cold shoulder didn't extend to Pierre

LaChamps. He was greeted like one of the Magi. There was only one cafe in town, run by a mean coot named Tugger McCoy. The slop he dished up tasted like something you'd find on the sod side of a boulder. It was five miles the other side of awful.

"Well, somehow Pierre LaChamps gets Tugger to give him a try, and practically overnight the cafe is a hive of hungry miners. This Frenchman was a master of the pot and pan, and what goes in them. The way he used spices and herbs, he could make a twenty-year-old coyote taste good.

"Everybody was happy as larks, except Doc Biggs. He was still setting busted legs, but no one would go near his machine. Even Tugger McCoy, who never smiled, seemed content. With an A-1 chef handling things, Tugger had more time to spend with his prize hogs, which he kept in a sty just north of town. I swear he thought more of those blueblood hogs than his pretty wife. Those porkers were a vexation to one and all, especially on a hot day, if the main street was downwind from the sty's aroma, but there wasn't much you could do about it. Tugger had been a boxing champ in the Marines, and didn't take criticism lightly. In fact, he claimed the pigs didn't smell at all, which probably explains why his cooking had been so bad.

"So there you have Tugger up with his pigs and Pierre feeding us fine, with a little help from McCoy's wife, Tess."

"Ha-ha," Genderman said, "enter the woman and trouble."

"No, not Tess McCoy, at least. But don't jump ahead."

"Well, for a newspaperman, you sure write a long lead-in. Pigs, X-ray machines and all."

"They all figure in," I calmed Genderman, "and there was a woman involved. Two of 'em, in fact. Pierre was a real handsome dude. He looked like he just stepped out of a shirt ad. He started keeping company with a Widow Parker, who had a ranch about four miles to the south. That was geographically gratifying to Pierre, because he also practiced his minuet lessons with a lady named Carla Friento, who ran a laundry in town.

"For about two months, everything was fine, and then Pierre started to drop hints that he was thinking of moving on. That caused a bit of civil panic, because our bellies were pampered by now, and we didn't want to return to Tugger's swill. I had a talk with Pierre and suggested that he buy the cafe and settle down. It seems his problem was the same

as anybody's—money. He had made such a success of McCoy's place that the old coot was asking a fortune for it. That's when I came up with the scheme to solve all our problems in one swoop. If the townspeople came up with the money, we could keep Pierre and his food—and, more important yet, get rid of McCoy and his blasted pigs.

"Well, you'd think I had discovered another Comstock lode, the way the money rolled in. Pierre paid off McCoy and the old coot left town during the night, with Tess. We celebrated with a delicious prize-hog barbecue the next day.

"But life is unpredictable, and after being in business for himself only a few weeks, Pierre's cafe burned down, with him in it. That's when Doc Biggs put in his hand and stirred up a ruckus. Although there wasn't much left of Pierre, he was the first chunk of human anatomy Doc Biggs had bumped into that wouldn't squawk about being X-rayed. He took pictures of every inch of the corpse, and when he developed the negative of Pierre's skull, he yelled 'Murder.'

"It seems the chef had a crack on his skull, and the Doc theorized that someone had conked Pierre unconscious and burned down the cafe. At first, we figured that the Doc was just looking for publicity. Hell, almost everyone in town had a stake in the cafe, and Pierre had no enemies. When Doc showed me the X-ray plate, I was ready to toss him out of the office. The 'crack' wasn't on the back of the skull at all. It was a tiny crack-line on the left side of the face, just about where my eyeglass-stops rest on my nose. But I can see that Doc won't take no for an answer, so to shut him up, I send the X-ray plate up to the real doctor in Carson City. I asked him if a man could have died from a small crack like that. It seemed to me that no one ever died from a punch in the nose.

"The Carson City sawbones really knew his onions. He wrote back that the crack was a fracture of some fancy-named head bone, and it couldn't have killed him because it was an old fracture, maybe ten or fifteen years ago. I took the proof over to the sheriff and put the kibosh on Doc Biggs' play for attention."

I took a sip of my drink and looked at my audience. Genderman shook his head. "Is that all? Hell, I thought it was a murder story."

"I didn't say it was a murder story. I just said the Rooney incident reminded me of Pierre's

death. That's all I meant to say."

"Well, there's one flaw in it," Opie said. "You said everybody in town had a stake in the cafe, but what about the lady rancher and the laundress? Couldn't one of them have found out he was two-timing her and taken revenge?"

"Not Carla Friento. She was delivering laundry out at the mines and stayed over, with plenty of witnesses to swear to it. As for the lady rancher . . . well, maybe, but there was no murder anyway."

"I believe there was."

We all turned to Doc West, who was lighting his pipe.

"Well, I can't see it," I said.

"You did see it. The sheriff saw it, and your Doc Biggs saw it."

"Where?"

"I admit that it would take technical knowledge, but a trained observer like yourself should have been more acute."

"Go ahead, Doc." Genderman was anxious to see me roast.

"When you wrote to the doctor in Carson City, did you tell him that LaChamps was an expert chef?"

I thought for a moment. "No, I don't believe I did. It didn't seem important."

"Well, if you had, the Carson City man would have been suspicious. You said the fracture was approximately here," and he pointed to the upper side of his nose.

"Yes, that's right."

"That's the ethmoid bone, and I'll wager the fracture was in the cribriform plate. A fracture in that area could cause anosmia."

"Loss of the sense of smell," Opie said.

"Yes, and with the loss of smell, you lose, or greatly impair, the sense of taste. I can't see how a chef could be so good under those conditions."

"Well, I'll be damned." I rubbed my chin. "You mean Pierre was a fake, Doc?"

"More than you realize. I don't mean a fake chef. He obviously knew his business. The corpse was the fake."

"Sure, I see it now." Genderman's eyes popped open. "He wanted to blow town and cover his trail, so he dumped another body in the place and burned it down."

"That's nuts," I told him. "There was no one missing from town."

"More precisely," Doc West said, "there was someone missing. Someone who had been a boxer, and probably got the fracture in the ring. Someone who could work around pigs and not smell them."

"Tugger McCoy!" I said excitedly. "But he left town with his wife."

"Was Mrs. McCoy young?"

"Yes, Doc. And pretty."

"Well, there's Genderman's 'woman means trouble' theory. Pierre falls for her, but covers the affair by being openly amorous with other women. Then he bilks the town for money to buy the cafe, tells people he's paid McCoy off, and sends his true love out of town for a month."

"But where was McCoy all this time?" Opie Hooter inquired of the Doc.

"I can only guess. This was desert country. Bodies don't deteriorate rapidly in arid earth. It could have been buried and dug up again on the night of the fire."

Genderman started to laugh. "So old Pierre gets the loot and the girl, and all with the assistance of our esteemed colleague here."

"Now wait a minute," I defended myself. "How was I supposed to know about cribriform plates and anosmia?"

"Sure, pal," Genderman said with some glee, "but you could have given the Carson City doctor all the details."

He was right, so what could I say?

"Don't feel so bad," the Doc consoled me. "The whole town overlooked the most suspicious thing of all."

"Like what?" I muttered gloomily.

"McCoy was a pig fancier. Did you really think a true fancier would leave prize hogs to the ignominious fate of a barbecue spit?"

I shot a look at Opie Hooter, who shrugged. "Remind me not to murder anybody in this town," he said, "at least on the west side."

"But, Opie, we're on the west side," I said. "The editor of your paper lives on the west side. Eventually, we'll all murder our editors, and the Doc here will get you."

"Not if we use Buzzy Lang's needle test. That will prove he's been dead for years."

"You know," Buzzy said, "that reminds me of a story that never got printed. The cops found this stiff with three needles sticking out of his left big toe."

But that's another story, and it's late, so I'll see you another time. Rooney's is never closed, so drop in.

In the process of settling an old account, one may reap an unexpected bonus.

I was the only passenger getting off the bus at Clawson's Cove on one of the myriad somnolent, sweltering and deserted inlets that scallop Florida's perimeter along the Gulf of Mexico. I carried my bag across the street to an air-conditioned diner.

"Hamburger," I said. "Medium rare."

The girl behind the counter looked at me, shook her head sympathetically, and called out my order. "Just get off the bus?" she asked.

"Uh-huh."

"You may be the only tourist in town this time of year."

"I'm not really a tourist," I said. "Is there a decent hotel nearby?"

"Only the Everglades. But it's three miles down the road and even now, off-season, it's ridiculously expensive. So if you don't have a car I guess the old Mansion House around the corner is your best bet."

A bell summoned her to the kitchen. The hamburger she brought me was surprisingly good. She had a winsome face, warm and friendly.

"Do you live in Clawson's Cove?" I asked.

"All my life. I was born here.

And this splendid four-star establishment is owned and operated by my Uncle Dan." She cocked her head. "Tell me something. How in the world did you get so thin?"

"Prison," I told her.

At first she was startled, then she smiled uncertainly. "You're pulling my leg. That's no prison pallor. Why, you're burned darker than any of those tourists who migrate down here all winter to broil themselves black. If you—" She stopped as the door opened and her face went blank.

A heavy man lumbered up to the counter, a leathery red-neck, hard-bitten, barrel-chested, with a sheriff's star on his shirt and a large gun in a loose holster. His pale eyes gave me a quick appraisal and lost interest. The girl drew a cup of coffee for him and then came back to stand in front of me.

"The prison," I explained, "was in North Vietnam. Four long years, and most of the time I sat behind barbed wire. Plenty of sun and not much food. Picked up one of those tropical fevers, so after I got back they kept me in a hospital until about a week ago."

She was genuinely solicitous. "Didn't they feed you in the hospital?"

I smiled. "Sure. But that fever must have changed my metabolism."

"Well," she said stoutly, "you're entitled to a vacation. How long will you be staying in Clawson's Cove?"

"Day or two. I'm on my way to

by Harold Q. Masur

the Keys, but I thought I'd stop off first and see Martha Crawley. Do you know her?"

The diner congealed into sudden silence. Even the kitchen noises stopped. The sheriff came over and swiveled me around. "You got a name, Mister?"

"Harry Kane," I said.

"What's your business with Martha Crawley?"

"Well, now, Sheriff, I'm not sure I care to discuss it."

"Would you care to spend a couple of weeks on the county road?"

"On what charge?"

"Vagrancy."

