ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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SEPTEMBER

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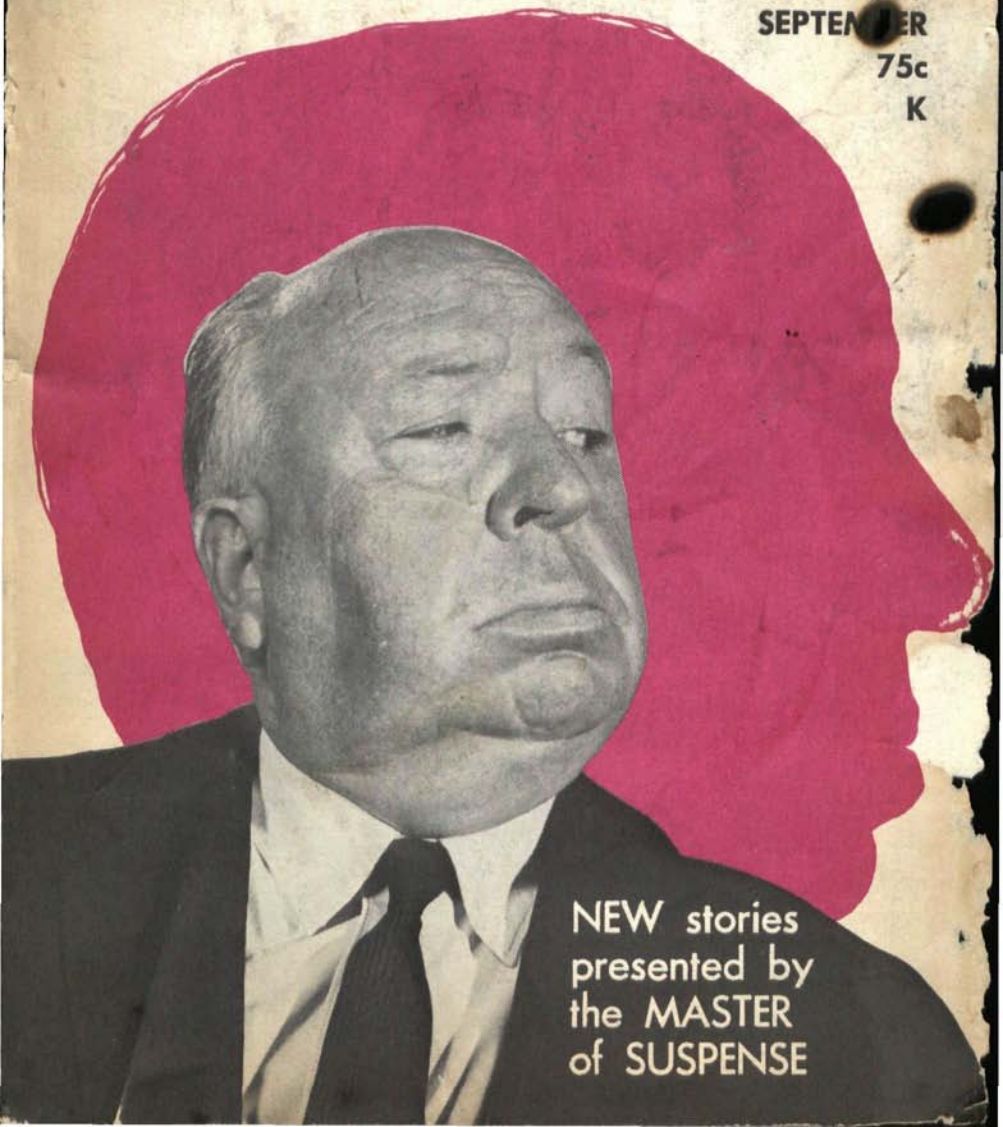

NEW stories presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

September 1975

Dear Reader

This issue is no place for those who wish to hear nothing of man's mortality—as what issue is. However, in this present case, the dear departed are as abundant as apples. A rich harvest lies but the turn of a page away, beginning with *A Small Death* by Stephen Wasylyk.

The ways in which the end may arrive are varied indeed, and you shall taste a number of fresh examples within Together they are sufficient to give pause to the most learned of assassins. Jack the Ripper, by his redundancy, was a most unimaginative fellow by comparison to the authors of these new plums of mystery and suspense.

If it is as a magician you come to regard me in my gathering the pick of the crop, I must defer to the new creation of Bill Pronzini and Michael Kurland. You shall meet him in the novelette titled *Quicker Than the Eye.*

Good reading

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 20, NO. 9 SEPTEMBER 1975

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

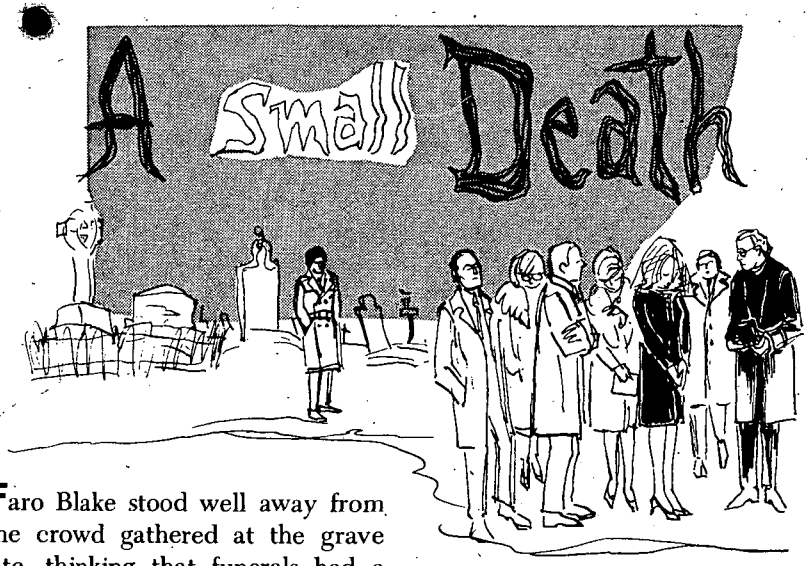
CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 9, September 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.

Amid one's triumphs, there may yet be cause to recognize that death is an inconsolable remedy for a disease.



Faro Blake stood well away from the crowd gathered at the grave site, thinking that funerals had a way of looking alike; the knot of mourners, the green canopy, the stacked flowers. This one was only a little different. The crowd was larger and it was well-dressed. Over-dressed, perhaps; the men were in well-tailored black suits, the women jeweled and furred.

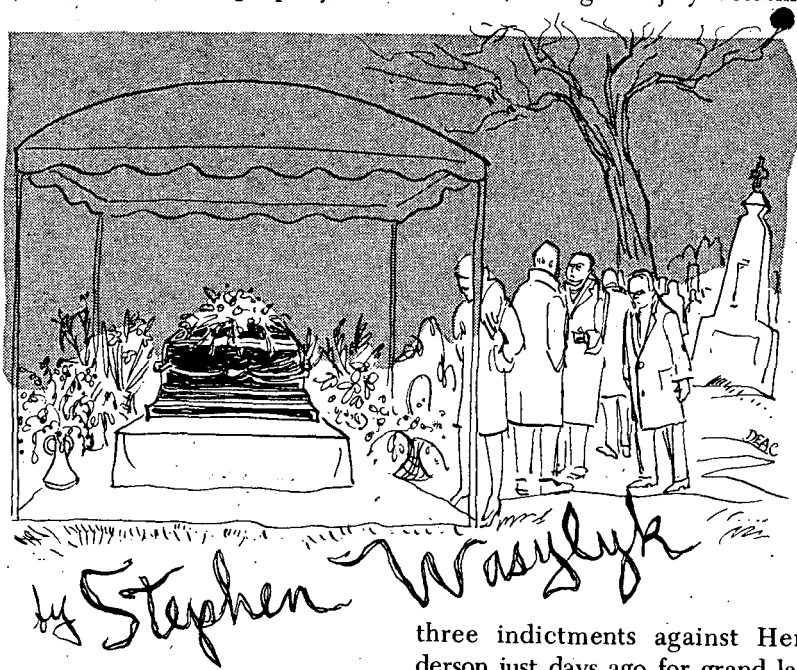
Henderson would have liked it that way, reasoned Blake. He had always made it a point to surround himself with the best.

The grieving widow was blonde and young, some twenty years younger than her erstwhile husband, wearing a simply-cut black ensemble whose classic lines had to have come from one of the city's exclusive shops. Since the widow was now extremely wealthy, the outfit was only suitable.

Blake wondered what she would do with all the money she had inherited. She had probably never concerned herself with its origin

and would certainly not do so now. Tainted money would buy all the things that clean money would.

Tainted money—a hackneyed old phrase, but to Blake it was very apt when used properly, and using it to describe Henderson's millions was very proper.



by Stephen Wasylyk

Henderson had made his money from crime—all-encompassing crime. There was nothing illegal in the city of which Henderson had not owned a very large piece—drugs, gambling, prostitution, loan sharking, fencing.

Yet, knowing where Henderson's millions had come from was one thing. Proving it was another. That had been Blake's ambition as chief investigator for the district attorney for the past three years. Now he was on the brink of success, the grand jury returning three indictments against Henderson just days ago for grand larceny, loan sharking and perjury, but Henderson had beaten them in the simplest, most economical way it was possible to beat a grand jury indictment. He had died.

From a heart attack, his personal physician had certified, almost as if Henderson had known that even with all his money and

his high-priced attorneys he wouldn't beat the indictments this time.

The coffin was lowered now and the crowd was drifting away toward the long row of black limousines, a slowly dispersing Who's Who of the crime hierarchy of the city, most of them in the big category, some of them hoping to improve their standing now that Henderson was gone. The straight types were there, too; professional people, politicians, the men with whom Henderson had done business from his front as a building contractor because, while everyone had known Henderson was a crook, he had never been convicted and a man was always innocent until proven guilty. Henderson would have had no problem producing character witnesses at his trial.

Blake started across the young spring grass, enjoying the soft wind that flirted with the budding trees and promised even balmier days.

Two men broke away from the stream of mourners and moved to intercept him. One was about six feet, his black hair long, a square moustache springing full above thin lips; the other was even larger, broad-shouldered, his battered face empty and blank.

The first man said, "Satisfied, fink? What more could you want?"

Blake stopped, his hands buried deep in his coat. The black-haired man was Crenshaw, who had masqueraded as Henderson's bodyguard. His actual job was to enforce Henderson's decisions, backed by the bigger man whose name was Malloy. Malloy seldom spoke, leaving that to Crenshaw.

"You see me crying," Blake said.

"Your job is through now. You've had three years of trying to bring him down. The D.A. won't need you anymore. You can get yourself a job guarding kids' toys in a department store."

"No," said Blake, "I'm not through yet. Not until I nail you."

Crenshaw smiled tightly, hate flat in his voice. "Not you, fink. Not ever you. Just be careful. One of these days someone is going to blow you away."

"Maybe," Blake said. "Why don't you try? I'd like that."

Crenshaw started away. "I would if I had the time, fink, but I won't be seeing you anymore."

Blake wondered what Crenshaw meant by that, dismissed it as big talk and went back to thinking about Henderson's money. He thought about it all the way into the office, leaving his car on the flat plaza alongside the ornate city hall that towered at the inter-

section of the two main streets of the city.

He rode the rickety elevator to the seventh floor offices of the D.A. As he walked down the hall to his cubicle, he beckoned as he passed to a blond young man drinking coffee from a plastic cup, his feet up on his desk. The feet hit the floor quickly.

In his office, Blake motioned the young man to a chair. "I have something I want you to do, Poole."

"You saw the big man planted?"

"I saw and thought. We know that Henderson would have left his widow the money he made from his contracting business. That was clean and could be handled with an ordinary will. But that wasn't all of Henderson's millions. We also know he had accounts in Swiss banks, for one thing, and possibly some in the West Indies, not to mention ways to hide his profits, like safe-deposit boxes under aliases. It would be a very complicated setup and I would be willing to bet his wife didn't even know where it all was. Now someone will have to straighten it out."

"That's why his attorneys come from one of the biggest firms in town. They'll see she gets it all."

"Will they? When she doesn't know about it and doesn't need it? Suppose someone wanted to rip off Henderson? It could be done. Even if she found out about it, what could she do? Take them to court?"

"Who would do the ripping?"

"I don't know who. I'm just saying that it is possible and there are people around who could do it. And if you're thinking his lawyers wouldn't go along, guess again. To be an attorney for a man like Henderson, you have to have a little larceny in your veins."

"All right. Let them rip him off. What does it mean to us?"

"Just a matter of information. Maybe what we learn will tell us who will be the people to watch, now that Henderson is gone. We still haven't blown the thing wide open. We know Henderson had connections that we never did turn up. Why don't you spend a little time looking into it? It will cost nothing and build the file a little. Snoop around. There would be overseas cables and phone calls from his attorneys' offices and maybe even from his home. The phone company will probably cooperate but if not, you can threaten them with a warrant. In view of the indictments, it is all part of a continuing investigation. I would like to know just how

much money Henderson had, where it is, and who is going to get it."

"You're crazy," Poole said. "Why waste our time? We can't recover it, we can't prosecute Henderson for having it and we can't even arrest anyone for inheriting it."

Blake chuckled. "Don't be too sure. The whole organization revolves around money. That's why the people are in it. Tracking down that money can tell us a great deal."

Poole shrugged. "I'll try," he said from the doorway.

Blake's phone rang.

"Faro? This is Leo Nern, down at Missing Persons."

An image flashed into Blake's mind of a man with whom he used to work; balding, stout, and ready for retirement, the sergeant's stripes on his sleeves were earned through thirty years of work in almost every department of the force.

"What can I do for you?"

"There is a slight problem down here that only you can handle. Do you have time to stop by for a minute and take care of it for me?"

"I'll be right down."

The Missing Persons Bureau was two floors down. It took Blake only five minutes until he was walking through a maze of desks to where Nern sat at the back of the room.

An elderly woman, her iron-gray hair pulled back in an unfashionable bun, her too-heavy coat pulled tight around her in spite of the warmth in the room, looked up at Blake and smiled. She was a Dresden doll-like woman, slight, traces of a youthful beauty still alive in the seamed face; a delicate woman, so fragile that somehow, somewhere her left arm had become withered and now lay uselessly in her lap. She was a woman to be shielded, cherished and protected and Blake was surprised to find her here, out of place in the rough, jaded atmosphere of the police unit.

Blake held out his hand. She grasped it firmly and held onto it.

"I see you two know each other," Nern said.

"Very well," Blake confirmed. "Mrs. Unger and I are old friends. I once rented a room from her and her husband for five years and there were many months they waited for the rent without complaining." He patted the woman's hand. "Why are you here?"

"My husband Morry is missing. You remember Morry?"

Blake remembered. Morry Unger was everything this woman was not—a bull of a man, hearty

and outgoing, even gross, but he had treated this woman like a hothouse flower, a child, protecting her from life with a gentle tenderness. She had been almost completely dependent on him. Blake sensed how lost she would feel with Unger missing.

Blake looked at Nern. "That is more your line than mine."

Nern shrugged. "I know. We've done all we could but we've had no luck. That's why she insisted on seeing you. She seems to think you have some magic way of solving her problem."

"When was he last seen?"

"Three nights ago. He worked on one of the waterfront piers as a security guard. He checked off duty at midnight. Usually he drove straight home, arriving by twelve-thirty. He never showed up that night. She came to the office the next morning. I checked the hospitals and the morgue. Today we followed it up. The man who relieved him said he punched out and walked to his car. That was the last anyone saw him. I put out a bulletin on both him and the car but we've turned up nothing yet."

Blake turned to Mrs. Unger. "Perhaps there was an emergency he didn't tell you about?"

She looked up at him, panic in her eyes. "Where would he go?"

Nowhere, Blake knew. He would never leave this woman.

"It seems to me that the first order of business is to find the car, if it's still in the city," he said to Nern. "Could you have the department see what they can do in a few hours? I owe this woman a favor."

"If you say so, Faro," Nern said, "but we can only do so much. You know people keep disappearing every day. But you'll have to do something for me. Persuade Mrs. Unger to go home. She insists she is going to stay here until we find her husband, but this is no place for her and she can't help."

Blake placed a hand on her shoulder. "He's right. You can do nothing here, and he will call if he learns anything. What would your husband think if he came home and you were not there?"

"There is nothing at home," she said, the panic in her eyes again.

"It is best," Blake said gently.

She rose reluctantly.

"I will come and tell you myself if we learn anything," Blake said.

She smiled gratefully. He escorted her to the elevator, then went back to his office, the morning suddenly filled with people to be seen, phone calls to be answered, papers to be read, assign-

ments to be given out to his men.

It was almost noon when the phone rang. Blake punched the glowing button.

Nern's voice said: "Faro?"

"I'm listening."

"Harbor Patrol has discovered a body floating in the river. They are recovering it now. We're not yet certain that it's Unger but you might want to go down there."

"I'm on my way," Blake said.

He wheeled the car onto the Harbor Patrol pier a few minutes later just as the launch was pulling in, a group of men standing around a covered body in the stern. He waited until the launch was made fast before dropping to the deck. A man wearing a greatcoat with the hood thrown back and with lieutenant's bars on his shirt collar, held out a hand.

"I'm Scully," he said. "Nern told us to expect you."

"Did you find any identification?"

"Not a thing. His pockets were empty, but it has to be this Unger. He's wearing a uniform complete with gun belt, but the piece is missing."

"How did he die?"

"There's no mystery about that. Someone blew a hole in his chest with a heavy handgun, then dumped the body into the river. The M.E. will have to pin it down but I would have to say he's been in the water for two or three days, which isn't unusual. The tides and the currents sometimes trap a body beneath the piers and it's a while before it breaks loose."

Blake motioned. Scully knelt and pulled back the blanket from the man's face.