"Sheriff, the United States Army owed me quite a lot of back pay when they brought me home and I've got a substantial piece of it in my wallet. Vagrancy won't wash."

"We're flexible here, Mister. I'll find something that'll stick."

I believed him. "I'm not looking for trouble," I said. "I don't know Martha Crawley. I never met the lady, but I knew her grandson overseas, a GI named Pete Crawley. He was my best friend. We spent a lot of time together and he told me about his family. He said he was six years old the last time he'd seen his grandmother, a year before his father died. Then Pete's mother married an engineer who settled the family in Hawaii. Pete was drafted and shipped off to Saigon. That's where I met him. I was with him when word came that his parents had been killed in an auto accident. So Martha Crawley was his only living relative. He wrote to her a few times, promising to come back here after the war. But he never made it."

"Keep talking, Mister."

"Our squad was out on patrol one night when the Cong ambushed us. They knew a lot more about jungle warfare than we did. Cut us to pieces. Only a few of us made it back. Not Pete. Missing in action and presumed dead, the Army said. Then two weeks later I got caught in a raid. They marched me north and I sweated out the rest of the war in a prison camp. I had promised Pete that if anything happened to him I would try to make it back to Clawson's Cove one day and visit his grandmother."

"You're too late, Mister. Martha Crawley is dead."

I blinked at him. "I guess I should have phoned first." I turned to the girl. "When's the next bus out of here?"

"This is Saturday," she said. "Only one bus a day and none on Sunday."

"So I'm stuck here for the weekend?"

She nodded. The sheriff turned and marched out. "That," she told me with her lips compressed, "was Sheriff Luke Spence. He's not one of my favorite people. Nor anyone else's either."

"It's an elective office. Why do they vote for him?"

"Because he's Glen Barrett's cousin and Mr. Barrett backs him and Mr. Barrett gets what he wants in this town."

"How does he manage that?"

"Through the Clawson Bank and Trust Company which he owns—and the bank holds mortgages on most of the property in this area." She smiled wryly and offered her hand. "You handled yourself rather well, Harry Kane. I'm Lucy Hume."

We shook. "Hi, Lucy. Why is your sheriff so uptight about Martha Crawley?"

"Because he can't stand the gossip about what happened. You see, the bank foreclosed its mortgage on Martha's property. Three acres along the water. That's where the new hotel is, the Everglades I told you about. Builders had been trying to buy it for years, but Martha wouldn't sell. Said she was saving it for her grandson. But then she failed to meet the mortgage payments and Mr. Barrett foreclosed."

"And later sold that land at a profit?". That was inevitable.

"You better believe it."

"I don't understand, Lucy. Pete Crawley told me the old lady was well off. What happened to her money?"

"She lost it. Mr. Barrett had been managing her security portfolio for years in an investment advisory account she had at the bank. Then the bottom fell out of the market and she was cleaned out. Martha was a real scrapper. She complained to anyone who'd listen. She even came to my boss and demanded that he sue the bank."

"Your boss?"

"Rudy Menaker." She saw my puzzled expression and explained. "Oh, you think I work here. I'm only helping out this weekend because Uncle Dan's regular girl called in sick. I'm Mr. Menaker's secretary. He's the town's leading lawyer; its only lawyer as a matter of fact."

"And did your Mr. Menaker sue the bank?"

"No. He looked at the evidence and told her she couldn't possibly win. She didn't even have a case."

"I'd like to know what happened. Would Mr. Menaker talk to me?"

"The office is closed on Saturday, but he might see you at home. I'll try to arrange it." She

went to a telephone, made the call and came back. "He'll see you in half an hour. Meantime, you can check into the Mansion House." She gave me directions.

I picked up my bag. "Do they have a nice restaurant at the Everglades?"

"Oh, yes, it's lovely."

"Would you have dinner with me this evening?"

"Harry, you don't have to—"

"Accept," her Uncle Dan called from the kitchen. "I can manage here without you."

There were summer stars in her smile. "All right. I'll pick you up at seven."

The Mansion House was a two-story building, faded and musty. I shaved and then walked three blocks to a medium-sized house of weathered shingles.

Rudy Menaker answered the doorbell himself, stepping out onto the veranda and indicating a pair of wicker chairs, lowering himself arthritically into one. A sour-faced old gent, exuding the rich aroma of bonded whiskey, he crossed his knees with a painful grunt. "Lucy tells me you're a friend of Martha Crawley's grandson, the one who got killed in Vietnam."

"My best friend, sir. I promised him I'd visit the old lady if anything happened to him."

"You're a couple of years too late. What do you want from me?"

"I understand she had some financial problems with the local bank and wanted you to sue."

"No way I could help, son. She claimed the bank had lost her money. I looked at the papers and she had a discretionary investment account. Mr. Barrett handled it just fine for a good many years. Times change. The economy here is going to hell in a handbasket. Nothing but problems; labor, energy, inflation, shortages, unemployment, you name it, we got it. What happened, son, it hammered the stock market right down through the floor into the basement. Cleaned out a lot of people. Martha Crawley wasn't the only one. Took a bath myself. Weren't nobody's fault. I told her she'd be wasting her time and what little money she had left."

"Weren't you also the bank's lawyer at that time, Mr. Menaker?"

His eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to tell me something, son?"

"Seems like you had a conflict of interest, Mr. Menaker. Maybe you should have suggested another lawyer."

"She came to me for an opinion. I gave it. She was free to do what she liked. Fact is, she did try

to get someone to drive her to Palm City. Told everybody she was going to retain old Willis Saunders."

"What stopped her?"

"A heart attack. And not her first. Ask Doc Kramer. He took care of Martha Crawley."

"Who took care of her property?"

"The bank foreclosed on the land and the public administrator sold off her household effects."

"What happened to the proceeds?"

"Barely enough to cover tax arrears and a few debts. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ." He stood up and walked into the house.

I went looking for a public telephone and found a Dr. Edward Kramer listed in the book. A passerby gave me directions.

As I entered the doctor's waiting room a small angry boy shot out of the office and a short portly man appeared in the doorway holding a hypodermic syringe.

"Allergy," he explained. "Been treating that little feller for years and I can't make him believe there are no vital organs in the target area. Come on in. Sit." He surveyed me critically and shook his head. "Too thin. Too much sun. Can't understand you tourists. Always dieting and sunbathing. Charred skeletons. You'd better put some meat on that frame, boy. Eat. And stay the hell out of the sun. It's overrated. Now take off your shirt and let's have a look."

"I'm not a patient, Doctor."

He frowned. "You ought to be. So . . . what's on your mind?"

He heard me out, the creases deepening, the benevolence shading into vigilance. He sat in silence for a long moment.

"That Rudy Menaker," he said finally, "too much booze. Ruining his health. Brain insult. Liver dysfunction. Won't take advice. How about you, Mr. Kane? Can you take advice?"

"If it's sensible."

"That's the only kind I dispense. Forget Martha Crawley. Go on about your business."

"Are you telling me to leave town?"

"Yes. There's nothing here for you except trouble."

"Something puzzles me, Doctor. Soon as I mention Martha Crawley's name, people turn edgy. Sheriff Spence; Rudy Menaker; you; and I shudder to think of my reception if I walk in on Mr. Glen Barrett at the bank. You seem intimidated, Doctor."

He was suddenly agitated. He paced once around the room, then faced me, his jaw set. "All right,

boy. Ask me specific questions."

"Did Martha Crawley die a natural death?"

"Yes and no."

"Too cryptic, Doctor."

"She came to me with chest pains some time back. Angina symptoms. I examined her. Hypertension, arteriosclerosis. I prescribed nitroglycerin, digitalis, heparin. They kept her going for two more years. I warned her to take it easy. But she had money troubles with the bank and was all wrought up. Then one night she called me, barely able to speak. I got out of bed and drove over. I got there too late. She was gone. All right. An old woman with a bad heart. People her age die all the time. But something seemed wrong and it bothered me."

"What, Doctor?"

"She always kept her drugs on a night table beside her bed. That night they were missing. I couldn't find them anywhere, not even in the bathroom cabinet. Martha was not senile. She understood her dependence on those drugs. So where were they? What happened to them?"

"Did you mention this to the sheriff?"

"He made light of it. Said she had probably swallowed her last pills and thrown the bottles away, intending to renew her prescriptions the following day."

"Would she let her supply run that low?"

"I can't argue with Luke Spence. I've had to patch up too many injuries because of the man's excessive zeal. Perhaps cruelty would be a better term. We've had confrontations. I never win. Now I steer clear of him." He looked past me and saw another patient in the waiting room. "Just keep your guard up, boy."

I found a visitor waiting for me in my room at the Mansion House. Sheriff Spence sat on the bed, staring at me with flat-eyed truculence. He stood up and came close, his voice harshly accusing. "You just came from Doc Kramer's. Now tell me you're sick."

"Are you really worried about my health, Sheriff?"

"I'm worried about your nose. You keep poking it into places it don't belong."

"I needed some medical advice."

"Legal advice too? Is that why you're bothering Rudy Menaker?"

"Have I broken the law, Sheriff?"

The bull neck inched out of his collar. His voice thickened. "Keep it up, Mister. Keep pushing me and you won't be able to leave on Monday. I'm telling you for the last time. Stay away from Kramer.

Leave Rudy Menaker alone. Keep your nose out of our business. You understand what I'm telling you?"

"I read you loud and clear, Sheriff."

He bulled his way past me and slammed the door behind him. My years in a Cong prison camp would seem like a picnic compared to custody under Sheriff Luke Spence. I glanced at my watch and saw that I had just enough time to shower and change my clothes before meeting Lucy Hume.

She arrived at dusk, driving a five-year-old compact, her smile warming me instantly. When we reached the Everglades I could see why the hotel people had been willing to wait for that particular site. A pair of flamingos glided along a natural lagoon near the entrance and there were formal plantings of flame vine, hibiscus, and bougainvillea.

"That section there," Lucy told me, "is just about where Martha's house stood."

We sat in candlelight and dined and talked. Finally, over coffee, she asked me if Mr. Menaker had been any help.

"I seldom expect candor from lawyers," I told her. "But even so, he let something slip. He mentioned the name of Martha's doctor."

"Dr. Ed." Lucy laughed. "He brought me into this world and saw me through all the usual childhood afflictions. Did you talk to him?"

"Yes."

"Crusty but lovable, isn't he? And he makes house calls too." She turned serious. "Harry, whatever you're trying to prove, I want to help."