It had been years since Blake had seen him and the white face, shrunken after days in the water, wasn't in the best of condition, but this was Unger. He motioned Scully to replace the blanket.

The chill wind off the river made the afternoon seem much cooler. "Follow the usual procedure," he said to Scully and leaped back to the pier.

I'll have to tell her, he decided. It will be better coming from me than from someone else and she's going to take it hard. The question was, why should someone kill Unger? If it had happened on the pier while the man was at work it would have been easy to explain. He would have been in the way of someone intending to rip off the pier. But afterward? When the man was on his way home? Maybe robbery was the motive but that could have been done without killing, and Blake couldn't see a holdup man challenging

Unger while he had that gun strapped to his hip. Then there was the matter of the car. No holdup man would have bothered to get rid of that, but Blake had a hunch it had been pushed off a pier somewhere and now couldn't be found.

Maybe the answer was at the place where Unger had worked.

The pier was only a few blocks away, the big doors of the shed fronting on the wide cobblestoned street, separated from the rumbling traffic by two sets of railroad tracks, rusty from disuse, left over from the days when the railroad used to do all of the dockside pickup and delivery. That job was now handled almost exclusively by the big tractor-trailer trucks, several of which were lined up in front of the doors being unloaded by forklifts.

Blake squeezed the car between two of the trucks and looked up at the front of the shed. Faded foot-high lettering below a huge 42 indicated that this pier belonged to Intra-Global Freight Handling, Inc. The name triggered something in Blake's mind that he couldn't quite pin down.

Just inside the door, he found a glass-walled cubicle that served as an office, occupied at the moment by a burly individual with a bald head, heavy jowls and a shirt pocket bulging with cigars. He was shouting into the phone: "Today! I said today and I mean today even if we have to put in overtime!" He dropped the phone and glared at Blake. "What do you want?"

Blake flashed his badge at him.

The man groaned. "Cops. That's all I need. They've been here once already about that fool Unger. I told them I don't know where he is. Neither does anyone else."

"We know where he is," said Blake quietly. "He's dead."

The burly man subsided a little. "How?"

"Someone shot him and dumped him in the river."

The burly man found a cigar, bit the end off, spat and said, "You know all that means to me? It means I've got to hire a man to take his place, that's what it means, and it's damn tough finding someone willing to work down here at night."

"You have my sympathy," Blake said coldly. "Right now I'd like you to answer a few questions."

"I don't have time for that," the man snapped. "I've got a ship to finish loading and get out of here. Do you know what it costs the company if it's delayed?"

"Frankly, I don't give a damn," Blake said wearily. "Finding the man or men who killed Unger is a lot more important to me than your ship. Are you going to cooperate or do you want to do it downtown? I can arrange that very easily."

The burly man touched a flame to his cigar and blew a huge cloud of smoke. "Don't get touchy. We all have our troubles. What do you want?"

"Tell me again about Unger."

The man sighed. "There's nothing to tell. He worked the four-to-midnight shift that night. His relief came in about eleven-thirty, they talked for a while, Unger punched out and that was the last anyone saw of him. You want to talk to the relief man, I'll give you his name and address."

"Homicide will take care of that. Do the men keep a log?"

"All guards do, once the pier closes. They have to check in late shipments and people leaving or entering the pier. It's a company rule." He pointed to a heavy book on a stand. "Help yourself."

Blake flipped through the pages. The page from Unger's shift of three days ago was singularly blank. He pointed it out to the man. "Looks like a light night. You get those often?"

The man shrugged. "They come along. There usually isn't much action here at night and no reason for anyone to enter the pier. All the guard has to do is keep his eyes and ears open and make his rounds."

"Would you have any idea of why Unger was killed?"

"Me? The way I figure it is that anything can happen around here at night. People aren't exactly falling over each other out there after dark. It's a very lonely place. Maybe someone tried to hold him up and he gave them a fight."

Blake stepped from the office

and looked down the inside of the cavernous shed, at the stacked crates, the men at work, the fork-lift trucks moving in a noisy ballet carrying pallets of cargo to the loading platform outside, where a crane hoisted them aboard the ship made fast to the pier.

"What are you loading?" he asked.

"Right now, machine parts."

"Where are they bound?"

"South America."

"How long has this ship been in?"

"Three days now. It sails late this afternoon."

"It was in the night Unger disappeared?"

"It docked that afternoon but guards don't have anything to do with the freighters. Their business is inside the pier."

"I was thinking of the seamen."

"They would have nothing to do with the guard. They come and go as they please along the pier, but this crew stayed aboard. They're all foreigners and only the captain speaks English. I don't think any of them left the ship and no reason for them to come into the shed. Once we close up at the end of the day, there is no traffic between the ship and the pier."

"Mind if I look around?"

The man waved. "Help yourself. Just keep your eyes open. There's a lot of action around here."

Blake walked out of the office into the bustle inside the pier shed. Avoiding a loaded forklift, he stepped out of one of the side doors to the open dock and looked up at the freighter, its once-black sides faded to a dull gray and spotted with rust, an A missing from the name *Santo Marie*. Blake knew little about ships, his experience confined to a one-time cruise when he was younger. Whether this freighter was considered large or small, he didn't know, but it towered above him, its bulk shadowing the pier from the afternoon sun. Some distance away, a gangplank slanted up toward the side of the ship. Beyond that, a crane was swinging pallets of cargo up toward the deck.

Blake walked along the pier toward the street, the shed to his left, the ship to his right. The man inside had been correct about one thing. To leave the ship, you had only to come down the gangplank and walk along the pier. Except when cargo was being loaded, the pier shed had nothing to do with the ship. It was nothing more than a warehouse, and there would have been no reason for Unger to leave it during his

tour under ordinary circumstances.

At his car, Blake looked up again at the faded name lettered on the shed, unable to place it, putting it down as something he had once heard in his years in the city. He put the car in gear and drove slowly along the waterfront. The piers for the most part looked alike, all patterned on one set of plans. Some had ships alongside, others had none. In the river beyond, several large ships herded by tugboats were either arriving or departing.

There was nothing to indicate why a man should have died here.

He found Mrs. Unger at home in the red-brick house sandwiched between the taller apartment buildings. It had been years since he had been in the house, yet nothing had changed and he was sure that nothing had changed in the third floor apartment he had rented for so long.

She looked at him expectantly.

Blake shook his head.

"He is dead," she said flatly.

"Yes," said Blake, his voice soft. "We found him in the river. Someone shot him."

She sagged a little. "I told him a hundred times it was a dangerous job."

"No, it was not when he was on duty. He was on his way home. It could happen to anyone."

"To really believe it, I must see for myself."

"I know," Blake said gently. He made a notation on a page of his notebook and handed it to her. "Go see this man. You must identify the body. The man will tell you what must be done and help you with whatever arrangements you wish when the body is released."

She looked at the paper for a long time. "Why should it be so? Why should someone kill him?"

"We don't know yet."

"What will I do without him?" she asked softly.

"You will manage," Blake said uncomfortably, wondering if she would.

She folded the paper with the fingers of her good hand and tucked it into her thin bosom, her thoughts elsewhere, leaving Blake standing there unnoticed. He turned to go.

"You will come back?" she asked suddenly. "It is important for you to come back."

"I will come back," he promised.

When he returned to the street, clouds had moved over the sun and the afternoon was gray. At City Hall, he parked in the section reserved for the mayor and a few chosen city executives and left it there, half hoping someone

would call him outside to move it.

Poole was at his desk, painfully stabbing with two fingers at a typewriter, when he walked into the outer office. Poole waited until Blake had hung up his coat and was seated at his desk before moving over to stand in front of him.

"For what it's worth, I have it," he said.

"Have what?"

"You wanted a rundown on what might be happening to Henderson's money. I spent the day tracking it down. I checked the phones and talked to a few people, like his stockbroker and people in banks. Not that they would give me much information but you know how things go. A little here, a little there and maybe you have a pattern. You can't take it to court but you can make some guesses."

"What are your guesses?"

"I'll leave that to you. All I will tell you is that for three or four days *before* he died, there was a lot of activity in Henderson's accounts. His bank balances were closed out, his securities seemed to have been sold, other assets were converted to cash and that was the name of the game. Collect as much cash as possible. Now why would a man do a thing like that?"

"Are you sure?"

"It would take an auditor to be sure and an auditor I'm not."

Blake considered. "With the indictments coming up, maybe he was planning to skip the country."

"Maybe so, but he never made it and I'll tell you this. The way I figure it, there is one helluva lot of cash around somewhere because Henderson sure didn't take it with him. I'll type up what I have and leave it on your desk."

Blake spun slowly in his chair to stare out of the window. Interesting, Poole's findings. He knew something would have had to happen to Henderson's money but converting it all to cash days before he died wasn't one of them. Not that it mattered anymore. Henderson was dead.

So was Unger and that was more important, even though it belonged to Homicide and not to him.

He felt a slight irritation and realized it was because that name on the pier, which he should have dismissed from his mind long ago, kept coming back as if it were something important, pushing other thoughts aside: *Intra-Global Freight Handling, Inc.*

Then it came and he sat up slowly, feeling a flicker of excitement. He went to the file, pulled out a folder and flipped through it quickly—and there it

was, just as he had thought.

He went back to his chair, propped his elbows on the desk, lowered his head into his hands and closed his eyes, his mind considering and reconsidering, sifting the possibilities until one came that refused to be dislodged.

He glanced at his watch.

Time was short. He grabbed his coat and yelled at Poole to come with him.

A half hour later he was looking at the river lapping at the pier where the *Santo Marie* had been moored, the freighter now in midstream, turning slowly, being ushered by a powerful tug.

"Come on!" snapped Blake.

They sped to the police launch dock and ran out to the boat. Scully, talking to a uniformed man, heard them coming.

Blake pointed at the *Santo Marie,* visible in midstream.

"Can you get us out to that ship?"

"Sure," said Scully. "But what for?"

"I'll explain later," snapped Blake.

"You'll need a warrant to get on board."

"To hell with the warrant!" yelled Blake. "Stop it for speeding or illegal parking or whatever else you people stop ships for. We'll worry about details later."

Scully shrugged. "It's your neck. Get on board."

Lights flashing and siren screaming, the launch pulled away from the pier, leaving a broad wake behind as it slanted toward the ship, pulling alongside the tugboat in a few minutes. Scully used a bullhorn to talk to the tug captain and Blake saw the bow wave of the tug subside as the tug slowed, the two ships drifting with the current.

"Let's go," he said to Scully.

Scully eased the launch toward a rope ladder that had been tossed over the side. They heard shouts and a commotion from the deck of the freighter and then Crenshaw's head and shoulders appeared.

His arm came over the side, stiffened and pointed.

"Duck!" yelled Scully.

The crew dived for cover. Crenshaw fired down at them, the bullet ricocheting viciously from the launch railing.

Blake drew his gun, clamping his wrist with his left hand and timing his shot to the bobbing of the launch, squeezing off as Crenshaw drifted into his sights. At the report, Crenshaw threw up his hands and disappeared.

"I guess that's it," Blake said to Scully. "Pull in. I'm going aboard now."

When he dropped over the side of the freighter into the well deck, Crenshaw was sprawled out, his arms wrapped around his bloody head as though he had developed a sudden headache. A half dozen nervous-looking crew members held two men by the arms. One was Malloy. The other was a six foot, gray-haired, well-dressed man with a hawk nose and a thin line for a mouth.

"Hello, Henderson," Blake said.

The D.A., a short man with wide shoulders, tightly-curled hair cropped close, a square face and heavy horn-rimmed spectacles, leaned back in his chair and tented his hands. He had a quick, aggressive way of talking and the words churned out: "You've got me into a helluva legal tangle that I don't know how to handle yet. You had no right to stop that ship. Henderson's lawyers are going to use everything from illegal seizure to claiming the ship was out of our jurisdiction. They might even charge us with piracy, for all I know. I won't even mention the ship's owners. They're a completely different problem. There is no legal precedent in this town for something like this, so you had better tell it to me from the beginning and don't leave anything out."

Blake sighed and walked to the window. The lights of the city were brilliant in the dark, their halos masking the dirt and ugliness that seemed to grow worse each year. He clasped his hands behind his back.

"It was Poole," he said. "Until he told me about the cash, I was as ready as anyone to believe that Henderson was dead. But that money had me thinking. If it had been just a matter of Henderson skipping the country to avoid indictment, why didn't he just go? He would have had no need to convert those assets to cash. True, we could have frozen some of them but there would have been others that he could get any time, as long as he was alive and well and able to sign the necessary papers to transfer the funds. And I figured that the cash was like the tip of an iceberg. If that was what Poole could see in just a few hours, then what was going on beneath? Why had Henderson done all this? It's not so easy to leave the country with a big bundle of cash. You can't very well just check it in at an airline counter. You can't just walk through customs with it and it's hard to avoid customs no matter how you travel. So then, how had he intended to go? I told myself it really didn't matter, that Hen-

derson had died before he could pull it off, but then that name on the dock kept coming back to bug me."

"What name?"

"Intra-Global Freight Handling, Inc. I knew I'd seen it somewhere and it finally came to me. It was one of Henderson's companies that we suspected he used to launder his illegal money. Then the thought came that maybe it could be handled that way, that Henderson had intended to stow away on board the freighter, working through Intra-Global. If anyone could arrange an undercover departure, Intra-Global could. I would bet that Intra-Global is up to its ears in smuggling anyway. Hell, the money could have been manifested as machine parts if it had to be. It seemed to me that if Henderson was going, that was as good a way as any."

"But as far as you were concerned, Henderson was dead."

"So was Unger."

"I fail to see the connection."

"So did I at first. But if Henderson had planned to sneak aboard the *Santo Marie* with his money by arranging it with Intra-Global and Unger was the security guard for Intra-Global, then there had to be a connection. Maybe, since Henderson was dead, the money was still going and Unger had found out about it somehow."

He shook his head. "But the money wasn't important enough. There had to be something else. The only way to find out was to get on board the ship. I had a vague idea that Henderson might be there."

"But you had seen Henderson buried."

"I had seen a coffin lowered into the ground. Money means power to a man like Henderson, so much power that he could buy anything he wanted. It's a concept the average man finds hard to grasp and that was what Henderson was counting on. He had the money to buy a doctor and a phony death certificate, a funeral director and the body of some poor soul to take his place. It would have been no big trick to find someone his height and weight and make him up so that anyone who saw the body would believe it was Henderson. Once that thought took hold of you, it was hard to shake."

He left the window and waved to the D.A. "The rest I leave to you. You will have to figure out the charges and what you can do with them. I'll pick up the doctor and the funeral director and have the body disinterred to find out who was really buried and how he died. I'll also take care of seeing

that Intra-Global is taken apart piece by piece, but not right now. I want to go over to see Mrs. Unger. If she hadn't brought me into this, none of it would have happened. I think she deserves an explanation of why her husband died."

"Tell me first. I still don't know."

"It was a nice spring night. Unger was standing in the door of the shed enjoying the night air when he saw Crenshaw and Malloy take Henderson aboard. Henderson didn't like that. He had Crenshaw and Malloy kill him. Malloy has made a full statement."

The D.A. grinned. "Go ahead and tell her. It might make her feel better to know that because of it, we've had one of our biggest days ever."

Blake walked out into the darkness and sat in the car for a few moments. It had started to rain and the city streets were polished, the air fresh and soft and clean. A big day—but it wasn't over yet. When it was all done, maybe Henderson would still walk away laughing. Things had a way of working out like that in court too often. But as a power, Henderson was through. He had caused the organization too much trouble and was too hot to handle now.

Blake still had that warm feeling of satisfaction when he pressed the bell at the Unger house. No one answered. He pushed the door and found it open.

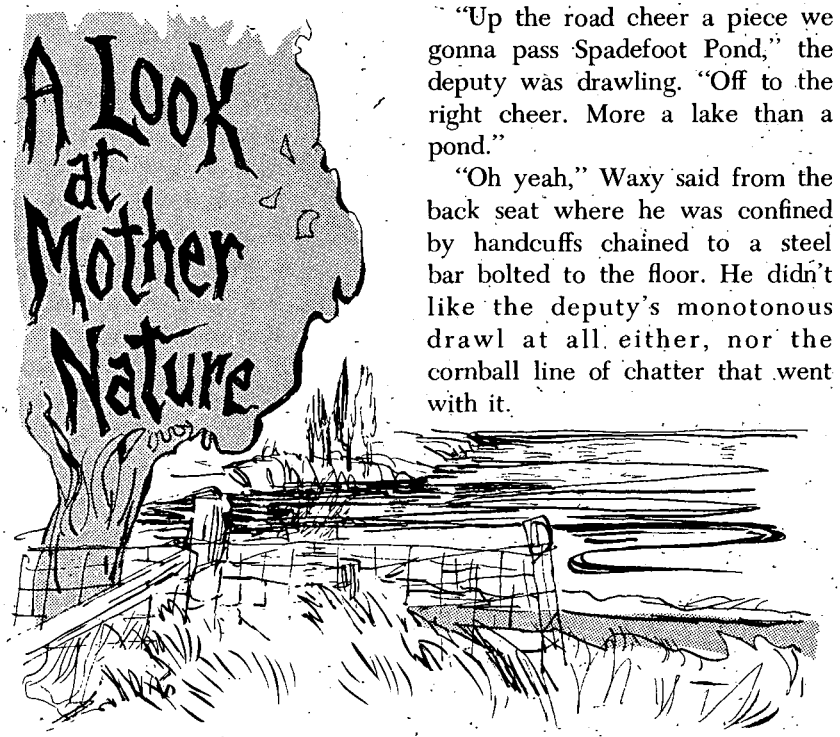
He found her sitting at the kitchen table, her head resting on her withered arm as if she were asleep, but the empty pill bottle in front of her told Blake the sleep was deep and final and she was beyond awakening.

It was a small death, only one of the many for which Henderson had been indirectly responsible and for which he could never be prosecuted, but it was big to Blake because she had been a friend at a time when he needed one, and her death was enough to dull the sense of victory.

No, he thought, it hadn't been such a big day after all.

There's nothing like a farewell present to make one's departure complete.

A Look at Mother Nature



There was not a thing about this deputy sheriff that Waxy Lustig liked. He didn't like the dirty Panama hat the old schmo was wearing and he didn't like the klutzy way he wore it—set square on his head. A real hick, this fuzz, strictly from Lower Slobbovia.

"Up the road cheer a piece we gonna pass Spadefoot Pond," the deputy was drawling. "Off to the right cheer. More a lake than a pond."

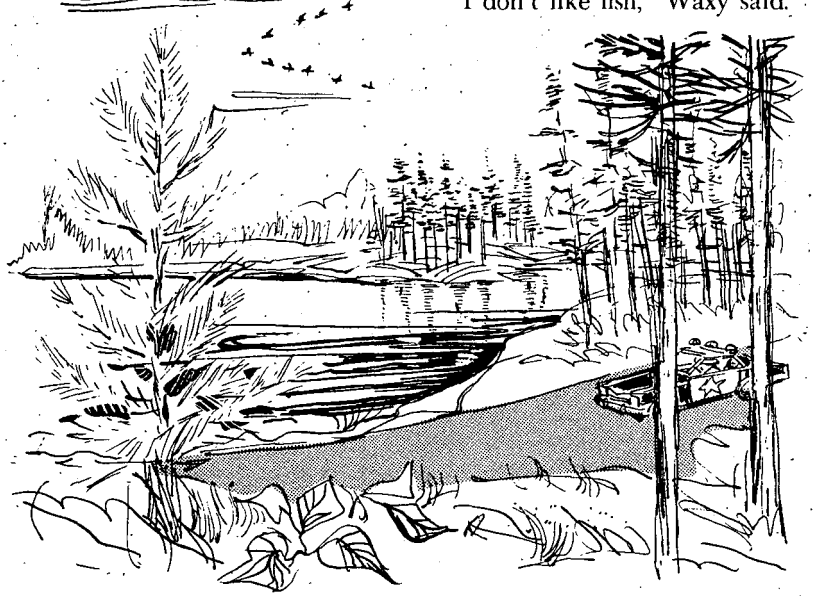
"Oh yeah," Waxy said from the back seat where he was confined by handcuffs chained to a steel bar bolted to the floor. He didn't like the deputy's monotonous drawl at all either, nor the cornball line of chatter that went with it.

"Save ole Spadefoot cheer, they's nary a body a water within a two-day drive or a two-week trot where a man can catch hisself a genuwine cutthroat trout. You have my oath on that."

"Yeah, yeah," Waxy said irritably.

The deputy shifted that sick cud of tobacco from one cheek to the other. "Big fellas too, them cutthroat. They favor cold water, cold and runnin. That's why they

by Frank Sisk



never seen this fur south save in ole Spadefoot. She fed by deep springs, I heah, and they so pure icy a man mought freeze the knuckles off a hand if he troll it outen the boat more'n a few minutes at a time. Take my oath on that."

Waxy decided he'd like to take his yokel oath and shove it.

"But that's what make them cutthroat grow so big and frisky," the deputy drawled on. "Real cold water. Back a few weeks I hooked me a fair beauty. Weighed a smeddum over six pound gutted and scaled. Sweetest eatin flesh a man ever set tooth to. You got my godly oath on that."

"I don't like fish," Waxy said.

"You missin out," the deputy said. "There's ole Spadefoot now. Stretchin out yonder behind that thin stand a pines. She's all a five-mile wide at her widest and ever cubic foot's as fresh and clean as the day the good Lord set her down cheer. Won't never see a

prettier sight this side of paradise in a coon's age, Lustig. Which in your case means now or never. Yessuh, man, now or *never.*"

"Thank you very much," Waxy said with heavy sarcasm. "You must be working a shift for the County Chamber of Commerce."

The deputy's studied reply was to turn his stubbled face slowly leftward and expectorate a globoid of tobacco juice through the open window upon the balmy morning air. This was one more thing about the shtup that Waxy didn't like—the damn chewing and spitting. Each time the crazy fool spat, which was about every four or five minutes, the breeze carried a fine spray through the open back window, flecking the left side of Waxy's face. Son of a bitch!

"Hell fire, Lustig," the deputy continued, "you ought to be downright grateful for a tour like this. Ain't ever jailbird gets a chance to enjoy Mother Nature like this, between one cell and another. If I was in your britches, boy, I'd fill my lungs with this fine air and feast my blasted peepers on ever God-given thing in sight. I'd look at fence post, I would, and phone pole and outhouse. I'd raise my blighted eyes to the sky and count the clouds, I would. And I'd get me a lastin sightful of the piney woods down to the last crimpin tree and all the green grass down to the last little ole blade. Yessuh, in your britches I'd sure hope to get me a bellyful of Mother Nature's bounty before the powers locked me up again behind cement and iron and thrun away the key."

"I'm sure as hell getting a bellyful of you, Homer," Waxy said.

"My name ain't Homer."

"Well, Clyde then."

"Ain't Clyde neither. Now if you was only half as smart as you think you are, Lustig, you mought have noticed when I was cuffin you at the county jail that I wear my name pinned to the pocket of my shirt. And proud of it. Floyd T. Herrington's what it says and that's what it's always been since I was knee-high to a weevil. Floyd T. Herrington."

"What's the T stand for—tochis?"

"Stands for Thomas is plumb what it stands for. I was christened in honor of my daddy's youngest brother who got hisself blown to smithereens over in France durin World War Number One." The deputy meditatively masticated his cud of tobacco. "Uncle Thomas," he said after a moment. "Never so much as laid eyes on him. Never seen a picture of him neither and here I am

bearin his name. Funny thing how names come about."

"Funny as a crutch."

"Take ole Spadefoot. As a tyke I figgered it was named after an Injun tribe. Injun names was on so many watery places cheerabouts—Tallahatchie, Tangipahoa, Natchez, Yazoo—a tyke was almost bounden to figger any wet spot that wasn't called Smith or Jones must of come down from the Injuns. Anyhoo, that was my way of thinkin back then."

"Good thinking, Floyd."

"My daddy was a great one for spinnin Injun yarns. In his youth he wandered some and he run into all sorts of folk, includin northern Injuns. I heard him tell of Flathead and Blackfoot before I knew shot from Shinola. The way I see I must a reckoned the Spadefoot was southern cousins of the Blackfoot. That's how fur from the truth a tyke's idee can take him. They wasn't never no Spadefoot Injuns cheerabouts. I know that now. They never was no such tribe as Spadefoot. Matter fact, what this body a water is named after—" the deputy chewed and spat "—it's named after the little ole spadefoot frog. Yessuh, the little ole spadefoot frog."

"Did the county trust you with lunch money?" Waxy asked.

"Warty little cuss craves sand. Hunkers down under it. Happy with a foot a sand on his back. Won't come out for air save at night. Or to breed. But won't breed worth a damn lessen it's rainin like the pure start of a flood. My daddy use to say you can tell when a spadefoot's right smart of its kind when it got brains enough to go *out* in the rain. My daddy had a comical turn to him."

"He should of been in pictures," Waxy said.

"My daddy's wit was dry," the deputy said.

"Speaking of dry, Floyd," Waxy said, "I haven't had so much as a drink of water since daybreak and I'm hungry too. Are we going to stop somewhere for lunch?"

"Appetite," the deputy said. "That's one damn thing you killers got in common. Eat like hogs, all of you."

"Who said I'm a killer?"

"I recollect the case of Stevie Harris. You recollect Stevie, don't you?"

"Never heard of him."

"Suppose not. Goes back a spell when they was still hangin killers in this state. Well, young Stevie Harris caught his gal—name of Mary Jane Lukens—in a fiddlin position with a Creole dishwasher behind the revival tent at a church picnic. Snatched up a cleav-

er that was somehow layin to hand and clove that pretty gal damn near into two separate sections and then he hacked off the better part of the Creole's left arm and was aimin at vital parts just as some members of the congregation pitched in and got the lad under control. Creole died a while later. Loss a blood. Stevie mought have gone to jail for a year or two iffen he been a proper sort, but he done more than his share of drinkin and brawlin and bustin the wrong jaws cheerabouts and so they tried him first degree for splittin up pretty Mary Jane and found him guilty. Well, suh, from the day he was sentenced till the day his neck was stretched, ole Stevie Harris begun to pack away the vittles like eatin was goin out a style, which it sure as Satan was in his particular case. In the sixty day or so that come between judge and hangman, Stevie added ninety-two pound to his natural weight. You got my oath on that. Ninety-two pound. I was the one walked him to the scales the last night of his life. Hangman had to switch to a stouter rope than the one he plan to use in the first place."

"Don't you ever stop?" Waxy asked.

"Nervous habit, eatin like Stevie Harris did," the deputy said. "Leastwise that's what Doc Volney said. Some folks eat like all get-out when they nervous. Some caint swalley so much as a glass a water."

Waxy moaned as if in pain.

For the next five minutes the deputy drove in silence. He was a sedately slow driver, moving along this secondary highway a few miles per hour under the posted speed limit of 50. Traffic was scant. Waxy studied the back of the deputy's leathern neck with an itchy feeling of repugnance. Three creases cut across it, pocked and bristly. Something about this scrawny neck set Waxy's stomach rumbling on its own emptiness.

"Well, are we going to have lunch or not?" he finally asked.

"Right soon now," the deputy said. "I'm gettin a mite hungry myself."

"What's right soon mean?"

"It means noon. Leastwise I figger on noon. Noon's when I count on reachin the state line. They's a fair to middlin cafe there. Calhoun's Place. Straddles the border. Calhoun barbecues a real tasty rib. You partial to barbecue ribs, Lustig?"

"I won't say no to anything. How long before we reach this place?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes. Why,

man, you ought to know that. You ain't exactly a stranger to these parts."

"Meaning what?"

"You been here before."

"It's possible."

"Hell fire, man, it's a pure fact."

"If you say so, Floyd," Waxy said wearily.

"You just after hearin me say so."

"Well, you hayshakers may be able to tell one bush from another but they all look alike to me."

"You mought sharpen up your look."

"I mought," Waxy said.

The road was taking a wide curve across an expanse of marshland. Rearing from the ooze, tall and feathery, were the omnipresent cypress trees. On higher ground beyond them to the right flourished a contrasting growth—white oak and black gum—but Waxy, whose recognition of local flora was limited almost solely to the cypress, didn't know what it was. Still, he began to find the immediate scene vaguely familiar and somehow depressing. Yes, he might have been here once before, just passing through. Since migrating south from Cleveland 10 years earlier he had passed through dozens of similarly dismal countrysides and they were all easy to forget. Waxy stirred uneasily.

"You recollectin some little thing?" the deputy asked.

Waxy deigned not to reply. He listened glumly to his growling stomach.

"Use to hunt in this here region a few year back," the deputy went on. "Back up in the high ground there midst the black gum and white oak. Coon and possum. And I bagged me a bobcat once. They's black bear up there too. You never find a critter more quarrelsome than a full-grown black bear. But I had me a good ole hound in them days, best hound a man ever had, and he weren't afeard of black bear or grizzly. He treed that there bobcat I bagged. Yessuh. Raymond, I called him. After another ole hound I owned back in my beardless days. But this here Raymond I speakin of now, he the sort of hound a man finds once in his whole damn life." The deputy's drawl was assuming a slightly rhapsodic lilt. "He weren't much to look at, mind. He was tan cheer, brown there, with sprinklins of black and white. Sad-eye ole boy, long-hangin ears. He sure didn't have no fancy pedigree. He had a goodly mixture of stray dog bred into him, ole Raymond did—everythin bred into him except quit. He was the most hang-on

dog I ever did see. He pick up a scent and nothin on God's green earth shooken him off it. I take my oath. And when ole Raymond spoke up you could hear that bayin two mile away."

Waxy was on the verge of dozing off.

"Now here's a place you mought recollect right well," the deputy said.

Waxy opened his eyes.

The car was slowing down. To the left across the road a gap-toothed picket fence, buckling and sagging, ran half the length of a black-dirt yard, terminating at a gateless gatepost. Several bantam hens were pecking at the barren ground behind the fence. The one-story frame house, once white, was a watery gray with a wide streak of brown running through it at one corner from a rust-eaten rain gutter. Off to the rear of the house stood an unpainted clapboard shed, listing slightly, its open door hanging by a single hinge. Two huge hogs nosed side by side in a nearby wooden trough. Walking toward them was a boy in faded blue overalls, carrying a bucket and now looking at the car slowly passing by.

Waxy recognized the place immediately, although it had deteriorated a hell of a lot since the one and only time he'd seen it before; must've been about three years ago.

The deputy must have observed the expression on his face through the rear-view mirror because he said, "Reckoned you mought find a bad memory or two cheer."

Waxy suddenly experienced an intimation of danger—he didn't know why. "These back-country shacks look all the same to me," he said.

"Nossuh, this little ole shack is some different."

"Yeah? How come?"

"Leastwise, to my way a thinkin this ole shack is some different. This ole shack belong to a gemmun name Mister Ormond Woodruff until he die a few year back. He kept the place trim so long as they was a breath a life in him, Mister Ormond Woodruff did. Not like the trash what's livin cheer now. Nossuh, Mister Ormond Woodruff was as fine an ole gemmun as ever walk God's green earth. I don't suppose a short-memory murderer like you'd recollect his name at all."

"That's the second time you've called me a killer," Waxy said. "Lay off, man. I never killed anybody in my life."

"You just a mite forgetful, Lustig. Why you think they want you in New Orleans if it ain't for murder?"

"I'm testifying in a trial. I'm a

witness for the prosecution."

"Why, sure you are. And the reason you goin to be such a good witness, Lustig, is you were part of the gang that robbed that there bank in New Orleans and killed the guard."

"I didn't pull the trigger," Waxy said.

"Maybe not that time," the deputy said. "But I warrant you pull the trigger many a time when nobody was lookin. I take an oath on that."

"You and your oath can take a flying—"

Heedless of any voice but his own, the deputy plodded on. "Mister Ormond Woodruff, he sized up you and your pardner good and careful the night you busted into his abode and begun your roughhouse. He tooken the measure of both you yella buggers inch by inch and don't you never forget it."

"We hardly laid a hand on the old man," Waxy said, a plaintive note in his voice.

"Yessuh, and Doc Volney hardly had to take more'n ten stitches in the side of Mister Ormond Woodruff's head."

"He went for a shotgun, man."

"Why, sure he did. Any gemmun worth his salt'll go for a shotgun when a couple sons a bitches break into his abode and demand service. Yessuh, Lustig."

"All we wanted was something to drink, something to eat. We'd been on the run for three days."

"You should of applied for welfare, Lustig. Anyhoo, Mister Ormond Woodruff give us a detailed description of his assailants. He got your gold tooth into it. And that streak of white runnin through your black hair like maybe they's a drop of albino blood somewhere. And he heard your pardner call you Waxy and you call him Cosmo. So I reckon one of the ones you go to New Orleans to testify against ain't nobody else save your ole pardner Cosmo Sienna. I swear you killers stick as close together as chaff in a high wind."

"You got killers on the brain, Floyd."

"I know what I know."

"Yeah, and not much else."

"One damn thing I know, Lustig, it was you shot the dog. Mister Ormond Woodruff saw you with the pistol in your hand."

"The dog?"

"Yessuh, the dog what begun barkin soon as you trash set foot on Mister Ormond Woodruff's property. You shot that dog down in cold blood."

Waxy blanched at the rekindled memory. He could see the dog coming around the house like an

express train. Barking like mad. Then, when it stopped barking, he could see its long white fangs gleaming from the light in a front window. "Hell, man, I shot that crazy dog in self-defense. It was ready to tear us apart."

"You was trespassin and they's nothin Raymond hated more'n trespassers."

"Raymond?"

"Yessuh, Lustig, that was my ole hound Raymond you done killed. Mister Woodruff was kindly boardin Raymond whilst I had a broken leg on the mend. And a yella weasel like you come down the pike and shoot ole Raymond in his prime. You couldn't done none worse iffen you shot my best friend."

"Sorry about that," Waxy said. "Maybe I should have just stood there and let the dog tear out my throat."

"You should a stood wherever in hell you come from," the deputy said, his drawl taking a cold edge.

This cat is a bloody weirdo, Waxy thought.

A few moments later he saw up ahead a rambling red structure, underneath an enormous sign which advertised CALHOUN'S *Each Morsel A Memory*. He breathed a big sigh of relief.

The deputy piloted the cruiser into the gravel parking lot and headed it for a space beside a tan sedan with a heavy antenna rising from the trunk. In the front seat were two middle-aged men in flowered sport shirts and Panama hats. These hats, Waxy noted, were in somewhat better condition than that worn by the country clown.

The men got out of the sedan, their holstered revolvers proclaiming them fuzz in mufti, and shook hands with the deputy. Papers were exchanged with a little conversation.

Finally the deputy opened the cruiser door nearest Waxy and unlocked him from the chain attached to the floor bar.

"We goin tie on the feedbag now," the deputy said. "Then these New Orleans detectives takin you on from cheer."

"That's the best news I've heard all day," Waxy said.

Grabbing him powerfully above the right elbow, the deputy assisted him, still handcuffed, from the back seat and walked him briskly toward the restaurant entrance. The detectives brought up the rear.

Inside, the deputy asked a gray-haired woman, whom he addressed as "Miz Ellen," for "a table kinda off by its lonesome" and she smiled understandingly

and ushered them to a far corner of a room that had only a few customers.

While the detectives were seating themselves, the deputy said in a stage whisper to Waxy, "You got a call from Mother Nature, man, this the time to speak up."

At first Waxy didn't understand what the bulbenik was driving at.

"The men's room," the deputy said.