"Sheriff Spence wouldn't like that."

"I don't care. All the more reason."

I thought about it for a moment. "What happened to the papers Martha showed Mr. Menaker?"

"She demanded them back so she could take them to Willis Saunders in Palm City."

I asked her to brief me on Saunders.

"I guess he's the best-known lawyer in these parts. We elected him to Congress for seven terms. Now he's back in private practice. I phoned him a few times on matters involving our office and his."

I thought it would be fitting if Saunders finally saw those papers. "Lucy, do you have any friends at the bank?"

"I have Tommy Hume."

"Sounds like a relative."

"He is. Tommy's my first cousin. He's the bank's auditor."

"Would he do you a favor?"

"Does he have to break any rules?"

"Only bend them a little."

"Suppose you tell me what you're after, Harry."

"Copies of the latest investment transactions Mr. Barrett made for Martha Crawley."

"Aren't those things confidential?"

"Not really. They'd be available from the brokerage firm in any event. But it would save me a lot of time and trouble."

"Tommy's working at the bank this weekend. I'll call him when I get home."

When I walked over to the diner for lunch on Sunday she handed me an envelope. It held Xeroxed copies of confirmation slips covering the brokerage transactions I'd requested. I glanced through them and asked if I could borrow her car after lunch.

"What's on your agenda?"

"A trip to Palm City for a talk with Mr. Willis Saunders."

"May I see your operator's license?"

"It's long expired."

"Then I guess I'd better drive."

I grinned at her. "When can you leave?"

"Any time she likes," her Uncle Dan called from the kitchen. "Business is lousy."

Palm City was northeast through swamp country. Saw grass stretched out on both sides of the narrow road. Clouds had scudded in from the Gulf and the sky was now dark and overcast. There was moisture in the air. Mangrove and palm hammocks were so dense at times that we seemed isolated from the world. Lucy drove carefully, concentrating on the road.

An hour later we moved out onto dry land and passed a small citrus grove. Cypress draped with Spanish moss stood tall. The road widened into a broad avenue lined with coconut palms. Palm City. We continued beyond the old courthouse and a small mission church to the other side of town.

Lucy had phoned ahead and Willis Saunders was expecting us. A slender man in his seventies with a shock of snowy hair and a bright sardonic glint in pale eyes, he gave Lucy a courtly bow and escorted us into a long cool livingroom.

He turned to me and said, "Now, young man, what is this urgency that could not hold until office hours on Monday?"

He listened to me with single-minded total absorption. I told him everything that happened since I had alighted from the bus at Clawson's Cove the previous day. Then I handed him the bro-

kerage slips and he studied them, his white eyebrows rising higher and higher.

Finally he looked up. His voice was sharp. "Are you telling me that Glen Barrett bought this unholy mess of speculative garbage for the trust account of an elderly widow?"

"You're holding the proof, Mr. Saunders."

"And nobody called him on it until you appeared?"

"Mrs. Crawley intended to, but she died."

His mouth tightened, distaste curdling into sour contempt. "Outrageous! A wanton dissipation of assets. It violates the 'prudent man' rule which limits fiduciaries to the most conservative investments for funds entrusted to their care. To seasoned blue chips. These transactions represent ventures of such a precarious and speculative nature they constitute a flagrant violation of responsibility."

"Is it actionable?"

"My dear young man, Mrs. Crawley could have sued the bank from here to Key West and back again."

"Mr. Menaker advised her to the contrary."

"Rudy Menaker is a fool. He had no business advising her at all. He was and is counsel for the bank. A definite conflict of interest." Saunders studied me, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Are you implying that Barrett bought this junk deliberately, so that Mrs. Crawley would lose her money and default on her mortgage, thus permitting him to foreclose and then sell off the land at a profit?"

"Not implying, Mr. Saunders. Asserting it outright."

He shook his head. "Too bad the old lady left no heirs."

"Why?"

"Because the aggrieved parties are all dead. Who will sue?" He stroked his jaw. "I'd like some time to look into this."

"How much time? The local sheriff wants me out of Clawson's Cove on tomorrow's bus."

"Luke Spence?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've heard of the man. A troglodyte. I have no clout in his bailiwick, so I suggest you come back here to Palm City on Monday." He looked at Lucy. "Does Rudy Menaker know about your visit here?"

"No, sir," she said. "I've decided to give Mr. Menaker notice. I don't think I care to work for him any longer."

He beamed at her. "Miss Hume, my secretary is retiring next month. I believe Palm City has more to offer a young woman

than Clawson's Cove. Would you consider moving here?"

She smiled. "Let me think about it."

He accompanied us to the door. It had not yet begun to rain. We decided to stay in Palm City for dinner. We wandered around, window-shopping, and then found a small seafood grill that served fresh pompano.

By the time we were ready to leave, it was dark and drizzling. Lucy drove slowly through the plaza and past the citrus grove and back into the Glades where heavy mist floated over the marshland, cutting visibility. No cars passed in either direction. Darkness brings its own sense of fear to unfamiliar terrain. This was an unreal world, eerie and silent.

I think I heard the deep-throated rumble of the huge diesel engine before its high beams came glaring up out of the night behind us. A deafening horn blast shattered the silence, sustained, unnerving. I turned my head and saw the ghostlike tractor-trailer closing in fast, barreling wildly down the dark slick road.

Lucy glanced nervously into the rear-view mirror. "Why is he driving so fast?"

"Maybe he's trying to kill himself. Quick, turn on your emergency flasher."

She fumbled at the dashboard. "Harry," she said thinly, "he's not pulling over into the passing lane."

"Pull away from him! Step on the gas!"

"I—I can't see far enough ahead." Sudden panic edged her voice. "He's almost on top of us."

The diesel's engine filled our ears. The great solid bumper rammed hard into the compact's rear and our heads whiplashed. I heard the trunk compartment crumple. We lurched and pitched sideways almost out of control, almost over the shoulder. Lucy fought the wheel. I reached over to help her. She was quaking and ashen but she held on, dead game.

We had the car under control when a sledgehammer blow rocked us again. I saw the pressure gauge flash red. Concussion had cracked the pan. We were losing oil. Without lubricant the engine would freeze and he'd have us for sure. I felt helpless and impotent—and responsible for Lucy.

The third blow spun us into a skid that sent the car over the shoulder to a shuddering stop, our front wheels caught in brackish muck. The diesel went roaring past while we hung there in teetering balance.

"Is he gone?" Lucy asked in a

small gargling, scared whisper.

"I think so."

I was wrong. We heard him in reverse gear as he came backing up the road—to finish us off. I yanked at the door and tumbled out, hauling Lucy after me. We scuttled across the road and crouched down among the saw grass. The diesel kept backing, going past us. He needed room to accelerate.

Then he braked and changed gears, revving the engine. He started forward, gathering momentum, hurtling down the road. Under his headlights I saw a bluish-green reflection, our own oil spill shining on the slippery blacktop. The diesel swung hard and caught the compact a solid blow that smashed it over the shoulder and into the swamp. In that instant, as the driver straightened out, the diesel's tires lost traction on the oil slick—an irresistible force, mass times velocity, a stumbling leviathan careening and fishtailing out of control. It slammed sideways over the shoulder into a mangrove tree and jacknifed high with a crunch of tortured metal. Sparks flew and, as the whole vast bulk somersaulted ponderously, a sheet of orange flame blossomed against the night with a muted roar.

We saw the bulky figure of a man struggle out of the shattered cab, clothes ablaze, face illuminated by the flames—Sheriff Luke Spence, his feet entangled in mangrove roots, unable to move. I started toward him, but the intense heat drove me back. He fell then, smoldering down into the saw grass.

Lucy clung to me. "Is he—"

"Yes," I said. "Nobody could survive that heat."

"Why was he trying to kill us?"

"Not us. Me. You just happened to be along. He did not like my probing in Clawson's Cove. First, because the bank's transactions would not hold up under scrutiny; and second, because he had something far worse than Barrett's fraud to conceal. He knew Martha planned on taking her case to Willis Saunders, and she had to be stopped. Somehow, he managed to make off with her drugs, knowing it would be fatal, intending to return them after her body was discovered. But Dr. Kramer got there first and saw they were missing. Spence was sure I'd been told and it worried him enough to learn my real identity."

She stared at me, oblivious to the drizzling rain.

"The name is Crawley," I said. "Pete Crawley. My guess is that Spence found some letters I'd written to my grandmother. All he had to do was check the hand-

writing against my signature on the Mansion House register, and that pegged me for him. He was afraid I'd blow the works. There was too much at stake. I had to be canceled. So he tailed us into Palm City and he waited to finish us on the way back."

"But where could Spence get a tractor like that?"

"Lucy, there must be one very disgruntled trucker locked up in the Clawson's Cove jail on some minor traffic violation. Spence planned on releasing him soon as he got back, hoping the rig would be far away by tomorrow morning."

"Pete Crawley," she said wonderingly. "Why were you listed as missing in action?"

"Because I'd been wounded and I was hiding out in the jungle when the Cong took me. I'd picked up one of those tropical fevers and my memory was gone. They lost my dog tags in some primitive field hospital. After I came home, the Army shrinks lined it all up for me, and I found a letter from my grandmother mailed to my last APO address, telling me about her problems with the bank. So I came down here incognito to find out what happened."

She searched my face. "And now? What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to retain Mr. Willis Saunders to sue the bank. That foreclosure involved fraud. Who knows, maybe the hotel people have a defective title. We may find ourselves in the resort business."

"We?"

"Sure. You've been working in your uncle's diner, so you know a little about food. And I can take a correspondence course in hotel management."

Reaction set in. Lucy began to laugh and cry at the same time, a small touch of delayed hysteria. She stopped suddenly. "You're crazy." Then she wailed, "I'm soaking wet. How are we going to get home?"

"Walk," I said. "With the kind of lunatics they have around here, it's safer than driving."