"Oh, yeah, sure," Waxy said. "I could use it."

"Order me a bottle beer," the deputy told the detectives.

In the men's room Waxy said, "I've got to use one of the stalls, Floyd. It would help without the handcuffs."

"Why, sure," the deputy said, producing a key, "but don't you try nothin fancy."

From within the stall Waxy began to hear a series of sounds: the flushing of a urinal, water splashing in a sink, the releasing click of a paper towel from its dispenser.

Then he heard the deputy's tiresome drawl. "I goin to wait on you outside the door, Lustig. Don't you tarry none, now."

As soon as he heard the door close Waxy emerged swiftly from the stall and looked for a way out. There was a single narrow window in the room and it was barred. Waxy realized many restaurateurs barred rest-room windows to prevent deadbeats from leaving the premises that way after a hearty session with food and drink. He also realized that such bars over the years, by a process of metal corrosion and wood rot, often become laughably loose in their fittings; and these bars, to judge from the streaks of rust, just might be ready for manual removal.

There were two of them about 12 inches apart. With both hands he seized one of them and shook it. It moved but just a perceptible fraction of an inch. He twisted it. It turned easily in its fittings but that's all it was going to do.

He took hold of the other bar without much hope and gave it a mighty two-handed tug. It came away from its upper and lower moorings with a sharp squeal. He held his breath. Had that dumb deputy heard the sound? The door remained imperturbably shut. Good.

Waxy measured the available window space with his eyes. About 24 inches. Not too tight a squeeze sidewise for a man who prided himself on a 32-inch waist.

Prior to making his wriggling exit, he began to place the iron bar on the floor and then he thought better of it. It might serve as a handy weapon. He

shoved it across the windowsill and let it fall to the ground below. In less than a minute he was outside himself—outside and free.

Retrieving the bar, he surveyed the immediate prospect. He was at the rear of the place. Farther to the rear were thickets and marshland. That obviously was not the sensible way to go. The corner to his right, if his sense of direction was reliable, led to the parking lot. That's where mobility was. Once in the parking lot he would be able to move out a car whether the ignition key was present or not. Then he remembered that the stupid deputy hadn't bothered to remove the keys to the cruiser ignition. Wonderful. Perfect.

Grinning wolfishly at his good luck, Waxy began to walk rapidly toward the restaurant's rear corner. As he rounded it he came face to face with the deputy, who was also grinning.

"Hell-fire," the deputy said, "if I ain't caught Waxy Lustig in a flat-foot attempt to escape official custody."

Waxy came to a dead stop and looked fearfully at the revolver that was being leveled at him. Its barrel appeared to be as big as a cannon's.

"Yessuh," the deputy said, "it sure do warm the cockles of my heart to catch a murderin son a bitch like you dead to rights."

"I'm not trying to escape," Waxy said.

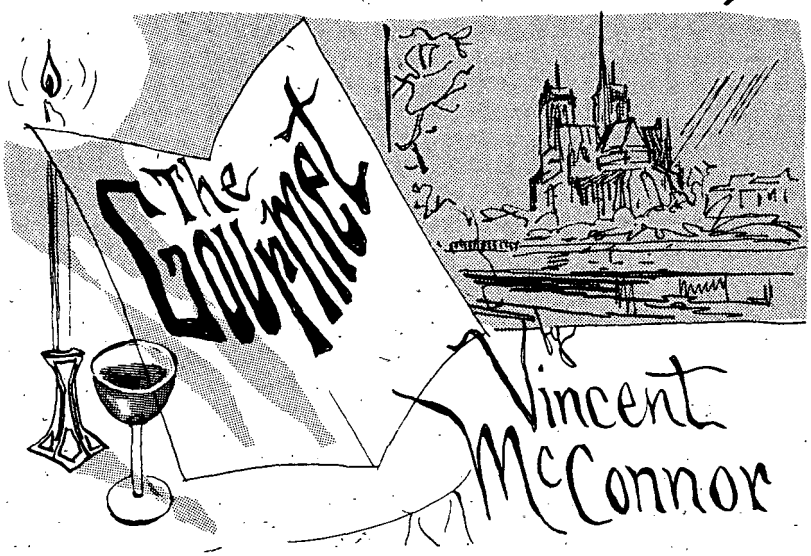
"Course not. You just takin a long hike. And whilst you about it you ready to attack a sworn deputy sheriff with an iron bar. That's what you doin, Lustig."

"Hey, man. I surrender. Here, take the damn bar. I don't want it."

"But I want you to have it," the deputy said. "Why I rid down cheer day before yesterday and personally hacksawed that there bar. So I want you to have it as kind a farewell present from me and ole Raymond."

The deputy's eyes were as chillingly gray as ice on a sunless winter day. Waxy didn't like those eyes at all—but he didn't have to look at them long.

Even a king can have too much of a good thing.



As Chief Inspector Damiot relaxed, sipping a cup of black coffee, he watched the snowflakes swirling down into the muddy Seine.

His lunch had been too expensive, but at least once a month he permitted himself such a meal—usually here at Roujon's, on the Right Bank, facing the Ile de la Cité and the river.

He always came here when he was worried about one of his current investigations or depressed by the weather. Today it had been the inclement weather that did it.

When he left his office in the drafty Préfecture, he had turned without thinking and walked across the nearest bridge, through the first snowfall of the season, straight to Roujon's door.

One of the waiters showed him to his customary table, beside a window facing the quai.

As he inspected the menu he noticed that there were fewer diners than usual for lunch. The thin little man who customarily occupied a table against the wall op-

posite the windows was among those missing. He had always been there at this hour in the past. Apparently he was on a strict diet because he never seemed to eat much and seldom drank more than two glasses of white wine.

When the waiter forgot to bring bread with his soup, Damiot looked around for the patron, but Monsieur Roujon was nowhere in sight.

That was when he realized, with some surprise, that Madame Roujon was absent from her place behind the cashier's desk.

What could have happened to take both Roujons from their posts during the lunch hour? Probably some crisis in the kitchen.

Damiot had finished his lunch with a particularly ripe slice of Brie and was enjoying a second cup of coffee, his eyes on the falling snow outside the windows, when a voice whispered exactly what he had been thinking.

"Such a depressing day . . ."

He turned to see the patron and noticed immediately that he was wearing a black band around the sleeve of his dark-gray jacket. "Roujon! My friend . . ."

"Your lunch was satisfactory, Monsieur Inspecteur?"

"Excellent! As always."

"Madame Roujon and I were forced to absent ourselves today." He glanced around the nearly empty restaurant. "My dear wife has retired to our apartment upstairs. Neither of us had the appetite for any lunch."

"Will you have a cognac with me?"

"My pleasure, Monsieur Inspecteur." He sank into a chair across the table, facing Damiot. "We are old acquaintances so I feel free to tell you that this has been a difficult day for me." He looked up as a waiter approached them. "Two cognacs, Jean. The 1928 . . ."

As the waiter went toward the bar, Damiot studied Roujon's face in the cold light seeping through the window. His usual florid complexion seemed to have paled as though he had suffered a shock which caused the blood to drain away.

Roujon clasped his hands together on the white tablecloth. "I can talk to you, Monsieur Inspecteur, because you are from the Police Judiciaire. You are accustomed to things that are . . . unexplainable. I know that you will be discreet about such a . . . a private matter."

Damiot frowned. Everyone thought they could tell their most intimate problems to a detective.

"We have lost our most famous customer," Roujon whispered,

leaning closer. "Monsieur Barreau."

"Barreau?"

"The king of gourmets! Every day for the past five years he has eaten lunch at that same table, against the wall, facing the windows."

"The thin little man!"

"He was not always so thin, Monsieur. Two years ago he was of an average weight. Exactly right for his height. Of course he has always been short. But never thin. Never!"

"I noticed recently that he seemed to be getting even thinner."

Roujon sighed. "Madame and I attended his funeral this morning. Most of our regular customers were there."

"That's why so many tables are empty today!"

Roujon nodded as the waiter returned with their brandy. "Your health, Monsieur Inspecteur." He raised his glass in a toast.

"And you, Monsieur." Damiot picked up his glass.

"And to Jacques Barreau! King of gourmets . . ."

They drank, slowly, savoring the tawny old brandy.

"Tell me. What caused his death?" Damiot asked, warming the glass in the palm of his hand.

"A book . . ."

"Book? May I ask—what book?"

"He was writing it. *Fifty Great Meals* was the title."

"Fifty?"

"They would all, of course, be French . . ."

"Naturally."

"Monsieur Barreau planned to give a complete menu for each, with a recipe for every dish. He had written many books on our classic French cuisine, of course, in addition to his weekly restaurant column in the newspaper. For years he has been the acknowledged authority on every phase of gourmet cooking. Which is why I was so honored to have him as a regular customer. I was able to hire the finest young chefs for less money than they would be paid elsewhere because here they would be cooking for the illustrious Jacques Barreau and, of course, he would make their reputations in his columns. When they left me they went on to some of the most famous restaurants in Paris, London and New York."

As Damiot listened he was aware of the other diners leaving and one of the waiters turning off the lights.

"This new book," Roujon continued, "was a tremendous project. It was to be Barreau's masterpiece. His chef-d'oeuvre! But I noticed something curious happening

soon after he began the actual writing . . .".

"It didn't go well?"

"Nothing like that! It went extremely well, he told me, from the start. Of course it required him to spend many hours reading old letters and diaries, checking faded menus and recipes from the past. This book was to cover centuries of gastronomy! Fifty great meals from history and from literature! What I noticed was that Barreau was losing weight. I was aware of this even before he told me about the first meal he was describing in his book: a feast from Rabelais! Tremendous saddles of venison and monstrous pastries which contained braces of peacocks. A gargantuan banquet that ended with hundreds of elaborate sweetmeats. I realized that same day, during lunch, that Barreau was picking at his food, leaving most of it on the plate. My chef was frantic after this continued for several weeks. Then Barreau confided in me. Told me that he was unable to eat because he had no appetite. For the first time in his life. Imagine! The king of gourmets had lost his taste for food . . ."

"Impossible!"

"But that was how it went. Week after week. Only it got much worse. The poor man ate less and less as he got deeper into his book."

"I saw him every time I had lunch here. Saw that he was getting thinner."

"I spoke to Barreau's doctor today, after the funeral, as we walked to our cars . . ."

"What did he tell you?"

"He is unable to understand what happened to his patient. Barreau's death was a complete mystery to him! And I, who knew nothing about medical matters, hesitated to tell him what I knew." He lowered his voice. "It is not, of course, a matter for the police, Monsieur Inspecteur, but I would like to repeat to you what Barreau told me . . ."

"Yes?"

"The poor man was unable to eat during the day because he ate all night in his dreams."

"In his dreams?"

"He dreamed, every night, about the meals he was describing in his book. Dining in ancient taverns and feasting in the halls of great chateaux. Long tables laden with huge platters of meat and game. Whole barons of beef! Hare and wild boars. Partridge and larks . . ."

"He dreamed that he ate them?"

"Everything! Because, of course, he wanted to taste each dish—in

order to describe them in his book. He continued writing during the day and, month after month, constantly lost more weight. Eating nothing during his waking hours, but dining every night while he slept. A banquet at Versailles with the Sun King and his court. A victory dinner for Napoleon . . ."

"Napoleon? That should be an experience!" Damiot realized that the daylight was fading from the restaurant. The falling snow had become much heavier, causing a soft violet twilight to cover Paris in the middle of the afternoon.

"Barreau wrote of a perfect breakfast," Roujon continued, "with that master chef, Brillat-Savarin, in the kitchen! Two dozen oysters for each person. Terrine of foie gras and a pie with truffles . . ."

"For breakfast?"

"He described a supper with Alexandre Dumas and some actress. A Christmas dinner, during the siege of Paris, when half the city was starving but Voisin's managed to obtain meat from the zoo. They served their guests roast camel hump and a stew of elephant trunk! Barreau showed me the original menu for that one. He wrote about a classic dinner at the Ritz, prepared by the great Escoffier himself, Monsieur Inspecteur!"

"And he continued to dream of all these meals?"

"Every night! But during the day he ate nothing. Only black coffee in the morning. A slice of chicken breast for lunch. Perhaps a cup of broth with a grilled cutlet in the evening."

"Did he manage to finish his book?"

"Just this week. The final chapter was devoted to the greatest meal that he, himself, had eaten during his entire life. He died the morning he sent the manuscript to his publisher."

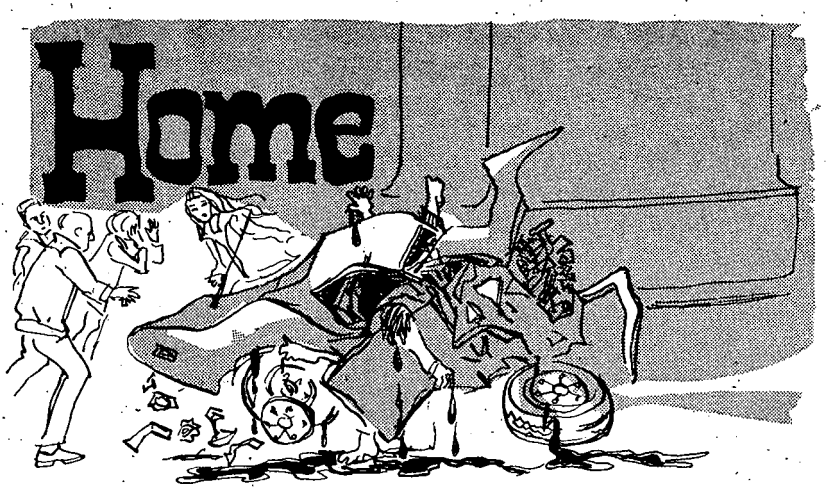
"Incredible! Starved himself to death . . ."

"He was a mere skeleton at the end, Monsieur Inspecteur. That is the mystery, which I could not hope to explain to his doctor when he told me that Barreau's system showed all the signs of overindulgence. Every symptom of obesity! I couldn't tell a doctor that Barreau, in fact, ate nothing—had eaten nothing all these months! That he sated himself only in his dreams . . ."

"Mon Dieu!"

"All his life Jacques Barreau had been a gourmet. A connoisseur of food. Paris called him the king of gourmets! But he died a—a glutton . . ."

Apparently one's familiar home grounds do not always breed contempt.



Frank Basil got off the bus in St. Louis at 2:00 a.m. Basil was a fairly short man, only five-foot-seven, wearing a rumpled black suit and needing a shave. He was in his forties, and the dark bags under his weary eyes made him look every minute of it.

A small canvas satchel hung from his right hand and hit his leg as he walked toward the telephone booths. The satchel was full of paperback books and two more novels protruded from the side pocket of his wrinkled suit coat. One of them had a small strip of torn newspaper sticking out of it, showing he respected books too much to mark his place by folding a page corner. He had been connected with The Outfit in one minor capacity or another for over twenty years, but until recently books had been his chief source of excitement.

Basil stepped inside the first vacant booth and set the satchel at his feet. He dug a handful of small change from his pocket and spilled it onto the shelf beneath the telephone. He deposited a coin, dialed the operator, and

placed a station-to-station call to Las Vegas. The telephone he called was on a private line in the penthouse of one of the luxury hotels along the Strip.

His call was answered by a woman who recited the number, then waited for him to state his business.

"Mr. Robben, please," he said, then added, before she could ask, "Frank Basil calling."

He had been calling that number at least twice a day for the last month, so he was well familiar with the routine.

Robben's gruff voice came on the line. "So you're still out there, are ya?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ya know ya can't run an' hide forever, don't ya?" Robben asked, as he always did.

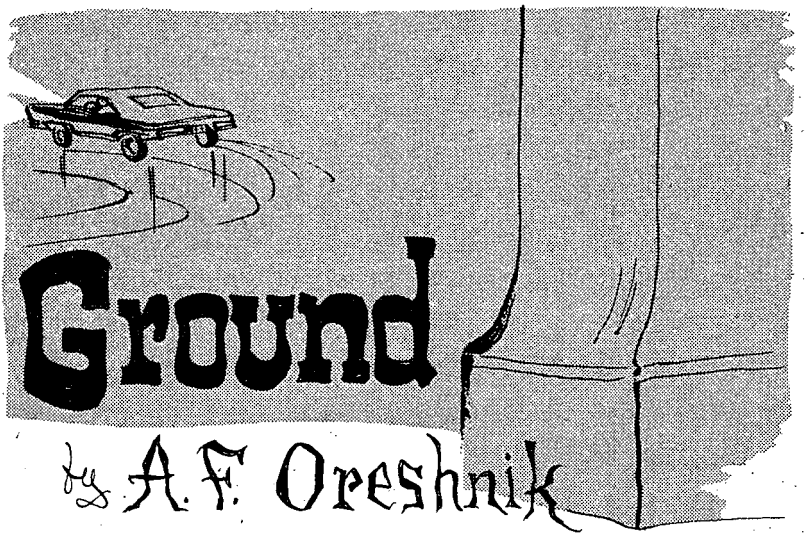
"Yes, sir, I know that."

"Well . . . ?"

"Can't we work something out, Mr. Robben? I'm real sorry about what I did. Honest, I am. I never did anything like that before. I'll make it up to you, I swear."

"Listen, creep," Robben said disdainfully, "it ain't the money; it's the principle o' the thing. You worked for me for fifteen years. You was trusted. An' what'd ya do? Ya took money what didn't belong to ya, and blew it on a horse race. It was like ya threw that $50,000 down a sewer. I gotta make an example of ya."

"Please, Mr. Robben," Basil pleaded.



"No," Robben said. "If I let ya get away with that, everyone in my organization would be tryin' somethin'. They'd have my bones picked clean in a week. My advice t'you is, take your medicine an' get it over with."

Basil hung up without replying. Take his medicine—that was a laugh. Medicine was supposed to cure, not kill. There's nothing Frank Basil wanted more than a cure for the situation his stupidity had gotten him into, but all Robben wanted was word of his death. It was as though they were speaking different languages.

Basil picked up the canvas satchel, left the terminal, then stopped at an all-night drugstore long enough to buy a cheap razor and some blades. He'd left his last room without pausing to pick up his clothes and toilet articles—and without paying his bill. He had overheard the desk clerk describing him to someone over the telephone and he hadn't stopped running until he had reached the bus station and had a ticket for St. Louis in his sweaty hand.

He had gotten out of Denver, but he knew his pursuers were close behind, and it was just a matter of time before they would be ahead of him as well.

He hurried toward the green neon sign of a hotel a block away, dragging the satchel of paperbacks. Except for his "luggage" he might have been mistaken for a derelict, and he knew it. That was why he had bought the cheap case in Denver and stuffed it with books.

The hotel had a lobby that was barely ten feet square. A self-service elevator stood open at that level, and an old man was on duty behind the registration desk. The place smelled of air freshener and decay.

"How much for a room with a bath?" Basil asked.

The clerk looked him over coldly, then gave a toothless smile. "I'll give ya the nun's rate," he said.

The room, on the second floor at the front of the building, had a view of the deserted street and the nearly empty parking lot opposite the hotel. The lot was closed and a chain had been drawn across the entrance. A drunken bum came lurching along the sidewalk on the far side of the street, and Basil watched him take a stumbling step over the chain and enter the lot. First he rattled the door of the attendant's shack, then he approached the closer of the two cars parked beside it. He walked around the car, trying all the doors, but they were locked. He had better luck with the sec-

ond vehicle. One of its rear doors swung open and he crawled inside.

Frank Basil filed the scene away in his memory. If by some miracle he managed to elude Robben's killers for a few more weeks, he would probably be sleeping in parked cars too. His cash was getting low, and he didn't dare use the credit cards he carried because of the trail they'd leave.

He went to the small bathroom and took off his clothes. He put his suit on metal hangers and hung it inside the shower stall, then turned on the hot water, checked to be sure the spray wasn't hitting the suit, and closed the curtain. While he washed his socks and underwear in the basin, hot steam took the wrinkles out of his suit.

It also took the crease out of his trousers, but he folded them carefully and spread them between the mattress and box spring on the bed. By morning they would have a passable crease, he knew.

That left only his soiled shirt. Luckily, it was one of the wash-and-wear, drip-dry variety. He carried it into the shower and washed it before using the last sliver of hotel soap on his body. Then he placed the shirt on a metal hanger and hung it from the shower rod. When he finally got to bed, he was asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

He dreamed he was being chased down a long, black tunnel by a monster with a searchlight. When the light filled every crevice, and there was no place for him to hide, he awoke abruptly and sat up in the bed. Bright sunlight was coming through the window. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. It was noon.

He shaved and dressed, but by the time he was ready to leave, it was still early. The check-out time posted on the inside of the door was 2:00 p.m. It was only 12:30. He would have to pay for that time, so he decided to use it.

He pulled a chair up to the window, found the novel he'd been reading, and settled down to wait. A truck rumbled by on the street, and he glanced up in time to see the drunk climb stiffly from the car in the parking lot. The lot was now almost filled, and an attendant was busy telling new arrivals where to park.

The derelict stretched once, then looked around with an exaggerated casualness. It was obvious he had something on his mind. At last he must have been satisfied that he wasn't being observed because he entered several cars, being careful to keep the shack

between himself and the attendant, and rummaged through their glove compartments. Frank Basil figured he was hunting for parking-meter change so he could buy a bottle of cheap wine.

At the front of the lot, directly across from the hotel entrance, a sedan was parked parallel with the street, taking up two parking spaces, instead of displaying its grille as the other cars in the line were doing. When the wino came to it he ducked down so the attendant couldn't see him and approached the car from the street side.

He eased the door open, then stumbled backward with an awkward, double-time shuffle as though he'd come face to face with a snake. He ended up in the middle of the sidewalk in a sitting position. Basil started to smile at his clumsiness, but the car door continued to swing open, revealing a man in a light-blue suit, lying across the seat with a shotgun in his arms, and the drunk was staring openmouthed down its barrel.

The scene remained frozen for only a second or two before the shotgunner reached out and calmly pulled the door closed. The drunk struggled to his feet and scampered away without looking back. In a moment, the street was back to normal, but Frank Basil knew he was no longer being pursued—he'd been found.

Basil dropped his book to the floor and jerked back from the window. His mouth was suddenly dry. He stood motionless, but his mind was racing. If they knew he was in the hotel, they could just as easily know what room he was in. Did he dare leave it? Yes, there should be no danger there. If they had wanted to kill him in the hotel, they could have done it while he slept. Instead, they had chosen to wait for him outside. Why? Why would they do that? Of course! The hotel must belong to The Outfit, and that would explain how they had located him so quickly after he arrived.

He grabbed his satchel of books and left the room. The elevator stood open, invitingly, but he passed it up and took the stairway to the lobby. The old clerk from the night before was still stationed behind the desk. Even if Basil hadn't seen the waiting shotgunner, this would have been a tip-off. The man was there long after he should have been relieved, because he would be able to recognize Basil quickly and give some kind of signal to the man or men waiting outside. To add more substance to Basil's suspicions, the

clerk became far more startled and nervous at Basil's sudden appearance than he should have.

"Call me a cab," Basil ordered.

"Uh . . . there's a cabstand just a block north of here," the clerk said. "You'll—uh—be able to get one there without any trouble."

"I'd rather have the cab come here," Basil said. "Call one for me."

Reluctantly, the clerk turned to the ancient switchboard beside him and began to dial. Basil reached across the desk and put a hand on his shoulder. "It'll work better if you plug into an outside line," he said. One of the jobs he'd had as a teen-ager had been as night clerk in an Outfit hotel in Baltimore. He was familiar with switchboards.

"Oh, yeah, that's right," the clerk said.

Basil stood where he could see the street through the glass door and also keep an eye on the clerk without seeming to do it. As soon as the taxi pulled up at the curb, he dashed out, climbed into the back seat, and said, "Take me to the airport." He waited until the car was moving and the driver had dropped the flag, starting the meter, then added, "Try to make it fast, will you? I have an upset stomach and I think I may be sick." Basil knew that the one thing a cabbie dreads most is having to clean up after a sick passenger. That one line would make him drive faster than a fifty-dollar bribe.

The cab picked up speed, and Basil turned his head in time to see the parking attendant get into the sedan beside the shotgunner. As long as they didn't know he knew they were this close to him, he figured he still had a chance. They would hold their fire, hoping for a clear shot at him when he was alone. Just as he wouldn't think of going to the police for help, they would avoid, at all costs, killing an innocent bystander. Hunters and hunted, they both had rules to follow.

As Basil predicted, the cab broke all records getting to the airport. The shotgunner and his companion were lost somewhere behind in the traffic. When the cab pulled up at the passenger terminal, they were nowhere in sight. Basil had no doubt they'd be along soon, though. They must have guessed where he was headed before the cab got away from them.

Basil paid the driver, grabbed his satchel, and rushed inside. He studied the arrival and departure times on display at the airline ticket counters and saw there was a flight leaving for Chicago in half

an hour. He quickly bought a one-way ticket, then hurried through the metal detector into the safety of the departing passengers' lounge. No one with a weapon would be able to get near him.

He had time to smoke two cigarettes before his flight was called. As he left the lounge, he saw the shotgunner standing empty-handed on the other side of the barrier, pretending to be looking somewhere else. Basil hid his nervousness and hurried to the waiting plane.

Basil knew the shotgunner hadn't been able to get on the flight because he'd been too far behind and hadn't known which one Basil was taking; but the man knew which one it was now, and he was probably already on the telephone. If there wasn't someone at O'Hare when he landed, there would be someone there soon afterward.

Basil swore under his breath. A fat lot of good it had done him to read crime and mystery novels most of his life. Not one of them had helped him. Not a single fictional hunt or chase had furnished him with a useful idea. The characters in books always got caught. Hiding in faraway places or big cities was never the answer, and the hunted were always conspicuous when they stopped in a small town. What was left? Nothing that Basil could see. Every avenue open to him seemed to have a dead end, literally.

The flight to Chicago was surprisingly rapid. It was a distance of less than 300 miles, and it seemed the plane had no sooner left the ground at St. Louis than it was entering the traffic pattern at O'Hare. Basil was one of the first people into the terminal and since he had no luggage to claim, he left it immediately. All he had was the canvas satchel, and he was carrying that with him.

He found that a flight was leaving for New York City in a little over an hour. Because Robben's people knew where he was, he didn't have to worry about leaving a trail. He was able to purchase his plane ticket with a credit card that had been issued to one of Robben's business enterprises. He picked up his ticket and fled behind the shield of airport police and metal detectors, as he had done in St. Louis.

The thought of Robben's expression when he learned he was paying for his travel expenses might have made Basil smile, but it didn't. He was too busy trying to discover which of his fellow passengers might be following, to make identification easier at the other end and to be sure he didn't

give them the slip again. One thing was certain, they would have plenty of time to arrange a reception for him at La Guardia. Basil's stomach was tight with apprehension.

The plane was already descending toward Buffalo when he discovered it wasn't a nonstop flight. It would be on the ground at Buffalo for 30 minutes before continuing to New York City.

Buffalo, New York; he'd been running back and forth across the country for a month and hadn't even thought of Buffalo. He had been born there, had lived there until he was fifteen—perhaps the happiest years of his life. He suddenly decided he wanted to see it again before his life ended.

As soon as the plane was on the runway at Buffalo, he ignored the stewardess' admonition to remain seated until the plane came to a complete stop at the terminal. Instead, he crossed the aisle and took a vacant seat next to the emergency door. When the plane slowed to a crawl and began to turn onto the taxiway, he pulled the release handle and jumped out onto the broad wing. He ran along it until he saw grass, not pavement, beneath him. Then he slid down the shiny surface to its trailing edge and jumped.

It had been like jumping off a building, but there must have been a recent rain. The ground was exceptionally soft. He rolled once and then got to his feet, paying no attention to the pain in his ankles. He knew nothing was broken or he couldn't have stood.

One quick look around and he knew exactly where he was. He had spent almost every weekend of his thirteenth summer at the airport. Jets were just coming into use at the time, and the airport pigeons were a hazard to the new aircraft. One small bird sucked into one of the engines was enough to do thousands of dollars' damage and cause the costly rescheduling of flights. The airport was too near the populated areas for firearms to be used, so a bounty of 25 cents was placed on each bird and boys were encouraged to hunt them with slingshots. Frank Basil had been one of them.

Basil began to run. He looked back once and found faces pressed to the windows of the plane he had just left, but no one was attempting to follow. Ahead was the Buffalo Aeronautical Corporation, the service facility for small private and company-owned aircraft at the airport. There were dozens of small planes parked to the east of the red-brick building, and a road and parking area was along the northern side.

Basil was in luck. He could see a taxi letting out passengers at the entrance to the B.A.C. operations office. He tried to run faster, but he was nearly out of wind. He slowed to a trot as the cab was turning around, then he put on a burst of speed to get to the end of the building before the cab reached it and was gone.

He was just in time. He waved it to a halt and scrambled into the rear seat, heaving and gasping for breath.

"Where to, buddy?" the driver asked.

"Take me to . . . the . . . main passenger terminal," Basil said, then settled back to get his breath and compose himself while the cab took the roundabout route necessary to get him there. His right hand was clutching the worthless satchel of books.

His breathing quickly returned to normal, and he wiped the sweat from his face and brushed the grass from his suit. When the cab stopped, he climbed out and paid the driver. He stepped inside the terminal and went directly to a car-rental desk. He figured The Outfit had surely known about the stop at Buffalo, even if he hadn't, and there had probably been someone on the plane with him as well. Right now, the last place anyone would look for him was inside the terminal building. After all, he'd risked a pair of broken legs to avoid it.

He surrendered a credit card and his driver's license to a young blonde girl at the rent-a-car desk. While she was making out the papers and having a sedan brought to the entrance, he went to a nearby booth and called Las Vegas.

"Hi, creep. Still runnin', are ya?" Robben said.

"Yes, sir."

"But not for long. Believe me, not for long."

"Can't we work this out, Mr. Robben?"

"It's bein' worked out," Robben said.

Basil returned to the car-rental desk and was given a copy of the rental agreement and a key. The girl walked to the door with him to point out the sedan.

Two men went past, walking rapidly, as Basil was climbing into the car. One of them glanced at Frank Basil, looked away, then his head spun back around in a classic double take.

Basil slammed the car door, started the engine and pulled away, all in one unbroken motion. He went around the traffic circle and sped out Airport Drive toward the main road. As soon as he had seen the man's reaction,

he'd realized he had made a blunder. Just because no one would be *looking* for him at the airport terminal didn't mean no one would *see* him. He had arrived before his pursuers had an opportunity to reorganize and take up the chase again—and he'd run right into two of them.

The traffic light was with him when he reached the highway. He made a right turn toward Buffalo and shot a quick glance at the road behind him. A yellow Corvette was speeding down the drive, passing the other cars as though they weren't moving. Basil didn't need three guesses as to who was in it.

He slammed his foot to the floor and kept it there. Half a mile later he flashed across Union Road and looked back to find the sports car was gaining on him. Some cars were blocking both right-hand lanes, so he crossed the double line and passed them with his horn blaring. There was a turnoff for the Thruway, but he kept going. The quickest way to get fouled up would be to get on a road he didn't know well. He decided to stick with ones he'd ridden on his bicycle as a boy.

The sun was low on the horizon, and he was heading directly into it. That didn't help his ability to judge distance or anticipate traffic conditions. The glare on the windshield kept him from seeing other cars as well as he would have liked, so he made it easier for them to see him. He turned on his headlights and drove with his left foot tapping the floor switch from low beams to high and back to low again.

He traveled the mile from Union Road to Harlem Road in less than a minute, but traffic was getting heavier. He made a skidding left turn onto Harlem Road against the light and went back to standing on the accelerator. Behind him, the Corvette tried to follow his lead and got caught in a minor traffic jam.

At Walden Avenue he found a huge plaza had been built on the swampy marsh where he'd once hunted frogs, but the Corvette had taken up the chase again and was gaining. He was too busy looking for a way to lose his pursuers to think about the changes that had occurred since his youth. The road ahead went over several New York Central Railroad lines and Broadway Avenue, which ran parallel to the tracks. This looked like it might provide a chance to give the Corvette the slip. If he could make the sharp right turn at the far end of the overpass and double back before his pursuers reached the top, they might think

he had turned at one of the streets farther along. By the time they learned otherwise, he could be on Broadway, putting some real distance between them.

Basil slammed on his brakes halfway down the overpass and managed to make the turn at the bottom, but he wasn't quite quick enough. The yellow Corvette came leaping over the top of the overpass while he was still in sight.

Basil floored his gas pedal again and his wheels spun wildly on the loose gravel of the exit road, causing the rear end to swing sideways. He had enough sense to let up on the accelerator until he gained traction, then straightened out the car and sped away. At Broadway the light was with him and he turned left, toward Buffalo. The Corvette was too powerful a car for him to lose on the open road. If he were going to do it, he knew, it would have to be on crowded streets with which he was familiar.

He soon had the rented car barreling along at 60—70—80! But the Corvette not only kept up with him, it steadily closed the gap between them. Broadway was straight as a bullet, with railroad tracks running parallel to it on the right. Any turn was therefore limited to the left, but his speed and the dense flow of oncoming traffic ruled that out.

Then Basil remembered the underpass. Not far ahead, he recalled, Broadway dipped down abruptly, made a 90-degree right turn under the New York Central tracks, then made a sharp left on the other side. It was impossible to negotiate that dogleg turn at speeds above 25 mph, as numerous drivers had discovered. The center support for the railroad trestle had brought many speeding cars to an abrupt halt.

As soon as he remembered the hazard, Basil took his foot off the gas. The Corvette was directly behind him now, and the driver pulled out to pass. The second man had rolled down his window and Basil could see a shotgun barrel protruding. Then the road dipped, and the underpass was coming up fast.

Basil jammed on his brakes and the Corvette flashed by so quickly the men in it had no chance to shoot. They must have interpreted Basil's action solely as a tactic to evade them. The driver touched his brakes, causing his tailights to flare briefly, but he had to have been looking at Basil in his rear-view mirror. He didn't use the brakes in earnest until the Corvette was less than ten yards from the turn—and it was far too late.

The sports car smashed into the concrete retaining wall at 60 mph.

Basil managed to slow to 35 and, amazingly, it was enough. He was able to make the turn without wrapping the sedan around the center support. He kept going for a few hundred yards, then made a left turn and parked in a lot behind a long, red transit-company garage. He got out and walked back to the underpass.

On close inspection he saw that the turn had been improved a bit since he was a boy, but it was still formidable. Several cars had pulled up and the people from them were milling around the wreck. The entire front end was pushed in, compressing the car's length about three feet. The engine, the fire wall, the steering column, the men and the seat were all mashed together in one dripping mess.

The condition of the dead men was bad, but Basil spotted something that was worse: a small radio antenna was sticking up out of the center of the trunk lid. The car had been equipped with a radio transmitter.

Basil turned away just as the police arrived and walked slowly back to his rented sedan. He sat in it for a while, thinking about the close call he'd had. The sun set and it got a little cool. He had no way of knowing whether the men had used their radio, or what they may have said if they did. He didn't know what he should do next.

Finally, he started the car and left the lot. He drove past the transit garage and kept going. The intersection at Broadway and Bailey was changed. The brownstone police station was gone from the southeast corner and the large lot where the circuses used to pitch their tents was now occupied by a huge, white supermarket.

He turned onto Bailey and headed north. A fine rain—almost a mist—began to fall. Basil turned on his windshield wipers and drove slowly, comparing the stores and offices he passed with his quarter-century-old memories. There had been changes, a lot of them. He decided he might as well drive out to the Kensington section and see his old neighborhood. He might not get another chance.