WHILE THEY LAST

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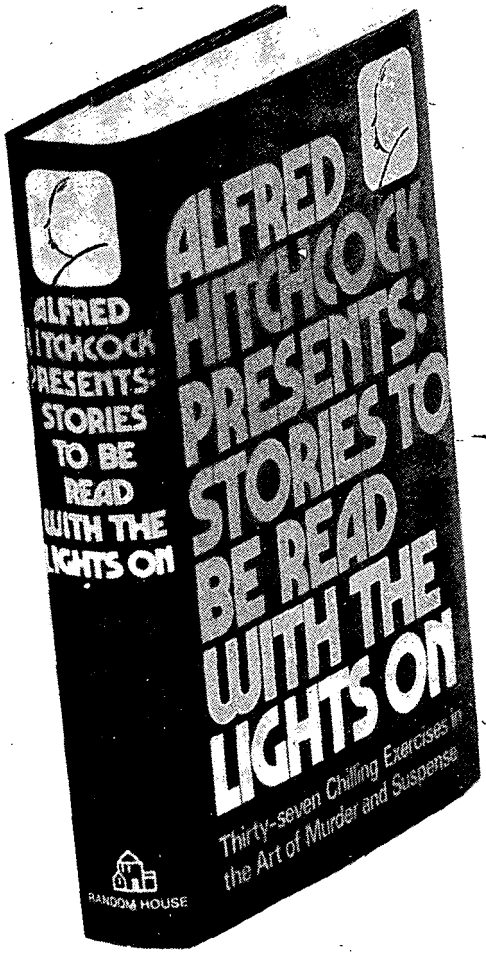

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When the improbable becomes plausible it may be time to take the pledge.

by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

It was lucky for her that he was a science fiction writer, because he could suspend disbelief more easily than the average man on the street. A woman in trouble needs someone to have immediate faith in her, no matter how incredible her situation might seem. He was perfect: he'd been writing about that sort of thing for over ten years; he more than half-believed every one of his own stories.

Since the art of the genre lies in basing plausible stories on improbable premises, the science fiction writer learns early that he can't afford to blink at impossibilities. He has to be willing to take each farfetched idea seriously, at least until it breaks down through internal inconsistencies. This is not to say that sf writers are broad-minded; it's just that they don't

close their minds as quickly as other people. The minds of writers who puff joints to fire their imaginations and who gulp Scotch to loosen their tongues close even more slowly.

When the woman came into his cluttered study and announced that she was not whom he thought, but an exile from an alternate time-track that closely paralleled his, he didn't lean back in his ancient wooden swivel chair and laugh. He raised his dark eyebrows a little, and fumbled with his left hand for a pack of cigarettes while he stared at her, but he didn't laugh.

"Sit down," he said, gesturing to the overstuffed chair in the corner, the one he'd hauled back from the Salvation Army. From behind the screen of the flaming match, he watched her movements, trying to pinpoint the source of the nebulous difference he had already perceived. "This is . . . somewhat unusual," he said, painfully conscious of his own banality. "I mean—oh, never mind. You say you're from an alternate time-track. Is it very similar to ours?"

She shrugged. "How should I know?" Something in the way her long blonde hair bounced caught his eye. He studied it for a moment before realizing that she parted it on the left. His wife parted hers on the right. "I just got here, George." A well-known frown of fleeting worry brought her plucked eyebrows closer together. "Your name *is* George, isn't it?"

"Yes. And yours is Ellen, right?"

"Right." She leaned back in the chair, twisting until the broken spring was out from underneath her. Her nose wrinkled at the odor of stale dope. "You told me—I mean, George on my—in my—oh, nuts. *My* George stopped using that horrible stuff when I asked him to. Doesn't your Ellen mind?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, yeah, she does, a little. But she pretty much keeps it to herself now, since I explained that without it I couldn't write." He shook his head sadly. "She understands that science fiction is pure imagination, and that without it I can't sell my stuff. Sf pays the rent here, so . . ."

"Oh, are you still writing *that*?" She put a condescending emphasis on "that," just like his Ellen often did. "*My* George hasn't written it in years . . . he's doing much better financially, too, now that he's given it up." One pale hand on her pearl necklace, she turned her head slowly, scanning the walls, looking for other points of differ-

ence. The way she ignored the shabbiness of the room—and of George—seemed a little self-conscious. Apparently she found her surroundings distasteful but was making an effort to be tolerant.

By then he had noticed her hands. His wife wore her wedding band at all times; this woman had only an emerald ring on the middle finger of her right hand. Evidently, the two Ellens had different tastes in jewelry. His didn't like pearls. "Do you wear wedding rings on your world?" he asked, prompted by the thought that she was material for a story.

Flickering to his hands, her ice-blue eyes rested on the simple platinum ring. "Yes, we do," she replied. "Why?"

"Well," he said, feeling awkward, "you're not wearing yours."

"I don't have one."

"Didn't I—I mean, didn't your George give you one?"

"How could he? Did you give your Ellen one?"

"Of course," he retorted, slightly offended. He tried to look dignified. "I may have been broke in those days, but I was able to scratch up enough bread to get her a ring."

She looked puzzled. "But . . . wait a minute, are you married to—her?"

"Sure." An uncomfortable silence fell on the room. He had time to notice that the storm was passing and that the corners of the study were becoming visible again. "Are we—I mean, are George and you married?"

"No." She held her chin high, but he could see a sparkle of moisture in her eyes. "We aren't. He . . . he says she won't give him a divorce."

"She?"

"Barbie." Scorn was in her voice, and on her curled lips.

"Oh." He remembered Barbie, dimly. A few weeks of passion in his sophomore year, passion that had cooled with the suddenness of nightfall in the tropics. So that's how close he'd come. "But you and he—"

"I'm his mistress," she said with proud defensiveness. "And if—" her chin trembled "—if I can get back, I'll be his wife, eventually."

"Get back?" Somehow, the thought hadn't occurred to him, but of course she'd want to get back. She was a stranger here, even though she had a . . . a parallel, a double, who'd probably lived most of the same life, thought most of the same thoughts. He watched her rise from the chair with the graceful flowing motion that his Ellen had. Turning her back on him, she went to the window and looked

up at a small patch of blue. As he studied the curves of her waist and her hips, another piece fell into place; another explanation of his feeling of not-rightness came to him. The clothes she was wearing—his Ellen didn't have any of them. This Ellen wore a royal blue sweater; his Ellen had one in the same style, but navy blue. This one had white corduroy slacks; his had beige. Of course, of course. He slapped his forehead, and felt more at ease. The difference, slight as it was, had been bothering him. "*Can* you get back?"

"Yes," she said softly, almost as though she were talking to the window. "Yes, if I get to the right place, at the right time."

"Do you know where the right place is?"

"Oh, yes." She turned to face him. The strengthening sunlight silhouetted her, casting her face into shadow. "George used to do a lot of research on things like that—back in his sf days, you know."

"Yes." His gesture told her to go on.

"He found several places where people from—from my world have disappeared, and other places where strangers have arrived. He's made charts and graphs and things, and he thinks . . . you see, it's his theory that in certain places, when conditions are right, a . . . a sort of gateway opens up. But the gateway goes only in one direction, so you have to be at the right one."

He shook his head. "Sorry, I'm confused."

Her glance said that was understandable, considering his condition. "There's a gateway here in New Haven—it opens onto the Green, from the Green in my world—but you can only travel from there to here, not from here to there, and it's only open during the worst kind of thunderstorm."

"Well, how did you happen to go through it?"

"It was her." Sudden fury contorted her features, and threw a scarlet flush into her cheeks. "Barbie!" she spat. "She knows what's going on; she knows he wants a divorce so he can marry me. She invited me to lunch downtown. I didn't suspect, so I went. The next thing I knew, she had a gun. She held it in her purse so nobody else would see it, and marched me to the center of the Green. There was thunder, and lightning, and pouring rain, and . . . and nobody to witness it. The place was right, she had to wait for a minute or two, till the sun got to its highest point—George says that does something to the magnetic field,

I'm not sure what—and the next thing I knew, I was on *your* Green, in *your* thunderstorm." She sank into the chair again, leaned her head against its wing, and pleaded, "Please help me get back."

"Sure." Buoyed by the feeling of omnipotence that swells one when a friend in trouble comes for help, he nodded three times before thinking to ask, "How?"

For the first time, she looked uncertain. "If you're anything like my George, you're not going to be happy about this, but I have to get to the Yucatán Peninsula. That's where the gate to my world is."

"Oof!" She was right; he didn't like it. Even though his Ellen worked, and he wrote full-time, money was a problem. What with his dentist bills, he didn't have more than a couple hundred dollars in the bank. Ellen had emptied the joint account the day before, because her boss had insisted that her clothes weren't elegant enough for his jewelry store. "The Yucatán, huh?"

"I'm afraid so." Docilely, she bowed her head, like a petitioner waiting for the king's judgment. Then her head snapped up sharply and her hand flashed out. "Look," she said with surprised glee, "my ring! I'll give it to you—it cost George $400 on our world, and that was a few years ago. You give me as much money as you can spare, but not more than, say, $500, and it'll all even out. OK?"

Her perfume—another difference noted by the mechanical portion of his brain that was keeping a tally—eddied around him. Dizzied by its power, he hesitated. "Well . . . I can only give you about $150. Why don't you just sell the ring? That way . . ." He trailed off as he saw the fire in her eyes.

"George," she said firmly, "I want to get to the Yucatán as quickly as possible. I want to get moving now."

"Well, you couldn't do that in any case. I don't have any cash here. It's all in the bank. It really wouldn't take that much longer to get the ring sold." He watched her set her jaw. His Ellen often used the same expression. For a moment he marveled at how close the two worlds were. "Besides," he urged, "a couple hundred could make all the difference."

"Please, George." She sighed heavily. "George, selling the ring will take time, which means that I'll probably run into your Ellen after we sell it. And that's something my George warned me about. He said that never, under any circumstances, must a person

meet . . . well, her double. He said it can cause madness, or worse. Please, George, take the ring, give me what money you can, even if it's only a little, and let me get going." There was desperation in her eyes, and it softened him.

"All right," he said at last, opening a drawer and rooting around for his bankbook. "I'll go across the street to the bank and get the money. But what are you going to do once you get it? That's not enough for a plane ticket."

"True," she admitted, "but I'm going to take a bus to New York and find a pawnshop there. I can sell my necklace—" she tapped it lightly "—and go right out to Idlewild, where I can get a plane."

"Idlewild?" He felt his forehead crease at the word. "You mean Kennedy?"

"Do you call it Kennedy here?" she asked innocently. "Why?"

His mouth opened to answer, but his eyes glimpsed the clock on the wall: two forty-five. The bank would close in fifteen minutes. "Never mind," he said as he moved to the door. "It's an awfully long story. I'll be right back."