He was half a dozen blocks from the Kensington Theater when an oncoming car slowed suddenly and made a U-turn behind him. He knew the chase was on again. The two men earlier must have used their radio after all, giving out a description of his car and its license number.

Basil turned the first corner he

came to and raced down the residential street, using every ounce of power he could wring from his engine. As soon as he saw the other car turn behind him, he swung around another corner and continued to watch his rear-view mirror. The car appeared behind him again, and he turned another corner, only this time he slammed on his brakes instead of speeding away. He pulled to the curb and backed up so that his license plate was concealed by another parked car. The rented sedan was a common make, model and color. There was one like it on every block. He was sure his pursuers would think he had reached the next intersection and turned. He lay across the seat and waited.

He heard the car turn the corner. Its lights swept past him and someone yelled. He didn't wait to find out what had given him away. He pushed open the curbside door and ran into the nearest driveway before they could get out of their car.

Coincidence, luck, fate, whatever—the home beside him was the one in which he'd been born. When he turned the corner of the building he ducked his head, as he always had, to avoid the low steel cable his father had strung up to replace the clothesline that was always breaking. It was too dark to tell if the cable was still there, but he'd soon know. There were running feet close behind him.

An exterior stairway was attached to the rear of the building. He located it by touch and began to climb just as someone rounded the corner of the alley and let out a strangled cry. The cable was still there, all right, and it must have nearly torn his head off. The man was making gurgling sounds, and he'd stopped advancing.

Basil moved as quietly as he could to the second landing and waited. He heard the cautious scrape of feet along the driveway, then a voice called softly: "Tony? Are you all right, Tony?"

There was no answer.

Lightning flashed far to the south and it must have reminded the man of his cigarette lighter. He clicked it on, and the long, blue flame lit up the yard. The first man was flat on his back with a shotgun beside him. His face was purple. He had hit the cable with enough force to crush something in his throat. The second man set his weapon down and went to him.

There were three potted plants lined up along the railing in front of Basil. He picked up the largest one, took aim and let it fly at the back of the man's head. Fear and tension forced a nervous laugh

from his lips as he let it go. The man heard him, started to turn, and the pot smashed into the side of his face, knocking him cold.

Basil fled back to his car and saw that his tire tracks on the wet street were what had given him away. He jumped into the front seat and drove off as fast as he could. He returned to the airport, put the car in a crowded lot, and checked into the airport motel.

He'd learned something: he'd learned that he'd been trying to hide in all the wrong places. Instead of heading for strange cities, he should have sought out familiar ones. He decided to return to Las Vegas in the morning. He knew that city far better than he knew Buffalo. He would know where he could go, and he would know which places to avoid. Rather than run blindly about, he decided to stay on home ground.

The next day he gave Robben another call, but it didn't follow the same pattern as their earlier conversations.

"I didn't know ya know karate," Robben said with a touch of wonder. "Tony Mead's throat was crushed. Ya busted a bunch o' little bones an' stuff, an' he choked to death. An' they tell me the Morrow brothers are gonna hafta be buried from closed coffins. They're a real mess."

Basil couldn't tell him it had been a combination of luck and coincidence. Robben was a professional gambler—he didn't believe in either one—so Basil just said, "Yes, sir."

"An' Ernie Boyer sez ya laughed before ya broke his jaw. Is that right? Did ya laugh?"

"Yes, sir," Basil answered.

Robben paused for a long, reflective moment. Then he said, "Ya know, Frank, you've always been a stand-up guy. An' ya never got out o' line before." His tone conveyed a new respect he never could have faked. "Why don'tcha come on back t' Vegas? I think we can work somethin' out, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," Basil answered and picked up his satchel of books. For the first time he was certain he'd be able to read them.

There are instances, of course, when a common bond may be found where it is least expected.

It was 9:00 a.m. Sunday when the call came into Homicide. The body of a man shot twice through the stomach had been found in an alley by a patrol car. Calls were made to the coroner's office and the police lab, and Sgt. Tim Harris and his partner rolled on it.

The patrol unit said they'd thought he was a sleeping wino until they had taken a good look.

The victim's wallet proclaimed

him to be one George Asler, age 38, and his address a nearby run-down hotel.

"Been dead ten to twelve hours, tell you more later," said the man from the coroner's office.

The homicide team went back

to their office and ran the victim's name through Records and Identification.

The result caused Harris to sigh. "George was a real cutie, seven arrests in the past five years for attempted or successful rape. No convictions, but on the last one the judge remanded him to the county head factory. They were through with him in six months and turned him loose upon an unsuspecting public."

"How come?" asked his partner.

"He was cured of his 'sexual fantasies,' whatever *that* is."

"So?"

"So, for starters, we have seven

by Sonora Morrow

unhappy girls, their fathers, brothers, uncles, boyfriends, husbands, et cetera, et cetera, who weren't happy with George. Then add all the enemies he may have made

just on account of his personality, not to mention someone who expected to rob him, or just some nut, which we have in abundance, who kills just for the fun of it."

"This is going to be a tough one, huh, Tim?"

"You're swift, partner, really swift. So let's start with a list of his rape victims—R and I will have them—and we'll talk to them first."

The evening meetings of the Saturday Handcraft Club were going even better than Helen had hoped. The nine members she'd contacted in order to start the club had turned out to be willing, able, sympathetic and anxious to learn. She'd explained to them that eventually she hoped to open a small shop to sell their patchwork quilts, macrame items, crewelwork and embroidered tablecloths and napkins. One common bond had brought them together, another gave them solid friendship, loyalty and empathy. One of the girls, Sarah, who had protested at the first meeting that she couldn't do anything, had begun, at Helen's urging, to work with clay, and all the girls had complimented Sarah on the ash trays, bud vases and sometimes unidentifiable mounds of dried clay.

Olive had somehow become Helen's second in command. "I'll do anything, *anything*, to help this project," she'd exclaimed vehemently. "You tell me what, when, how, and where, and it's done."

"I appreciate that. You can take over for me sometimes; the girls like you and you're a terrific help to them and me."

She was the last name on the list of Asler's victims and Sgt. Harris knocked at her apartment door.

"Miss Helen Matthews?" he asked when she opened it.

"Yes?"

He showed his badge and identification. "May I speak to you for a few moments, please?"

She waved him into the livingroom.

When both were seated, he said, "This is just a routine check. It doesn't mean anything, but we have to do it."

"Do what about what?" Helen asked.

"George Asler was found dead last Sunday morning, murdered, and since you were . . . ah . . . one of his victims, I just need to know your whereabouts last Saturday night."

"You think I killed that—that monster?"

"Oh, no, ma'am," he replied ve-

hemently. "We just have to check out his known enemies so that we can get on with it. We've spoken to his other victims too." He sighed, "Unfortunately detective work is largely a matter of elimination, and that's all I'm doing now. We won't bother you again."

Helen managed a smile. "I understand. Last Saturday night I was right here with nine other members of our Handcraft Club from 7:00 p.m. to about 1:00 a.m. Would you like a list of their names and phone numbers?"

"If you don't mind, Miss Matthews, just for the records. I doubt we'll contact them."

She wrote him the list, he apologized for troubling her and left.

The morning watch commander roused Harris out of a sound sleep at 2:00 o'clock on a Sunday morning.

"Got five dead ones over at the General Hospital Emergency Ward, Tim; possible homicide, go check it out."

Harris groaned, dialed his partner's home number and got dressed.

Five college boys had been having a beer bust at the local college tavern Saturday night. About 11:00 p.m. they all began to clutch their stomachs, some vomiting, all lapsing into semi-consciousness. Ambulances had been called and they were brought to Emergency.

Harris located the doctor on duty.

"Three were already dead by the time we got them and the other two were dying," the young man said. "I suspected poisoning and had the stomach pump results analyzed."

"And?"

"It was an arsenic compound appearing as barium-like radiopaque material, fatal after ingestion in a very short time, depending, of course, on the amount."

"Of course," Harris agreed. "And is arsenic that easy to get?"

"Unfortunately, yes," the doctor said. "Insecticide, weed-killers, ant poisons, paint, wallpaper of some kinds . . ."

"Doesn't it have to be signed for at place of purchase?"

"In its pure form, of course, and sometimes in other forms, but drugstores and other outlets don't always do what's required."

"Terrific." Harris sighed. "What's the location of the beer tavern, and may we have a list of the dead boys' names?"

"We have all their effects at the desk, Sergeant. The place is called Swifty's, it's on Barillo

Street, on the corner of Spruce."

At 3:30 a.m., Swifty's proved to be dark and locked. There was an emergency number pasted on the front door and Harris called it. The owner was surly at being waked but provided the names and phone numbers of the bartenders and waitresses who worked there.

"Gus was on duty Saturday night, you can start with him," yawned the man and hung up.

A phone call to Gus got Harris an address and he went to it.

The apartment was nice, Gus was still dressed, the television's late-late show was finishing a Bogart-Bacall movie and Gus offered Harris and his partner a beer.

They declined, asked the barman if he had a key to the tavern and upon his affirmative reply, requested that he go there with them.

The floor was swept, the tables polished and all the glassware gleamed on shelves behind the bar.

Harris groaned. "What the hell is *this*?"

Gus said, "What is what?"

"Five men were poisoned in here tonight and the place looks like it was ready for a sanitation inspection. Where are the glasses the boys drank from?" Harris asked him.

"Look, Sergeant," Gus tried to explain, "we didn't know it was poison. We thought it might be ptomaine from someplace they ate before they got here, or . . ." He hesitated.

"Or what?"

"Well, half of these college kids are taking drugs of some kind, or pills. I just figured they'd got a bad batch or a bad shot." He shrugged. "I'm no doctor, how should I know the difference between poison or lousy drugs?"

Harris couldn't argue with logic like that. "Okay, after the boys were taken away in the ambulances, you just did what you usually do, right? Closed at midnight, washed up everything, swept the place and locked up."

Gus nodded.

"So now we need to know who approached the table where the boys were sitting. Were there any girls with them, any other men?"

"Come on, man, this is a jumping place; you really expect me to remember who was with who? Sure, there are plenty of easy broads hanging around these college boys. They come, they go, and to me they all look alike."

"How about the waitress?"

"That much I know. These guys got a pitcher of beer from me. Ellie didn't serve them."

"That's fine, Gus, thanks for

your help. We'll drive you home."

Harris had gotten five hours' sleep and checked in Sunday at 10:00 a.m. His equally groggy partner sat across from him.

"Did you run those five guys through R and I yet?" Harris asked.

"Yeah, the package is right there on your desk."

Harris leafed through it.

Fourteen months previously the boys had been arrested on a charge of rape, brought to trial and given six months suspended sentences. The victim had been a Miss Olive Seran.

Harris went to the address given for her while his partner went to talk to the parents of the five boys.

Olive answered his knock, saw his identification and asked him into her apartment.

"A homicide man at noon on Sunday, I *am* impressed." She smiled as she offered him coffee.

He got right to it. "The five men involved in your rape case are dead."

"Well, well, there is justice somewhere, if not in the courts."

"They were murdered."

"Better yet," she said grimly. "If you're expecting me to care, you're barking up the wrong girl."

"Miss Seran, this is only routine and, believe me, I know how you feel."

She laughed. "Five fun-loving boys kidnap me from my garage, put me through fifteen hours of hell, three months in the hospital, a travesty of a trial and two months with a head shrinker who didn't even know what I was talking about, and *you* know how I feel?"

Harris nodded. "I've talked to enough victims to know exactly how you feel, Miss Seran. I'll leave if you can just tell us where you were last night. That'll be the end of it, I promise you."

Olive shrugged. "I belong to a handcraft group, we meet every Saturday night. There are ten of us and I was there from 7:00 p.m. until just after midnight. The mother of one of the girls was there and she taught me how to crochet. I guess I was with her most of the time. I'll give you names and addresses."

He thanked her for the information and left.

Tim Harris had been in Homicide for twelve years and had learned a lot about coincidence and alibis, motives and murder; but he waited for the next Sunday-morning victim in vain.

Helen was happy to announce to her Saturday night Handcraft

Club that they were doing so well, the boutique would soon open. Each had mastered a craft, made so many fine products that it couldn't fail. She suggested that they get new ideas, see the various displays at local museums.

"Can we all meet here and go to the ceramic and sculpture exhibit this Wednesday evening?"

The girls murmured their agreement and arrangements were made to meet at Helen's apartment and go in two cars. The tour was very successful, the members going their ways singly or in pairs. Helen and Olive scanned the newspapers for other exhibit events taking place on weekday evenings. New ideas, new goals were changing the members of the Handcraft Club, and the culmination would be the opening of their very own boutique.

In the meantime, Sgt. Tim Harris was both annoyed and relieved when a month of Sundays went by with no dead bodies with a record sheet of rape. Perhaps he'd been wrong.

He was in the police cafeteria sipping his midmorning coffee when Sgt. Art Gomez of Hit-and-Run Felony joined him. They'd gone through the Academy and been appointed together, but seldom saw each other.

"Tim," Art said, "how's it going with you? Everything OK?"

"Business is fine as usual, unfortunately. How you doing?"

"I don't know." Gomez shook his head. "All I ask of life is a few clues, a direction to go, reliable witnesses so I can do my job and close my cases."

"That's all any of us want."

"Yeah, but I got three victims with no clues, no witnesses, and no direction to go."

Harris felt a small ripple of ice up his backbone.

"What about the victims?"

"Men, arrest records, no connection with organized crime."

"What had they been arrested for?" Harris was afraid he might know already.

"Rape, attempted rape, child molestation. No loss to the human race, but that isn't *our* province, is it?"

Harris sighed. "Can I come down to your office later and check those files and arrest records, Art?"

"Be my guest, Tim. Got an idea?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

It was 7:30 on a Saturday night when Sgt. Harris knocked on the apartment door.

Olive opened it and smiled at him. "Sergeant Harris, isn't it? Checking more alibis, or do you

want to learn how to crochet?"

He shook his head. "Neither. May I come in?"

"Please do." She waved him toward the livingroom and Helen came toward him.

"Sergeant Harris, how nice to see you again. Have you come to arrest someone?"

He smiled. "A nice group of ladies like you, who do such lovely handiwork and are together so much? Not likely."

Harris walked around the large livingroom, noting girls at work on crewel, knitting, macrame, and three off in a corner with a frame, sewing busily on a patchwork quilt.

"Are you off duty?" Olive inquired. "Can you have a drink?"

Harris nodded. "Anything you have."

He wandered over to Sarah, busy putting the finishing touches on one of her clay works.

"That's very interesting," he commented. "What is it?"

Sarah smiled at him. "That's the body of a dead man, a very bad man. Don't you see all his badness? He hurt people, but now he can't because he's dead."

Olive came up to the sergeant, handed him his drink and put her arm through his, leading him away from Sarah.

"She's not quite right, hasn't been since . . . since what happened to her. But she's coming along just fine and we'll work with her until she's come all the way back."

Harris smiled at her. Helen joined them and the three of them went to sit on stools at the kitchen bar.

"I just wanted to tell you ladies that I think it's marvelous that you've taken the time to work with these girls. I know the bond that brought you all together. And I know exactly what you're doing."

"But you can't prove it," Helen said grimly.

"I'm not here as a cop, really," he tried to reassure them. "What I am here for is to ask if my wife can join your club. She needs people like you."

"I really don't think your wife would enjoy this group. I mean she wouldn't fit in," Helen said.

"Oh, yes, she would," Harris countered. "Two years ago, and I still haven't found the guy who raped her, but I will."

Herein, one learns of a certain kind of retribution which few people would care to elect.

Albert Morgan involuntarily squeezed the bars of the cell as he heard the footsteps in the corridor. He had been through this procedure five times since he was placed on Death Row several years ago. During that period he had developed a hatred to the point of agonizing acuteness. This hatred was directed at the man now approaching the cell. Warden Madison Oates, accompanied by two prison guards, looked somber but there was something in his expression which sent chills through Morgan. It was the hollow sobriety of a funeral director who tried to appear mournful to the family. Morgan prepared himself for bad news. He had become a legend because of a self-learned skill with the appellate process, but now he felt his luck was about to run out.

The warden stood in front of the cell. To Morgan, it seemed like minutes before Oates spoke. "The court has refused to hear your latest appeal, Morgan. I just spoke with the Governor and he has ruled out any last-minute reprieve. I'm afraid it's all set for tomorrow morning."

"You're afraid, you're afraid," Morgan hissed at Oates. "This is the first time I've seen you happy since I've been in the joint. Every time you announced a stay, I could see it was killing you. Well, I'm not going to grovel or cry or give you any satisfaction at all. I'll go out in style."

The warden turned and left the cell area. The two guards, Joe and Ed, remained behind. Each had taken a liking to Morgan but had

by Robert H. Curtis

slipped into the taciturn behavior which they assumed before an execution.

"Sorry, Morgan, I'm really sorry," was the best that Joe could muster.

Morgan remained impassive and only the whiteness of his knuckles as he grasped the bars betrayed emotion. It was 4:05 p.m. Executions at the prison took place at 6:00 a.m. Less than 14 hours of life remained for Morgan. It seemed incredible. He had counted on legal maneuvers to delay his execution until the force of public opinion decreed that he had suffered enough, but a flurry of international and domestic crises had all but squeezed the story of his fight for life out of the newspapers. A year ago, his was a cause célèbre; now he was a forgotten man, his cause lost.

Morgan sat down and gazed straight ahead. The only sound he heard was the turning of newspaper pages. Both guards were reading, somewhat self-consciously.