He returned in ten minutes, his wallet bulging with $170 in tens. "Here," he said as he handed it over to her, "that's all I had in my account. Luckily, Ellen—my Ellen—gets paid today. You sure you can't stay to meet her? She'd be tickled pink."

"No," she answered regretfully as she rose, "I don't dare. It's too much of a danger to our sanity. I've already checked the buses. There's one in twenty minutes, so I called a cab. Thank you, George, thank you very much." Impulsively, she leaned over and kissed him on the mouth. "You're almost as sweet as my own George, you know?" A beeping horn stopped her from giving him another. "That's my cab." After one last, wistful, grateful glance, she started walking toward the front door. As she went through the dining room she picked up a raincoat George had never seen before. Her rolled umbrella rested against the wall.

"Uh," he said as he followed, "look, I'm going to sell the ring, and if I get more than—"

"Keep it, OK?" She was out the door and clattering down the stairs.

"Well, thanks, but if you need more, write, huh? Let me know, and I'll send you . . . I'll send you what I can."

"Thank you, George." She stopped at the bottom of the staircase and threw him one more kiss.

"Take care of yourself, now."

It was 7:00 p.m. and Ellen wasn't home yet. He called the store for the fourth time; for the fourth time, he got no answer. A sick feeling was growing in the pit of his stomach. She often hitchhiked home to save the bus fare, and she laughed at his fears. But dammit, there *were* crazy people in the world, and—

He caught the phone halfway through its first ring. It was Ida Jenkins, the wife of Ellen's boss. "Hi, George," she began, "I just thought I'd find out how Ellen's feeling. Is she better?"

"Feeling?" he repeated numbly. "Did something happen to her?"

"Why, yes," came the thin, metallic voice. "She got sick at work. Were you so buried in your study that you didn't notice her come home early?"

"Uh—" His eyes darted frantically around the kitchen; his ears strained for any hints of sound in the apartment. "I don't think—"

"Look, I've got to hang up. Tom's supposed to call me from New York to tell me about the new items he bought. Tell Ellen she doesn't have to come in tomorrow, or Friday, either, if she's still not feeling well. Ask her to give me a call tomorrow night."

"Uh—"

"There is one other thing, George. She was feeling so ill that she didn't notice this, but remind her, when she's better, that she has one of our display rings. A big green one, looks like an emerald. She'll know what I mean. G'night, now." Before he could say anything, Ida had dropped the receiver onto its hook.

A postcard came in the next day's mail. He recognized the handwriting, but his stomach hurt so much he could barely read it. "George," it said, "I'm sorry, but I needed *your* money, too. Even with Tom, a new start can be expensive, and, as you said, a couple hundred could make all the difference. You'd better explain it all to Ida. And, George, you really should stop writing sf. It can give people too many wild ideas."

One has often heard that a threat is usually as good as a promise—but not always.

Morning on the Gornergrat was cold, dry, space-clear. Ringed by the Alps, the glacier was a ribbon of ice flowing down the side of the mountain to drip waterfalls and rivers into the July valley below. In the distance the east wall of the Matterhorn spewed clouds into a china blue sky; the jagged peak thrust up into the sky like an angry, jealous god guarding the village of Zermatt at its feet. It was all in technicolor and totally unreal.

Zermatt was where Douglas Franklin came when he had played in one chess tournament too many, when tension had stretched his nerves and shriveled his emotions to a point where the most beautiful cities became no more than squares on a playing board and he no longer cared to distinguish between people and chess pieces.

Douglas eased his back pack onto the ice, then sat down on it. He threw back his head, opened his mouth wide and sucked in the icy breath of the mountains. With the terrible tension gone he could begin to relax and think about the good things, the first-place trophy and $3,000 check back in his ho-

tel room. He had won an Interzonal, and the victory would launch him into the elimination finals for the world championship. It was something to think on, to savor, and Douglas intended to do just that.

He removed a bottle from his pack, uncorked it and sipped at the thick, clear liquid. The liquor hit his stomach and exploded in a warm glow that left a pleasant ringing in his ears. He waited for the echoes to die away before rising, shouldering his back pack and resuming his trek down the face of the glacier. Fifteen minutes later he found the dog.

The small black poodle was still alive—barely. Its eyes were closed, its breathing labored and shallow. An irregular, speckled trail of blood in the snow ended in a large stain surrounding the dog's hindquarters. The cold had stopped the bleeding, but was killing the exhausted dog. Threads of torn muscle were interwoven with black, kinky fur along a single,

a novelette

deep groove cut in the animal's left flank. It was the kind of wound that might be left by a bullet.

Douglas quickly removed his fur-lined parka and wrapped it around the animal. Then he picked up the bundle and cradled it in his lap. He was rewarded with a weak whimper. A stubby abbreviation of a tail worked its way out through a fold in the parka and began to wag feebly.

"You just hang in there, pal," Douglas heard himself saying. "I'm gonna fix you up." He'd always thought it silly in the past when he'd seen people talking to animals; now he found himself crying.

He picked up a handful of snow, let it melt, then pressed his hand over the dog's muzzle; he could feel a small tongue licking the palm of his hand. He repeated this procedure until the tail-wagging became stronger and the eyes opened. The dog's eyes were large, very black and soulful. They had the gleam of intelligence, like those of a precocious child. He poured a mug of coffee from his Thermos, let it cool, then laced it generously with the liquor. He held the mug in front of the dog's muzzle and the animal

by George C. Chesbro

lapped it up. The dog coughed, barked, and licked Douglas' hand.

"There, dog," Douglas said affectionately, "what'd I tell you?" The dog barked. Douglas produced a sandwich from his pack and the dog wolfed it down.

There was a license and a leather pouch hanging from a collar around the dog's neck. Douglas opened the leather pouch. Inside was a note announcing that the dog's name was "Dragon," and giving the name, address and telephone number of the dog's owner. The address was an apartment building in Zermatt. The name of the dog's owner was Victor Rensky.

It occurred to Douglas that he'd heard the name before. He thought for a few moments, then placed it; Rensky—if it was the same one—was a former OSS officer, turned journalist after the war. His books on little-known aspects of covert Nazi operations in Europe had made him famous, not to mention rich.

"All right, Dragon," Douglas said, rising to his feet and cradling the dog in his arms, "let's get you home."

Dragon barked his assent, then promptly fell asleep.

It was past noon by the time Douglas emerged from the network of hiking trails into the town of Zermatt. He walked to the river flowing through the center of town and turned right, heading for the cluster of apartment buildings jutting up from a steeply-rising slope to the west. Two hundred yards to his left a red jet helicopter rose from a large heliport cut into the side of the mountain. That particular sound was a familiar one in Zermatt; usually it meant that someone was dangling—or dead—on the Matterhorn.

The main entrance to the Helvetia apartment house was open. Dragon was awake now, trembling with the excitement of being back in a familiar place. The apartment directory indicated that Victor Rensky lived in 3C. Douglas entered the lift and got off on the third floor.

There was no answer from 3C. Douglas rang the bell a third time, gave a perfunctory knock, then turned to go. Dragon was not willing to give up so easily. Showing an unexpected surge of strength, the dog leaped from Douglas' arms, yelped with pain when he hit the floor, but remained on his feet. He scampered back and used his paw to push aside the mat in front of the door, revealing a key that had been hidden there. Dragon picked up the key in his mouth and trotted

triumphantly back to Douglas. The key dropped with a minor clatter at Douglas' feet.

Douglas laughed. "Is this an invitation? I know your master will be glad to see you, but I'm not so sure he'll appreciate your bringing any two-legged friends into the house."

But why not? Douglas thought. Perhaps Rensky would be back in a few minutes. Dragon, after being shot and almost freezing to death, deserved a taste of home before being locked up in some doctor's office. Douglas decided he would wait a half hour. If Rensky wasn't back by then he would leave a note and drop Dragon off with a veterinarian, as he'd originally intended. He scratched Dragon behind the ears, picked up the key and went into the apartment.

The interior was tastefully decorated in dark browns and gold, lightened by a series of framed blowups of the Zermatt valley and the Matterhorn. It reflected a journalist's mind, the constant, not-quite-successful struggle to create order out of chaos. There were magazines on every conceivable subject strewn about the room. One wall was book stacks filled with five or six hundred well-worn volumes. A workbench extended the length of another wall; on the bench were two typewriters—one portable and one electric—and a stack of manuscript paper surrounded by more books. There were a dozen chess sets around the room. Beside each was a small pile of postcards, identifying Rensky as a postal chess player. There was one set on the workbench, along with another pile of postcards.

Douglas went to the bookcases. The collection was a potpourri of books and subjects, with the emphasis on Nazi Germany; many of the books were Rensky's own. One shelf was devoted to chess, and the first book that caught Douglas' attention was *his* own, a small but popular monograph on The Dragon Variation of the Sicilian Defense. "Good taste," he grunted. He turned to Dragon and said, "I wonder if you know that you're named after a chess opening?"

Dragon's bark indicated that he certainly did. The dog lay down on a well-worn throw rug, licked his injured hindquarters, then promptly fell asleep. Douglas went to the workbench.

The books that Rensky was using all seemed to be on the same subject. The one that was open bore the title, *The Nazi Fifth Column In Switzerland: The Hidden Traitors*; and it appeared that

Rensky was writing, a book of his own. The pile of typescript was heavily annotated in what Douglas assumed was Rensky's handwriting.

He moved on to the chess set and picked up the postcards, intending to go through the moves in his mind. He riffled through the cards, stopped when he was halfway through the pile and started again, this time more slowly. They didn't make sense.

Douglas was thoroughly familiar with the rules and method of playing postal chess; he usually had a dozen games going at one time, using postal chess as a painless means of analyzing new opening ideas in a painless, nontournament situation. He knew that in Europe they would use the algebraic method of chess notation in order to send moves. That would mean that the eight squares on the first rank of the chessboard would be assigned the letters A to H; the squares on the files, counting from White's side of the board, would be numbered from 1 to 8. The cards, datelined from a number of different cities in both Germany and Switzerland, bore just about every letter of the alphabet, and the numbers were frequently higher than 8; and there was something else that was odd: all of the postcards had been written by the same person who had annotated the typescript.

Douglas dropped the cards back onto the bench and shrugged; if Rensky wanted to play postal chess with himself using a system that didn't exist, that was certainly his business.

The phone rang. Dragon's head jerked up from the rug and his tail began to wag. Douglas hesitated, then picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

The person on the other end of the line grunted in surprise. There was a long silence filled with tense, heavy breathing, then: *"Wer ist das?"* It was an old voice, old but tough, a voice clearly accustomed to giving orders. It carried clearly from the receiver into the room. Dragon pulled back his lips from his fangs and growled.

Douglas looked at Dragon and frowned.

"Wer ist das?"

Dragon's growl became a snarl, then a series of short, savage barks that, coming from a small poodle, might have seemed comical were it not for the fact that that same poodle had been shot a few hours before. Douglas didn't laugh.

"Uh, I don't speak German," he said carefully. "How's your English?"

"Who is this?"

"My name is Douglas Franklin.

Am I talking to Mr. Rensky?"

Another pause, then: "This is a friend of Mr. Rensky's. I hear a dog barking. Do you have a dog with you?"

"That's Dragon. I found him up on the glacier. He was hurt. I was bringing him back to Rensky."

"May I ask what you are doing in Mr. Rensky's apartment?"

The tone of the question was harsh and strained. Douglas felt anger rise within him but he contained it. After all, he *had* walked into a stranger's apartment. "The dog showed me where the key was. I thought I'd wait for Rensky."

"Mr. Rensky is away for a few days." Now the words were carefully measured. "I will take care of Dragon. Perhaps you would be kind enough to bring him to me. I am an old man, and I do not climb steps well."

"All right," Douglas said shortly. "Who are you and where do you want me to meet you?"

"I am Hans Vorteg. I will meet you in front of the Tourist Office by the athletic field. Do you know where it is?"

"I do. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Douglas hung up the phone and looked at Dragon, who had been snarling throughout the conversation. Now Dragon coughed and lay still. Douglas was aware of a pain in his stomach where the muscles had knotted. He walked across the room and picked up the dog.

If Vorteg knew Rensky would be away for a few days, why was he calling? *Who* was he calling? "I don't like it either, Dragon," he said, petting the dog. "I think we'll pass on Mr. Vorteg. You know where we can find a vet around here?" Dragon barked and wagged his tail. Douglas smiled and shook his head. "I know that's an answer, but I don't understand Dog as well as you understand English. C'mon, let's get out of here."

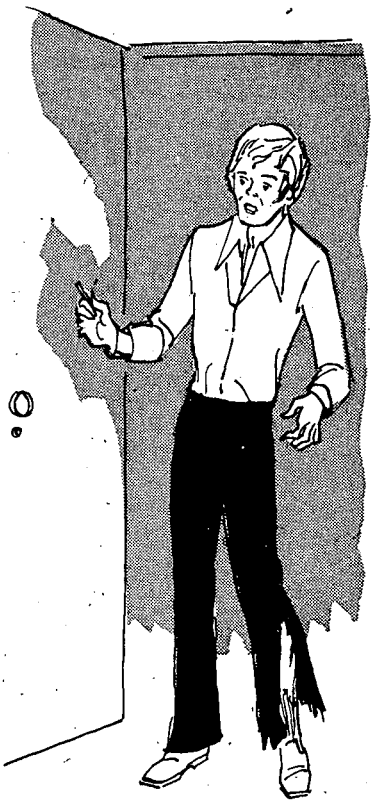
He started toward the door, then froze when he heard the sound of metal scraping in the lock. Rensky? He backed up and pulled his face into the kind of smile he thought he'd want to see on a stranger standing in *his* apartment.

It wasn't Rensky. The thin blond man was in his early thirties, about Douglas' age. He was still holding the strip of metal he'd used to pick the lock in a right hand that was missing the ring and little fingers. He was limping badly, favoring his left foot. His left trouser leg was torn and dirty, as though he had recently fallen.

The man looked up, startled, as Dragon snarled. The blood drained from his face, leaving splotches of red on paper-white flesh.

Douglas had to yell to be heard above Dragon's frenzied barking. "Looking for somebody?"

The man recovered, wheeled and limped out as fast as he could. Douglas heard him stumbling down the stairs. He considered going after the man, then decided against it. In a village the size of Zermatt there couldn't be that many thin blonds missing two fingers and walking with a limp.



"Another friend of yours?" Douglas said, scratching under Dragon's ears. The dog nuzzled Douglas' hand. "I know some Swiss law," Douglas said after a thoughtful pause. "Let's you and me go find him."

He found Karl Henning on the tennis courts of the hotel owned by Henning's father. Henning was a well-built, ruddy-complexioned man who was pushing forty and looked thirty. Henning approached his job as local constable as a kind of civic duty; his father was a member of the Zermatt "commune," a group of old families who literally owned everything of value in Zermatt, ran the enterprises jointly and shared all profits. Henning took no pay for his work because there wasn't that much work; Douglas didn't consider him much of a policeman, but then Zermatt wasn't exactly the crime capital of the Western world. Douglas had met him on a previous visit, and liked him. He was a terror on a tennis court and Douglas admired competitiveness.

Henning recognized him as he

came into the fenced-off playing area. The constable waved off his partner and came over to Douglas.

"Douglas!" Henning had a deep, natural bass voice, pleasant to listen to for five or ten minutes, numbing after that.

Douglas shifted Dragon to his left side and shook the hand that was extended to him. "Hello, Karl," he said. "It's good to see you. You look fine."

"So do you. How are the chess wars?"

"A little frantic. That's why I'm in Zermatt."

"And you're not staying with us? You know we would have insisted that you take a room without charge!"

Douglas smiled thinly. "I know. That's why I'm not staying with you."

"How many famous grand masters do we get in Zermatt?" Henning looked hurt. It passed. He nodded in Dragon's direction. "A traveling companion?"

Douglas shook his head. "I found him up on the Gornergrat. He was hurt. I think somebody took a shot at him."

Henning rolled his brown eyes; it was the reaction of a man who didn't want to talk about hurt dogs and gunshots. "What were you doing up on the Gornergrat? It's dangerous up there; the ice is shifting. There are crevasses. We lost three Italians yesterday. The slopes have been closed."

"I just got here last night. I'd planned to do some summer skiing. When I found out the slopes were closed I decided to hike down. The funicular was still running." He cleared his throat. "Why do you think somebody would want to take a shot at a dog?"

Henning rolled his eyes again. Douglas had found it amusing the first time; now it was annoying.

"Who knows?" Henning said. "A crazy man; some hunter with bad eyesight. Where was his master?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about, Karl." Henning cast a glance in the direction of his tennis partner who was swinging his racquet impatiently. Douglas moved around in front of him. "The dog belongs to a man by the name of Rensky. I got that from a message in a pouch around the dog's neck. I also got his address. He lives in the Helvetia. The dog showed me where the key was and I went in to wait. While I was there I had a strange telephone conversation with a man by the name of Hans Vorteg." The name brought a reaction from Henning. Douglas talked through

it. "A few minutes after the call a man tried to break in. He'd fallen and hurt himself. Now, I think the call was meant for that man. The fact that he fell slowed him down; he wasn't in the apartment when he was supposed to be. To my mind, that brings up a few questions. For example, where's Rensky?"

Henning was staring at his sneakered feet. "The man who tried to break in—what did he look like?"

Douglas told him. That got another reaction. For a moment Douglas was afraid that Henning was going to faint. The blood had drained from the big man's face. "You know who it is?" Douglas asked.

"Jan Vorteg, the son of the man who talked to you on the phone. He lost the two fingers on the north wall of the Matterhorn two years ago." Henning sounded as if he were going to choke.

"Vorteg is a big name around here?"

Henning nodded. He looked totally distracted. "Mr. Vorteg is a commune member."

"Well, what the hell was his son doing in Rensky's apartment?"

Henning glanced over Douglas' shoulder and swallowed hard. "Perhaps you should ask Mr. Vorteg yourself."

Douglas turned. The man coming across the courts toward them was over six feet. Age had withered his frame somewhat, but not much. His hands, swinging militantly at his sides, were large and heavily-veined. He had an almost square face, framed by a mane of silver hair; his eyes were a deep blue, and burned with a cold fire. As he came up and stopped in front of them, Douglas could see that his lips were compressed with anger, giving his mouth the appearance of a tiny, blue-white slash in his face.

Dragon had begun to growl. Douglas put a hand over his muzzle, quieting him.

Vorteg glanced at the dog, then pointed a thick finger at a spot between Douglas' eyes. "You are Douglas Franklin," he said in English layered with a thick German accent. "Why did you not meet me as you said you would?"

"I met your son along the way. He convinced me I should look for a cop."

Vorteg turned to Henning for the first time. "You are very free with information about my family, *Herr* Henning." Henning started to mutter a protest, but Vorteg continued: "There is a simple explanation for the questions I'm sure Mr. Franklin has raised in your mind. First of all, *I* have

been caring for this dog since yesterday, at the request of Victor Rensky. As you can see, it is a thankless task; the animal is a spoiled, impossible beast."

Dragon squirmed, but Douglas held him tightly, stroking his throat, quieting him.

"Rensky was suddenly called out of town on business," Vorteg continued. "It was his custom to take Dragon for a walk each morning on the Gornergrat. This morning it was my son who took on this chore. The beast ran away from him. We have spent most of the day looking for him."

Karl Henning swallowed hard. His bass crept up to a tenor as he said, "Douglas tells me the dog was shot."

Vorteg's hands flew out from his sides and froze in the air. "Karl! Do you think Jan would shoot a dog?"

"Uh, did Jan hear a shot?"

Vorteg's eyes became slits, almost matching his mouth. The hands slowly descended to his sides. "As a matter of fact I think he mentioned that he did. Am I being questioned, *Herr Constable*?" He made constable sound like a dirty word.

Karl Henning was drowning in embarrassed silence. Douglas rescued him. "What was your son doing, coming into Rensky's apartment like—like that, Mr. Vorteg?"

"He was there at my express wish, *Mr.* Franklin. First, to see if the dog had come back to the Helvetia. Second, to check the apartment to make sure everything was in order."

"He picked the lock."

Vorteg's eyebrows arched in triumph. "Because *you* had the key!"

"He ran away."

Vorteg snorted. "My son is not a coward; neither is he a fool. He had hurt himself—the reason he was not there to take my telephone call. When he saw you he naturally assumed you were a burglar. Knowing that he was in no shape to fight you, he did the wise thing. He ran for help. *You* were the one there without permission, Mr. Franklin, not Jan."