Morgan closed his eyes and began to think of what was in store for him. The pellets would drop into the bucket, and the cyanide gas would rise relentlessly to snuff him out. Just before his consciousness ended for the last time, would his entire life flash in review the way it was supposed to? Well, if it did, the mental movie would not be happy. He had been shortchanged and wondered why he had fought so long and hard to preserve a life which had been miserable. He had been a frail child, always sick. He had missed much school because he was in bed with pneumonia, or suffering from the effects of his severe allergies, or home with an upset stomach which the doctors had said was a result of tension but which his father had diagnosed as goldbricking, pure and simple. *His father*, Morgan thought grimly. One natural father and this was his—a cold, unsmiling man who worked as a machinist, who turned his wife into an alcoholic and who resented the sickly son. He had tried to win his father's attention by doing something, so he turned to petty crime. At least, that's what the psychologist at reform school told him.

His reverie was interrupted by the approaching footsteps of the guard Joe.

"What would you like for dinner, Morgan? You can have anything you want. I know it's a dumb idea. Just when you don't feel like eating they give you a treat."

"Is Oates coming back here tonight?"

The guard looked puzzled. "No,

the warden's gone for the day. He won't be back until morning."

"I *know* he'll be back in the morning. It's more than just duty that will bring him to my execution. He really wants to watch those pellets drop." Morgan paused as if to savor a thought. "Well, I told Oates that I'm going to go out in style," he continued. "To begin with, I'm going to order a big meal and I'm going to eat it all. You can tell Oates that my last meal was exactly what I wanted it to be. Expensive! Give me a big dinner of clam chowder, broiled lobster, french fries, shrimp salad with red sauce, apple pie a la mode and coffee. Yeah, and some sourdough bread too. Let the lousy state pay the bill on this one."

At 7:30 p.m. Joe brought dinner into the cell. He himself felt queasy and didn't see how Morgan could eat. "The food manager screamed about this one, but here it is. Sorry I can't do more for you."

Morgan remained silent as Joe pushed the tray through the slot in the cell door. The guard returned to his newspaper as Morgan began to eat.

Twenty-five minutes later, the two guards jumped as the gasping sounds began. They rushed to the cell and by the time they opened it, Morgan was on the floor. His face was swollen and blue and he was struggling to breathe.

"Ed! Call Doc Knudsen and the warden."

The doctor waved off the younger guard, who had been giving artificial respiration. He examined the man on the floor. Finally he looked up at the warden. "It's all over," he announced. "No pulse, no heartbeat, no respiration, pupils widely dilated. Your prisoner is dead."

"Damn it, Doc, how could that be? He was alive a few minutes ago. This will cause a lot of trouble. Guess he had a heart attack, huh, Doc?"

Knudsen looked up at the warden, whom he didn't like. "I couldn't possibly be certain of the cause of death without an autopsy. However, I'd appreciate knowing exactly what happened. All I know is that Ed just called me and said, 'Come quick, it's an emergency with Morgan!' "

Dr. Knudsen gazed steadily at the empty tray. The lobster claws rested on a plate like two pairs of obscene pliers. The doctor seemed transfixed by them.

The warden was feeling jumpy and the sudden knocking on the door of his office startled him.

"Come in, come in," Oates said, not bothering to disguise the annoyance in his voice. The fact that the sun was shining and that it was eleven o'clock in the morning didn't make him feel better. Morgan's death last night had upset prison routine.

The door opened and Dr. Knudsen entered the warden's office.

"Well, Doc, is the autopsy over? What did it show? Heart attack?"

"No, he didn't die of a heart attack. The autopsy confirmed what I suspected last night. In cases like this, which are extremely rare, the autopsy alone can't give the answer. It can only tell what he didn't die of. The important thing is the clinical story and the history."

Oates now was visibly angry. "Does that mean that you don't know why Morgan died?"

"You weren't listening to me, Warden." Knudsen was very patient. "I do know what killed him. The technical term is 'angioneurotic edema secondary to shellfish reaction.' In other words, he died from a severe allergic reaction, and fatal is about as severe as you can get." Knudsen continued to talk. "You see, Warden, when I spoke to Joe last night and he told me the sequence of events, and I saw those lobster claws, I began to suspect what had happened. I went to the medical record room right after you left and checked Morgan's file. Then this morning the autopsy showed those few findings that are present in such cases—things like a swollen larynx and a dilated heart."

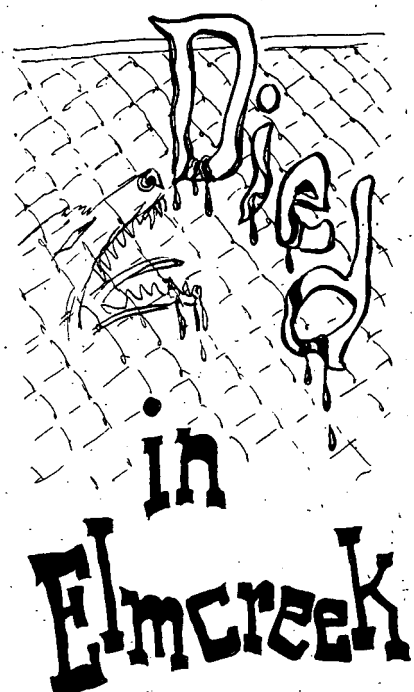
Oates looked puzzled. "You're not making yourself clear, Doc."

"Let me put it this way, Warden. Morgan himself deprived you of your little party this morning. He knew about his allergic reaction to shellfish. He also knew that he had no problems with the usual kinds of fish but that shellfish, especially lobster, could kill him. Finally, he had probably learned that tension increased the severity of his allergic reactions, and that his mental state, in combination with his last meal, would insure a fatal result."

Knudsen paused and then looked directly at Oates as he spoke. There was an edge of sarcasm in his voice. "Don't feel too bad, Warden. Think of it this way: instead of the state supplying cyanide pellets, the state provided lobster."

Coming down to the present may be much simpler than going up into the past.

The Lyon in Elmcreek



My childhood was spent in the small Midwest town of Elmcreek, a rather ugly little town with a drab parsonage that was my home and an unassuming church where my father preached. I was, as I remember it, twelve years old when my father reluctantly answered a call from an urban church in order to provide me, his only son, with the advantages of a city education.

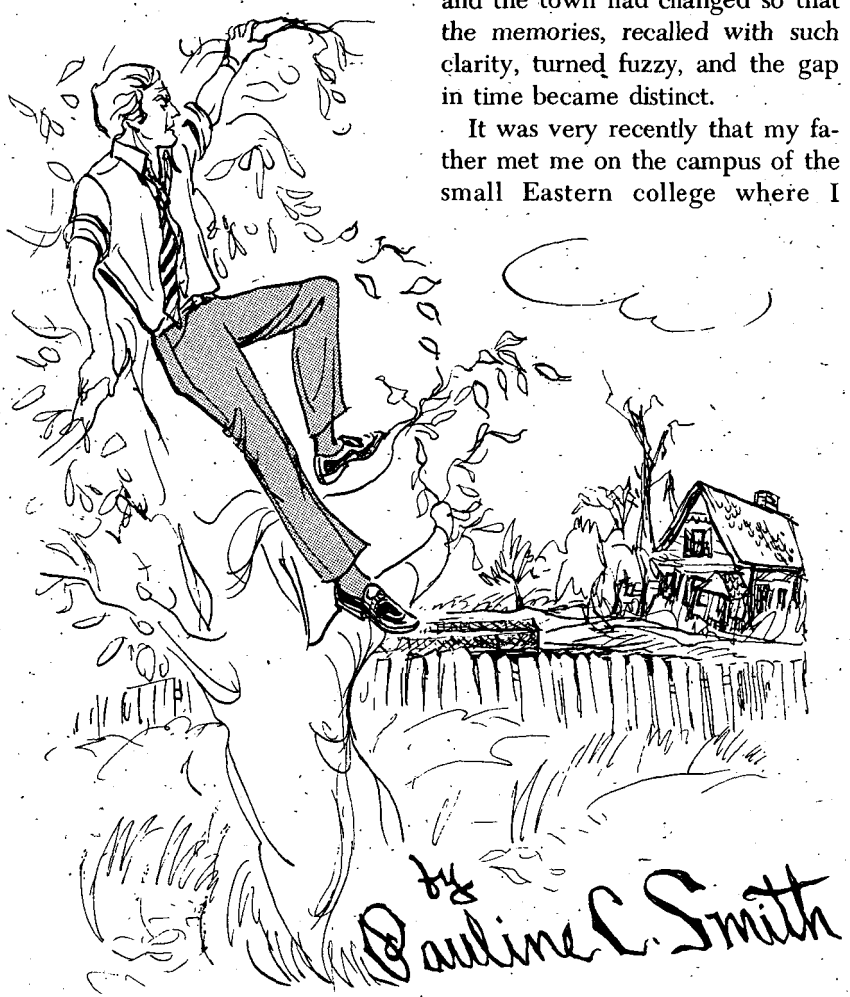
Yet I never forgot Elmcreek, its summer heat and winter cold, the dust and snow, Sunday School and Christian Endeavor. All of Elmcreek's social life centered around the church where the town meetings were held; box suppers too, and strawberry sociables which were sometimes substituted by peaches or apples, but still called strawberry because that's the way it was.

Even though we left the town for a more comfortably attractive parsonage, an impressive church and the advantageous high school, I did not forget Elmcreek. Those four years in the city and the following six at State University are

dim by comparison. I remember everything that happened in Elmcreek with the exception of a blank space the year I was nine.

While my father used to go back for an occasional visit, to preach a sermon, to visit my mother's grave, or perhaps to talk with members of his old congregation, I never returned to Elmcreek until thirty-five years had passed and the town had changed so that the memories, recalled with such clarity, turned fuzzy, and the gap in time became distinct.

It was very recently that my father met me on the campus of the small Eastern college where I



by Pauline C. Smith

teach English Literature. He is 75 now and still walks straight and tall with only a slightly awkward stiffness to denote the stroke of ten years ago that sent me to the Midwestern city he had served for so long to bring him east to retirement with me and my family.

My father often walks the campus—we live so close—the students know him there, and smile and nod respectfully. He likes this distant acquaintanceship, I think, without further affinity, and he likes to wander the grounds with his old-soldier walk, so it was not a surprise to see him there; the surprise was that he had come to meet and walk home with me and impart some news.

"Mrs. Lyon is dead," he said.

"Mrs. Lyon?" I asked.

"Of Elmcreek."

"Oh?" I said politely, not remembering the name of Lyon.

He unclenched his fist and held out the tightly folded telegraph message. I unfolded it to read a request that he conduct the funeral services.

"Back in Elmcreek?" I exclaimed with surprise. "After all this time?"

I was remembering the town meetings, the box socials and the pew where I sat through funerals. "I could make reservations on an early-morning flight," I said, "and we could hire a car from the airport to Elmcreek." There was no question about it—Father wanted me to accompany him or he would never have met me with the telegram.

"Yes," he said, "I have already wired."

We walked across the broad avenue and up the terrace stairs to the big old house I purchased the year I was married, the second year I taught at the college. I opened the door to the familiar scent of leather and lemon polish and the sound of Victoria's greeting from the back of the house. "Is that you, Elliott?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Is Grandfather with you?"

"He's here." I turned to my father then and told him, "I'll make arrangements right away." He nodded and moved directly toward his rooms, this in the nature of a silent rebuke for my traditional habit of indulging in a leisurely martini the minute I arrive home.

I smiled as I watched him go, stiff and unyielding, an old man full of narrow judgments and rigid principles who is important to me, more important as a symbol than the wife I love and the daughters I adore.

"Did he tell you about it?" I asked Victoria when we were

seated in my study, the tray with frosty pitcher and glasses on my desk. I reached for the phone.

"Only that he received the telegram to preach a funeral. Who is it?"

"I don't know. Lyon, a Mrs. Lyon."

I phoned the airport and made reservations, then the college administration office to arrange for a substitute for the next day's classes—the last reluctantly, it being still early in the fall term. I turned to my wife. "Do you know how long it's been since I've seen Elmcreek?"

She smiled and asked, "How long?"

"Thirty-five years," I said. "Thirty-five years!" and I remembered much, but not a Mrs. Lyon.

I remembered sleigh rides over prairie snow, and chickens bathing in summer dust. I remembered a town of beautiful trees and ugly houses. I remembered prim box socials in the churchyard and funerals in the church . . . how with sedate and very unwilling step, I used to follow the pallbearers to the graveyard beyond, and flinch when the clods of earth struck the box in the grave. It was all very clear except for that section of time during the autumn I was nine.

Through the dinner chatter of my daughters, I remained remote and my father aloof as we both remembered Elmcreek, each in our own way.

After dinner, with the girls and their mother off to a symphony and Father in his rooms preparing his funeral oration, the memories followed me to my study and persisted while I attempted, without success, to correct class papers.

. . . I was seven and the marble king of Elmcreek. I had a whole cigar box of glassies and agates before my father found out I was playing for keeps and cut my capitalistic reign short. I remember Mrs. Baugh and her luscious chicken dumplings, and Mrs. Watkins, who tucked in the bed sheets so tightly I couldn't find room for my toes. There was also Mrs. Martin, who darned my socks and patched my pants . . . All those church women who took turns in cleaning up the parsonage and preparing good, wholesome meals for the "poor motherless boy" and his "sainted widowed father," but I do not remember Mrs. Lyon.

. . . I was eight and in love with my third-grade teacher, she of the fine mist hair and flyaway hairpins. I found one of these on the schoolroom floor, its color worn to silver, and cherished it in the cigar box that had once held

my marbles until I learned, to my despair, that my beloved was to be wed, so I buried the hairpin and swore myself to a life of celibacy. I remember the red schoolhouse, faded to a soft rose, with a rusty bell in the tower. I remember all the buildings of the town: the grocery store, butcher shop, pharmacy, barbershop. I remember the houses and who lived where, but I do not remember a house for Mrs. Lyon, or the woman.

. . . I was nine, the Babe Ruth of Elmcreek until I broke an arm and discovered the love of reading. I read through those long, lazy days of summer in the branches of the parsonage trees, moving from peach to plum and cherry as the fruit ripened, reaching the pear tree in early fall where I heard a snarl that split the air and a growl that ground it up . . . I remember that. I also remember, unaccountably, an excerpt of a verse from the book of Ecclesiastes, something about a living dog being better than a dead lion, and no more until winter—as if a curtain had fallen on the stage to close off all behind-the-scenes reality in preparation of make-believe for when the play should go on.

. . . I was ten that winter, the gap of forgetfulness past, itself forgotten. I was beginning to grow up and show an exaggerated respect for my father, as if I were one of his flock following in blind determination and not the son, the only son, who had once loved him dearly. I remember the sleigh rides that winter and hay rides the next summer. I remember the spelling bee the following year and Mina Schermerhorn who won it and on whom I had a scandalous crush . . . and I remember my father, the symbol of all that was right, all that was good in spite of a secret tug at my mind to beg for a further analysis. I remember the apples Alvin Hurd and I stole from the Anderson orchard, but I never again climbed a tree in the parsonage yard nor did I read there.

I remember all of Elmcreek except for the lapse that fall when I was nine.

On the plane the next morning, I opened my briefcase and laid out the class papers, but my mind wandered so far and wide that the task of correction was a hopeless one.

I replaced the papers, buckled the case and looked at my father's face in profile in the window of vaporous cloud. "This Mrs. Lyon," I said, and he did not move, did not even turn his eyes my way.

"Who was she? I don't remember her."

My father looked at me then. "She was the widow of Buford Lyon. Do you remember him?"

I shook my head.

"I buried him thirty-eight years ago."

Thirty-eight years ago I was nine years old.

"His widow has lived alone in that house ever since."

"What house?" I asked.

He looked surprised. "The one on the next block from the parsonage. The house behind the orchard."

I remembered no house there. I thought it was fields all the way to the graveyard on the other side of the church. I thought I could lay out that town in the graph paper of my mind, but I could remember no house behind the parsonage orchard.

At the airport I hired a car and drove the fifty miles through dull, flat countryside to Elmcreek, which we reached shortly after noon.

I missed the old sign at the entrance crossroads that once admonished the long-ago motorist with the legend: "Drive slow and see our town. Drive fast and see our jail." I drove slowly, but I did not see the town I remembered.

This town, this new Elmcreek, had filled in the empty lots with buildings and crowded the fields with tract homes. I drove up and down the paved streets without locating the dusty square where once I reigned as marble champion, or the baseball lot I always remember when a chill day causes my arm to ache.

"It's so changed," I murmured to my father, and he answered, "Places change and so do people. They change with the years and they change with understanding," a benevolently philosophical statement for my father, the rigid fundamentalist, to make.

The schoolhouse had been stuccoed over and enlarged, the bell and tower gone. I knew my father would first want to go to the cemetery and visit my mother's grave before stopping at the parsonage to pay his respects, so I turned at the schoolhouse corner, getting my bearings at last, or almost, in this strange town I thought I remembered so well. Then I turned at the next corner, the long block I remembered as fields where once we boys ran and hid in the weeds and formed armies with sticks for play guns—now lined with houses and small, precise front lawns . . . so different. "That is where the Lyons lived," said Father.

I slowed my already slow speed

before the old house on the block, the very, very old house that had been here when I was a boy, with its big yard the way they used to be, unkempt now. I could see the solid wood fence behind it and the tops of the parsonage fruit trees beyond. I looked at the house without recalling it. I had thought, when I sat in the pear tree reading Stevenson and Poe that when I glanced up from my book, it was over fields, the fields that were there then, and the house that was there too, but which I remembered only as a continuation of the fields. Maybe it was as Thomas Wolfe said, I couldn't go home again, for having arrived there I was discovering it wasn't at all as I thought it had been.

I drove on to the graveyard, the back entrance as I remembered, with tall arched headstones and marble angels standing watch. I parked the car and we walked inside, directly to my mother's grave, where Father knelt and closed his eyes and I faintly remembered a gentle woman, always in the shadows.

Back at the car, I looked at my watch. "We'd better go to the parsonage now." Father nodded and I drove on, only then noticing that the graveyard had changed after all, extending another block, two blocks of cemetery, more modern, more parklike, with flat, unobtrusive markers. I turned at the end of it and again on Church Road where I could see the spire.