Henning looked immensely relieved, as though a doubles partner had just served an ace for match point. "Douglas was just trying to be helpful, Mr. Vorteg. I'm sure Mr. Rensky would not wish to press charges."

"That's your business," Vorteg said. He held out his hands. "I will take the dog now."

Dragon snapped at the hand. Vorteg's hand came back to cuff the furry head. Douglas quickly turned to the side, shielding Dragon with his body. "The dog

is hurt," he said evenly. "I was taking him to a veterinarian. I still am. After that, you can make whatever arrangements you want." He was not about to have to look Dragon in the eyes while he handed him over to Vorteg.

Vorteg hesitated, then backed away. "Perhaps that is best. Dr. Jenck can tranquilize the beast."

Karl Henning nodded enthusiastically. "Dr. Jenck's office is across from the church. You know where that is."

Vorteg's large hand dipped into his pocket and came out with a wallet. "Something for your trouble, Mr. Franklin."

Douglas could feel a white-hot flush spreading up his neck, squeezing his eyes. He turned and walked away before it could blind him.

On the crest of a hill above the tennis courts he stopped and looked back. Something had been said to shake Henning out of his deference; the two men were arguing heatedly.

If Hans Vorteg was lying through his teeth, that was Karl Henning's problem, not his, Douglas decided, and there was no doubt in his mind that Vorteg *had* lied. The story the old man had told might be barely plausible, if not for Dragon. Dragon simply was *not* an "impossible beast," but a highly intelligent and naturally affectionate dog, the product of a lot of love and training by the kind of owner who wouldn't leave Dragon with somebody he didn't like or trust. If Dragon didn't like the Vortegs, it was for a reason—something the dog knew.

He wasn't a cop, Douglas reflected, and he wasn't a hero. He wasn't even a dog owner. He was an exhausted chess grand master badly in need of a vacation. Dragon and the Vortegs were none of his concern. Then why couldn't he sleep?

Douglas dragged on his cigarette and stared down into the swiftly-flowing waters of the river. Beneath a full moon the hissing water with its load of dissolved calcium glowed white; the Swiss called such water "glacier milk." In his mind's eye, Douglas could see Dragon staring up at him with trusting eyes as the dog was locked into his kennel.

The veterinarian's report had been a good one. Douglas had found the dog in time, soon after the shooting had occurred. There was no infection and no signs of pneumonia. A few shots and a few days of rest and Dragon would be as good as new.

But for how long? Douglas wondered. Somebody *had* tried to

kill Dragon. Perhaps they would try again.

In the empty stillness of the Zermatt night the footsteps echoed clearly; they belonged to a man with a limp.

Douglas threw his cigarette into the water, then quickly stepped out of the light. A few minutes later Jan Vorteg passed beneath the street lamp directly in front of Douglas. In his right hand Vorteg carried a faded flight bag. The bag was bulky and, judging from the way Vorteg was listing to one side, heavy. He crossed the bridge over the river, then turned right at the first intersection. Douglas felt the muscles in his stomach begin to flutter; Vorteg's route would take him past the church—and the veterinarian's office. Douglas waited a few moments, then started after the other man.

Not wishing to advertise his own presence, Douglas kept a good distance between himself and the man ahead. As a result, Vorteg was already in the vast, grassy courtyard in front of the veterinarian's office a full minute before Douglas arrived there.

Douglas braced against the side of a building and peered around the corner. The courtyard was in total darkness, the moonlight cut off by three huge trees with upper branches that formed a virtual canopy over the yard. He strained, trying to peer into the darkness, undecided on what action he should take. He was concerned about Dragon, and at the same time not anxious to present himself as a target, in the event that Vorteg was armed.

The pungent smell of gasoline wafted to him a split second before the side of the east wing of the building erupted in a sudden flash of orange-white flame.

Douglas groaned and sprinted away from the protective cover of the building, across the lawn. Vorteg, gimping along as fast as he could, emerged from the darkness, saw Douglas, tried to cut to the left and fell to the ground. The man's eyes were wide with fright as Douglas sprinted past him; it was the second time in twenty-four hours Douglas had allowed Vorteg to escape from the scene of a crime; he'd be most curious to hear the elder Vorteg's explanation for this one.

He hit the office door at full tilt—and bounced back three feet. His shoulder went numb. The door was solid. From inside the building came the high-pitched yelps of frightened, panicky animals.

There was a window a few feet away from the rapidly advancing flames. He quickly removed his

jacket and used it to shield his fist as he broke the glass, then to shield his face from the flames as he picked the jagged pieces of glass from the frame. This done, he braced his hands on the frame and vaulted headfirst through the window.

He landed on his shoulder, tucked into a ball and rolled, came up on his feet. First he unbolted the door, then he raced back along the corridor and through another door into the area where the animals were kept. The room was filled with black, acrid smoke. He could hear the hiss of flames above the din created by the animals. Dragon was to his left, standing on his hindquarters, his front paws braced against the wire of his cage. Across the aisle were three other dogs and a goat. He released the goat first, grabbing it by the fold of skin under its chin and leading it out to the door. Then he released the three other dogs. Finally, he opened Dragon's cage. Dragon wagged his tail, then leaped into Douglas' arms.

"Lazy dog!" Douglas whispered as he carried Dragon out into the cool night air.

He sat down hard on the moist ground beneath a tree and coughed, struggling to catch his breath. From the opposite end of town came the wail of fire engines.

Dragon licked Douglas' face, then leaped out of his arms, ran off a few paces and began to bark excitedly.

Douglas shook his head. "What's the matter with you, dog?" he said. "This isn't playtime." He was distracted by the thought of what would happen next, and he was convinced the sequence of events would be fairly simple: the Vortegs would simply lie. Hans Vorteg would claim that his son had not been out of his bed all night, and no one in Zermatt, least of all Karl Henning, would be prepared to call a member of the all-powerful commune a liar, not without the kind of evidence that Douglas didn't have. So, if members of the commune didn't lie, who was responsible for the fire, and the empty gasoline can on the lawn? An itinerant chess grand master?

Douglas didn't like the scenario; it contained just enough paranoia to give it the ring of truth.

Dragon ran back to him and gently pulled on Douglas' jacket with his teeth. Then he again ran off a few paces, turned and barked.

"Dragon, what the hell—?" The rest of the sentence caught in his throat. Dragon was trying to get

him to follow. He had been running in the direction of the mountain to the west; high up on that mountain was the Gornergrat. Douglas slowly rose to his feet. "You know . . . something," Douglas whispered. "And you can show me. That's why they had to kill you." He nodded his head and clapped his hands. "All right," he said to the dog, "we'll do it your way; we'll play the Dragon variation."

Douglas walked toward Dragon and clapped his hands. This time Dragon seemed to understand. He gave a small, high-pitched bark and leaped into Douglas' arms. Douglas skirted around the trees to avoid the fire trucks and official cars, then started walking directly toward the mountain in the distance.

Dragon lay at the edge of the crevasse, whimpering. Douglas, standing above him, shivered in the freezing, glacier dawn. Fifty feet below them, wedged between two blocks of ice, was the body of a man who could only be Victor Rensky.

It was a perfect grave, an almost perfect murder, Douglas realized. The ice was closing up. In a few days, or perhaps only a few hours, this section of the glacier would be a seamless stretch of ice, and Victor Rensky's body would begin a slow, inch-by-inch journey that would take a thousand years.

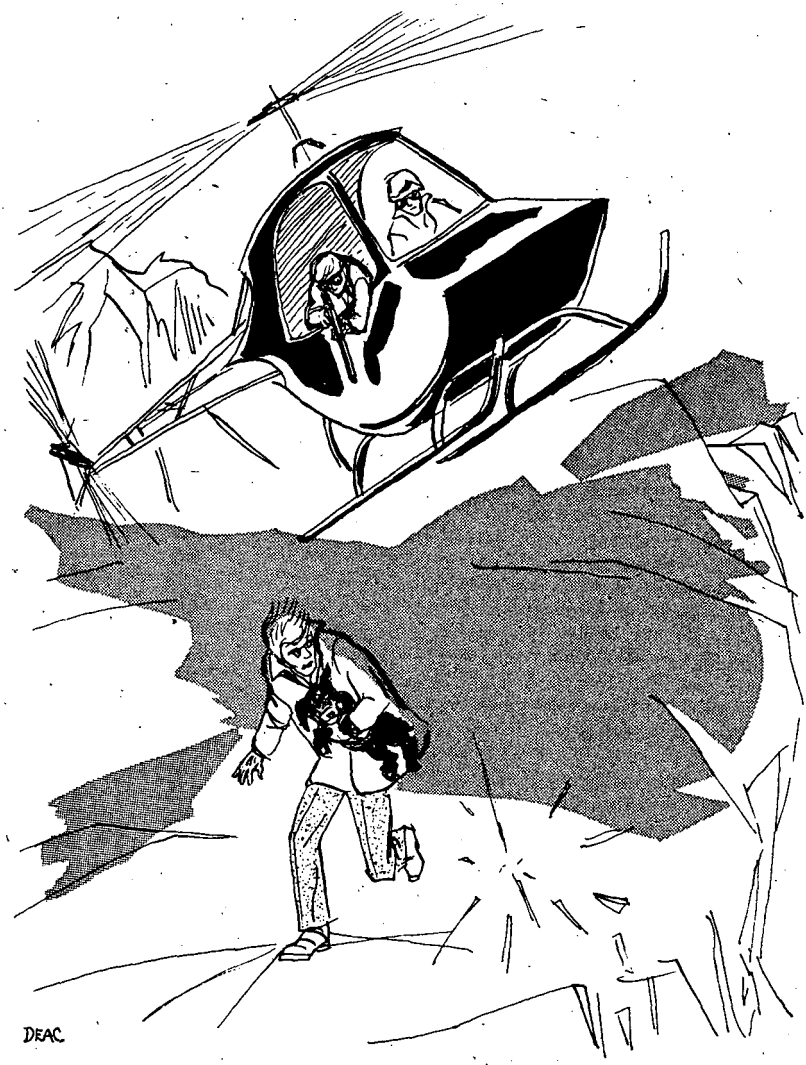
Douglas reached down and touched the dog. "C'mon, Dragon," he said quietly. "You've done your job. Let's get out of here before we freeze."

The helicopter came at them from the east, out of the sun. Douglas heard it before he saw it, and it sounded too close. He dropped flat onto the ice, grabbing Dragon and holding him close as the helicopter passed a few feet overhead. Had he remained standing he would have been smashed and hurled into the crevasse.

The craft made a sharp turn and started back. It was a small helicopter, private, and piloted by Jan Vorteg. His father was sitting beside him. Sunlight glinted off metal inside the cockpit. A second later there was a gunshot and the ice next to Douglas exploded in a shower of sparkling slivers of frozen sunlight.

Douglas picked up Dragon and sprinted as best he could across the ice, keeping low, zigzagging on the treacherous surface. Again the helicopter zoomed overhead, and Douglas dropped to the ice as bullets whizzed through the air.

There was no place to run. Douglas knew he was too large a



target. He pushed Dragon away from him. "Go, Dragon!" he shouted. "Get out of here!" The thought crossed his mind that now Dragon would have to start all over again, coaxing someone up onto the Gornergrat to find two bodies. He choked off a hysterical

laugh. "*Run,* you damn dog! You got away once! Let's see you do it again!"

Dragon stood his ground, growling and barking at the closing helicopter. Douglas cursed, jumped to his feet and started running again.

There was a roar of sound to his left, a flash of red, and then there were two helicopters overhead. The shooting stopped, and the two helicopters began a strange, aerial duet orchestrated by hand signals from Karl Henning. There was a double-barreled shotgun sticking out from the open window of his cockpit. Both helicopters banked and set down on the other side of an ice ridge that blocked Douglas' view.

Douglas rose and, with Dragon limping at his side, began walking toward the ridge. He felt dizzy, almost overwhelmed by the realization that he was still alive. He picked up a handful of snow and rubbed it vigorously against his face, savoring the clean, biting cold.

The double shotgun blast was totally unexpected, an ugly mushroom cloud of sound billowing up from the spot beyond the ice ridge where the helicopters had landed. Douglas stopped and waited. His elation was gone.

A few moments later Karl Henning emerged from the other side of the ridge. He walked slowly, his head bowed. He carried the shotgun in the crook of his left arm. The big man walked to the edge of the crevasse and stared down at the body of Victor Rensky. Douglas joined him. Dragon lay down by the tear in the ice and began to whimper again.

"I couldn't help it," Henning said softly into the silence. "They both had guns. I guess they didn't take me too seriously. They just didn't leave me any choice."

Douglas touched the other man's arm. "Thanks for bailing me out, Karl. How'd you know I was up here?"

"It was a guess. Somebody saw Jan Vorteg running away from the fire. He also saw you walking with the dog toward the mountain. Later, when I saw that Vorteg's helicopter was missing from the pad, I thought I'd better check up here." He paused, then nodded in the direction of Rensky's body. "What do you suppose this was all about? Personal feud?"

Douglas shook his head. "I don't think so. Do you know anything about a Nazi fifth column in Switzerland during the war?"

A muscle twitched in Henning's jaw. He took a long time to answer. "There have always been a lot of rumors about prominent

German-Swiss collaborating with the Nazis. The story goes that they wanted to turn Switzerland, at least the German-speaking part of it, over to the Germans. I don't know how much truth there is in it."

"Well, Rensky was writing a book about it. I saw the manuscript and the research materials in his apartment. My guess is that he had a list of the names of some of those traitors. Hans Vorteg's name was on the list. Somehow Vorteg found out about it. He couldn't face the disgrace of being branded a traitor, so he got his son to help him kill Rensky. If you check with Rensky's friends you'll probably find that he was in the habit of walking with Dragon early every morning on the Gornergrat. The Vortegs knew that. When the slopes were closed to skiers, the Vortegs saw their opportunity. They knew Rensky was up on the glacier before anyone else, so they went up in their helicopter and ambushed him, then pushed his body into the crevasse, but they missed Dragon, and they worried about that for good reason. They knew the dog might be able to lead somebody back to the spot where his master was shot. They spent the whole morning looking for him, just as Vorteg said. That's why they didn't get down much before I did, Karl."

Henning thought about it for a few moments, then slowly nodded. "Jan Vorteg broke into the apartment to get the manuscript and the list of names."

"Right. When he saw me there, with Dragon, he knew they had problems."

Henning's face creased in a half-smile. "How right they were," he said quietly. He turned suddenly and slapped Douglas on the back. "Well, my friend, thanks to you it looks like I'll miss my tennis game this afternoon. I've got work to do. We'll have to get that body up. Then I think I'll go over to Rensky's apartment and see what names turn up in that manuscript." He grinned broadly. "But first I'm dropping you off at our hotel. You'll stay there as the guest of the Swiss government. It's the least a humble public servant like myself can do to repay you for what you've done. And I think our chef can find a steak for Dragon."

Douglas was staring down at the body. "I may be able to do one more thing for you," he said distantly.

"What's that?"

Douglas turned to face Henning. "I think the list of names is in the apartment—but not in the manuscript."

Henning frowned. "Then where?"

"There," Douglas said, walking across the room to Rensky's workbench and placing his hand on the single pile of postcards there.

"On postcards?" Henning sounded incredulous. He was standing by the door. The shotgun he still carried seemed ugly and out of place in Rensky's world of photos, books and chess sets.

"Rensky was a chess fanatic. Maybe he was also eccentric—or security conscious. In any case, the other postcards are properly notated, and they're from other people with whom he played postal chess. This deck is a ringer and, if I'm right, they're in a simple code, alternating letters and numbers corresponding to letters to spell out names, dates and any other information he might want to record."

Henning's voice seemed strangely hoarse. "Why the hell would he want to do that? Assuming that he wasn't simply eccentric."

Douglas shrugged. "I can guess. First, he was dealing with highly-sensitive information. But he was also doing a lot of research in East Germany. He risked search every time he went in or out. If routine written notes on the subject of Nazi collaborators in Switzerland were uncovered it might not be taken too kindly by the East Germans. Also, there was the danger of leaks if his notes were found by the Germans—warnings to the subjects of his investigation. So he coded all the important information and mailed it to himself as a postal chess card. He never underestimated the inherent risk in the project; he would be a target right up to the day the book was published. Vorteg somehow found out anyway, and what happened proved Rensky was right in taking the precautions he did. He should have taken more." Douglas reached across the workbench for a pencil and piece of paper. "It will be easy enough to see if I'm right. Let's try decoding some of the cards."

"No, Douglas," Henning said. His voice was flat, drained of emotion. "Leave the cards alone."

Douglas glanced up and found himself looking into the large, black, owl-eyes of the shotgun. He slowly let the pencil drop to the bench, then turned to face Henning squarely. Dragon lifted his head from the worn carpet where he lay and began to growl. Henning moved closer.

"What is it, Henning?" Douglas asked softly. The shotgun had

dropped to a point on his chest just above his heart.

The large man nodded curtly toward the stack of postcards. "My father," he said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"Karl, I'm sorry." Douglas shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Shut up, Franklin! He doesn't need your pity, and neither do I! My father made a mistake . . . a long time ago. And he's always regretted it. He told me about it ten years ago. For the past thirty years no man in Switzerland has been more patriotic than my father. To have this . . . *thing* . . . come out now would kill him. The cards must be destroyed."

"Karl, I don't give a *damn* what you do with the cards," Douglas said with feeling. The gun didn't waver. "You can't even be sure your father's name is in there. Maybe Rensky overlooked a few."

"It's there," Henning said flatly. "Vorteg told me. On the tennis court yesterday."

Douglas' breath whistled out through his teeth. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Did he also tell you that he killed Rensky?"

It seemed to take Henning a long time to get the word out. Finally, he said, "Yes."

"You killed them, didn't you? Vorteg and his son. You didn't want to take a chance on their talking. That's plain enough now."

Henning's eyes flashed. "I don't have to explain myself to you, Franklin!" he said with some of the fiery pride that had first attracted Douglas to him, a pride that had seemed sorely lacking the previous afternoon. "You can think what you want!"

"Yours was the only shot I heard."

"Maybe we fired at the same time. You wouldn't have heard a rifle over a shotgun blast. Isn't that beside the point? The important thing is that I didn't kill *you*, Douglas. And I didn't let the Vortegs kill you. Think about that."

"What the hell did you expect would happen?"

"I was hoping . . . everything would work itself out."

Dragon had been silent a long time. As a result, his single, sharp bark startled Henning, causing him to turn his eyes away for just a moment. Disarming Henning was almost ridiculously easy. Douglas reached out and pushed the barrel of the gun with one hand and hit Henning on the jaw with the other. Douglas felt something snap in his hand, but the one blow was enough. Henning dropped the gun and sat down hard on the floor. His eyes were glazed. By the time they cleared again Douglas had the gun trained

on him. Henning didn't move.

"Why *didn't* you kill me, Karl?"

Henning didn't answer. Instead, he slowly pulled his jacket away from his body. There was a bullet hole in the material a fraction of an inch from where Henning's ribs would be.

Douglas swallowed hard. "So you did kill them in self-defense. You're still the law around here. You had—have a responsibility. You were going to let two men get away with a murder."

"To save my father. The only thing I was going to do with you was to threaten; I wanted your promise to keep silent." He added as an afterthought, "I don't suppose it would have worked anyway."

"It's wrong, Karl. It's all wrong." He felt—and sounded—defensive, and he wasn't sure why.

"What're you, Douglas? A cop?"

Dragon came across the room and lay down at Douglas' feet. Douglas reached down and touched the dog's head. He was surprised to find that his hand was trembling.

Karl Henning pointed to a telephone on a stand at the opposite end of the room. "There's the phone. Call Interpol, if you want. But you just remember that I saved your life. Now it's up to you to decide what to do with my life—and my father's." He paused, then added, "What are you going to do, Douglas?"

Douglas stared at the phone for a long time. Then he picked up Dragon and walked slowly out of the room.

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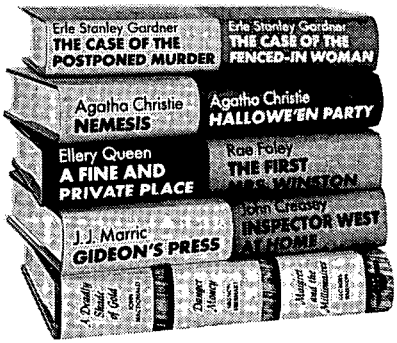

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