The church shone glossy white, but the friendly benches out under the trees were gone, as were the trees. The parsonage, close by, seemed very much the same—rather shabby, almost derelict—and the parson who met us on the broad front porch might have been my father forty years ago. He ushered us in and plied us with sandwiches, cake, tea and coffee. I remembered then that funerals were once cause for feasting, a get-together time, and wandered outside and around into the back orchard. The leaves had started to fall, but I could touch each tree and name it . . . especially the pear tree at the end of the lot where I sat with my book those early autumn days when I was nine.

It was quiet in the orchard, the shouts of children faint from their yards on the block beyond. I thought of my age—forty-seven—and I thought of my leather-soled shoes, not built for climbing, and took off my jacket, letting it fall on the leaf-strewn ground, and rolled up my shirt sleeves.

I was awkward and the old break in my arm, set poorly by a

country doctor, made itself apparent as I grunted and panted and hitched my way up through branches that had seemed lower and far more secure thirty-eight years before. Leaves fell in protest and the childish shouts turned so faint as to sound like those of my long-ago friends from the fields as they played at war.

I was up, clinging, and dared not look down, so I looked out and over the high board fence and saw the wire enclosure in the Lyon yard and heard again, from the distance of time, the growl and snap of a dog. The shock of the memory, foggy and muted, nudged at the shock that had caused me to forget. I opened my mouth wide to breathe in the misty autumn air and remembered Buford Lyon, burly and ponderous, as he trained the dog in that wire enclosure—quietly, both man and dog—very, very quietly. Fragments of memory nudged at each other as I looked through falling leaves at the wire runway in the Lyon yard . . . the dog strapped to a homemade treadmill with caged rats as a lure to keep its short bowlegs churning. I closed my eyes and turned my head to call up another memory from that box of those I had kept closed for so long . . . this even more incomprehensible and so terrifying that it had frozen my nine-year-old body to the limb of the pear tree that day and fixed my horrified eyes in mesmerized attention.

It had been warm, and Buford, stripped to his tattooed waist, was excited. I could *feel* his excitement as I cowered in the leaves, wanting to leap and run, wanting to scream a protest, when he brought the net bag, squirming, into the wire-enclosed runway and attached it to a pole, and unleashed the dog, whispering to it as he bent and swayed the pole so that the bag lowered and rocked and sprouted frightened fur as the dog leaped and clawed, encouraged and teased softly by the man. I didn't know what the bag held, what made it heavy and furry until I heard a hiss and a screech as frantic, taloned, fighting paws emerged, swaying and dipping as the man rocked and bent the pole . . . then I knew it to be a kitten—my kitten—the one promised to me . . . the only one of the litter a shiny black. The dog leaped and clawed. The pole bent and snapped.

Sick with recall, I turned from the wire enclosure to look through the trees toward the parsonage and remember dropping my book that day to scramble from the tree, barely protecting my splintered arm as I slid to the ground,

prepared to commit the sin of interrupting my father during his preparation of a sermon. I burst in, my chest aching with questions, my throat spouting demands as, tearfully and inarticulately, I poured forth my shocking story.

He leaned back in the straight chair and laid down his pen precisely to hear me out without comment, then he bent forth again, picked up the pen and, without glancing at me, made his comment: "Stay out of the pear tree."

I stopped loving my father in that instant.

I made my way cautiously down the trunk of the pear tree, leather soles slipping off old gnarled branches. Coming down to the present seemed much easier than going up into the past. On the ground, brushing off bits of bark, shaking my trouser legs into place, rolling down my shirt sleeves, and putting on my jacket, I knew that I was not yet truly here but still partially held by that once-upon-a-time. I could hear the shouts of children and smell burning leaves in the air. Were the shouts those of my friends or their progeny? And had the leaves burned long ago or were they burning now?

The little parsonage was now crowded with old congregation members greeting my father. I walked across lawns and through the wide open doors of the church with only a scattering of early mourners and the organist quietly waiting on her bench. Instinctively, I sidled my way into the last pew, the one in which I had sat so restlessly through hundreds of Sunday sermons and every service the church performed.

I knew no one. I looked at backs of bowed heads and wondered if they were friends. My very clear memories of this town and its people had now become fuzzy while the blank space took the well-defined shape of rats in a cage, a kitten in a bag, a cruelly silent dog, the man . . . and my father who once delivered a sermon that now came to mind—a strangely different sermon from his usual, both in context and deliverance—a sermon that seemed to pluck aimlessly at The Word, as it scattered vituperations from Exodus to Jeremiah, with a Deuteronomy redundancy thrown in for emphasis and an Ecclesiastes statement for symbolism. It had been a strange sermon to come from my father, who usually spoke in low key, using a solid theme based upon a single section of the Bible; but that Sunday, which must have occurred at the very edge of my forgetfulness, was

one of repetitive exhortations to take a life for a life, and misquotations surrounding the amending of ways and doings, with the final warning about a living dog being better than a dead lion, all out of context and in direct opposition to my father's usual tenets.

He took his place at the pulpit while the church filled up. I was startled out of the past and into the present. My father's voice, a little reedy now, but still with an authoritative timbre, began the reading of the service. He had selected verses from the Psalms, read in praise and celebration. I was carried along by the words and rose at last, hardly realizing the service was over as the others rose, but as a child again, the parson's son, in forced attendance of the rites of the church, and found myself walking the aisle toward the raised platform in front to look into the casket and pause, seeing, in the old face in last repose, the younger one who had promised me a kitten . . . a black kitten full of life and happiness, "born just for you," she had said. I stumbled past the platform and the casket, remembering Mrs. Lyon at last, timid and fearful, who had sat so often in the pew beside me and leaned over, during a hymn one Sunday, to tell me my kitten had been born, the blackest of the litter, and once it was strong enough to leave its mother, it was mine!

I stumbled, the church closing in on me. I felt a great need to be outside, breathing the clear autumn air with the blue sky above me, for I had remembered Mrs. Lyon and what she did as I watched from the pear tree. I stood on the lawn shuddering as the mourners broke up, some moving quietly toward their cars, others waiting for the graveside services. I stood apart, knowing none of these people, glancing toward the parsonage where the pear tree had grown old beside the wooden fence. "Stay out of the pear tree," my father had ordered on the day I told him of the dog and the kitten. I no longer loved my father so, after a while, I climbed it again, my book tucked under splinted arm, and heard the snarl of the silent dog as it leaped, a grunt, a gasp, a keening cry—the click of the pen gate, footsteps running away—and Buford and Mrs. Lyon were swept from my consciousness . . . as was the dog on the treadmill, the rats in their cage, the kitten in its bag, with only a part of my father left to me, that part on the pedestal, revered in exaggerated compensation for the love I could no longer feel.

The pallbearers, laden with their burden, marched slowly from the church doors, my father following, head bowed. I joined the group of mourners and stood apart during the lowering of the casket to the intonation of the ashes-to-ashes litany and while the clumps of earth were dropped.

I moved around the now restless group preparing to depart, and tugged at my father's sleeve like a child, and like another, he followed me along the dried-out grass paths, across the church and parsonage lawns to the hired car in the driveway. I helped him in and backed up and drove through the unfamiliar town of Elmcreek to the highway.

We rode those first few miles in silence while I, the man, looked back to the boy. Abruptly, I said, "He was raising the dog to be a fighter, wasn't he? A pit bull for the ring?"

"Yes," said my father.

"The kitten . . . the kitten in the net bag was a game to him," I shuddered then as I must have shuddered thirty-eight years ago, "a lure and lesson to the dog in how to kill."

"Yes," said my father.

I turned to look at him, then back at the road. "I came to you that day—after I had seen it—" swallowing my sickness at the very distinct memory. "I came and told you and you did nothing."

"I was writing a sermon," said my father.

Startled, I trod heavily on the accelerator; the car swerved and I eased my foot, remembering the sermon, the sermon that preached of the mending of ways and a life for a life—remembering too the old Model-T my father sedately rattled through the town as he called weekly at the homes of each of his church members. He was probably involved right up to his clerical neck even before I told my terrible tale of the helpless kitten and the ruthless man with his dog . . .

"You knew about the dog," I said.

"I knew about the dog—the man and the woman. She needed something to love, and he brought home a dog to train to be a killer. He built the dog run and the treadmill, and caught the rats and caged them, and when the kittens grew old enough, he caught them too, to train the dog to kill."

I swallowed in memory.

"The woman was forbidden the dog run, but she needed something to love and the dog needed affection, so when the man was gone she went out to the dog run to get and to give what both she

and the dog needed, you see."

"And then you preached the sermon," I said.

"I had to preach a sermon to which someone would listen."

"She listened," I said, thinking how closely she must have listened to that life-for-a-life sermon, how carefully she heeded the amend-his-ways distortion, and how very well she knew the dog and the master.

Seeing it now with the eyes of a man through the shock of the child, I remembered Mrs. Lyon's defiance in the dog run that day, and the dog's protective savagery as it leaped on the man who had taught it to kill.

I heard again the snarl of the dog, the grunt, the gasp and the cry of the man. I heard the click of the pen gate and the scampering footsteps. "You knew it would happen," I accused my father.

"I told you to stay out of the pear tree," he said.

"You knew he would be killed," I persisted.

"I knew that a dog, trained to kill, would kill as it had been trained for all of its life to do."

I drove the hired car onto the airport parking lot and followed my father who walks straight and tall, a man of narrow judgments and broad ones too—a man of rigid principles who allows them to bend.

As we waited in the waiting room for our flight to be announced, I opened my briefcase thinking I'd get to work on class papers, and immediately closed the briefcase again. "Elmcreek was not as I remember it," I said.

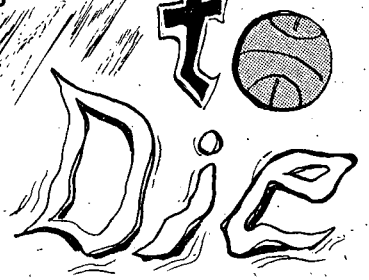
"Things change," he agreed. "But they change only in shape and form and then settle back and you find they are the same after all."

Loving my father again at last, still respecting him, I noted that change and stability, diversion and fixity were all a matter of perspective and viewpoint. "And understanding," I commented, "the understanding that, sometimes, it is better to let a Lyon die."

"Sometimes," he answered, as he clasped his hands clerically on an ecclesiastical knee.

The scent of pursuit may, at times, be overwhelming.

A Game Way to Die



Checker Casnik was sure he could get away with it—and keep the fifty thousand dollars too.

It wasn't as if he had *tried* to kill the boy. All he wanted was to slow him down, keep him from scoring his usual twenty-five points and getting his fifteen rebounds.

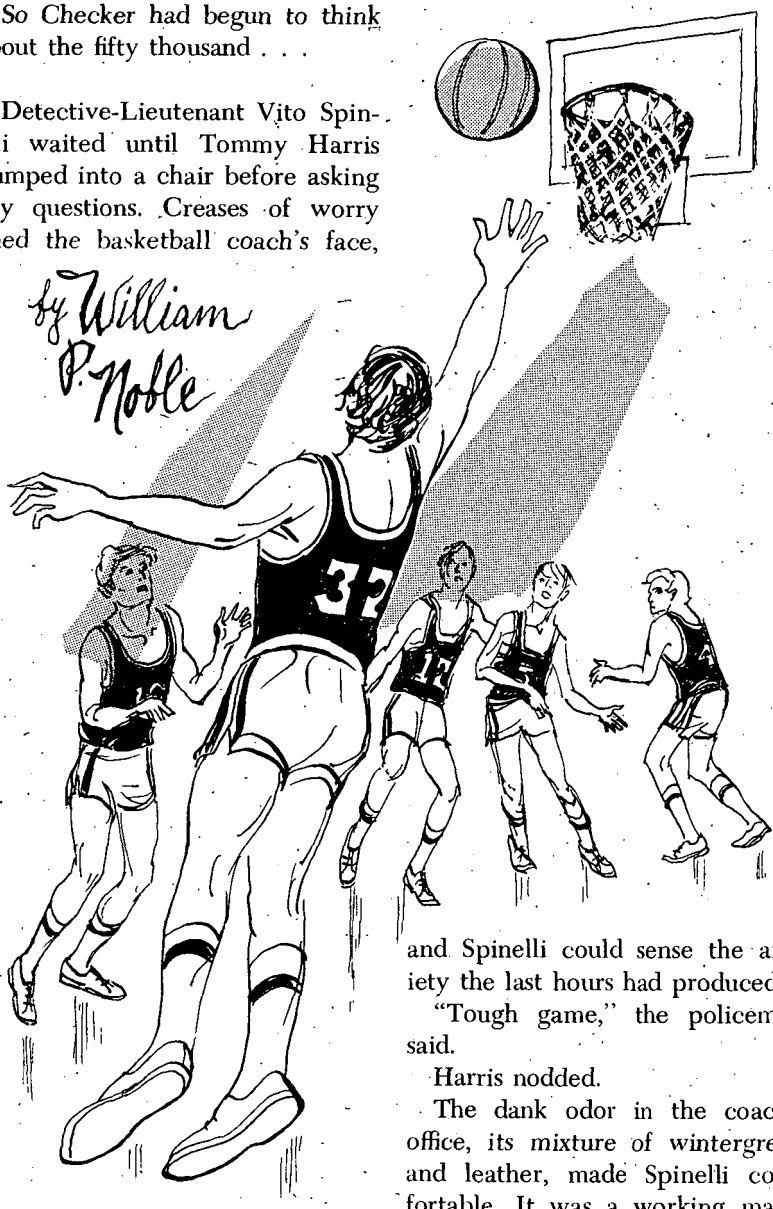
The early line had had City University on top by twelve points. Some people thought it should have been more. After all, with Sam DeLance hitting the way he was, there were only a couple of teams in the country that could stay with them, and *they* didn't have City's bench.

Checker knew all this, of course. He'd witnessed hundreds of college basketball games over the last twenty years, and he could tell that Sam DeLance and his teammates would put City University near the top of the polls for a long, long time.

So Checker had begun to think about the fifty thousand . . .

Detective-Lieutenant Vito Spinelli waited until Tommy Harris slumped into a chair before asking any questions. Creases of worry lined the basketball coach's face,

by William P. Noble



and Spinelli could sense the anxiety the last hours had produced.

"Tough game," the policeman said.

Harris nodded.

The dank odor in the coach's office, its mixture of wintergreen and leather, made Spinelli comfortable. It was a working man's

office, papers piled on the desk, equipment loosely bundled in a corner, file drawers half open.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" Harris asked.

"I need information."

"Sure."

Spinelli remembered his conversation with the locker-room man. "Tonight wasn't the first time DeLance got sick?"

"Oh, no. He missed practice once last week, and then a couple of weeks ago it didn't look like he could make the game we always play against our alumni."

"What happened?"

"It was in the warm-up. We have a drill where we do figure eights under the basket, and as each man cuts inside, he's fed the ball. For the first time since I can remember, Sam was a step late getting to the ball, and he threw our timing off. I finally took him out of the drill."

"How did you know he was sick?"

"He'd bend over and clutch himself, then his face got pale and once or twice I saw him stagger."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, he just sloughed it off. Something he ate, he claimed. After a little while he wanted to play so I put him in."

"What about tonight? When did you first notice he wasn't feeling well?" Spinelli asked him.

"In the early minutes. He just wasn't hitting the boards like he should, and he was slow coming down when we broke."

"You saw nothing in the warm-up?"

Harris shook his head. "I was being interviewed on television."

In the first five minutes the game had seesawed, with neither team able to put together more than two straight baskets. Then, Sam DeLance picked off a cross-court pass and was dribbling toward his own basket. No one was close to him, but just as he started his leap from the head of the key, the ball slipped from his hands and Sam collapsed to the floor.

A loud groan had gone up from the partisan City University fans while the players ran back up court. For several seconds, few realized Sam DeLance was still down, and it was only after some spectators screamed to the referee that he was noticed.

His face was ashen, and he was clutching his stomach.

"Can you think of anyone who would want to give arsenic poison to this boy?" Spinelli asked.

"He didn't have an enemy in the world," Tommy Harris said.

Checker Casnik hung up the

phone with a broad smile of satisfaction. Yes, the fifty thousand would be waiting, whenever he wanted it.

Of course he still felt badly about the boy dying. It was not something he had planned on—but maybe it wasn't so bad after all. If the boy were still alive, he just might . . . yes, it was possible he could have . . . well, a remote chance at best, but now there's no way anyone could know.

Checker had an uneasy thought: *better get rid of everything.* Then he reassured his fragile confidence. They have to know what to look for, and where to look for it. How are they going to do that?

"Are you positive?" Vito Spinelli said into the phone.

Across the desk, Tommy Harris watched him with interest.

"There's no doubt?"

Spinelli nodded silently once, twice and then hung up. "Well, now we know what and why." He stood up and stretched. It had been a long night. "What was the spread on tonight's game?"

"Twelve points, I think." Harris laughed. "I try to keep away from that sort of thing."

Spinelli was not smiling. "And you won by four?"

"Yes."

The detective slammed his fist into a palm. "Okay, somebody *had* to know something, had to be feeding it to the outside."

"Why?"

"Because *somebody* put a bundle on your opponents tonight, close to a hundred thousand that said you wouldn't beat the spread."

Harris whistled silently. "All that money . . . Maybe it's because we're a ranked team and the game was televised."

"Sure," the detective said, "except for one thing."

"What?"

"The dough was put down just a few minutes before the game was to start."

Checker Casnik patted the last shovelful of dirt into the small hole. The bottles, the chemistry book, even the rags were safely under the earth. Now he could relax.

Fifty thousand dollars! After twenty years it really didn't seem so much; all those ball games, the overheated gymnasiums, the noisy shouting, the waiting—waiting for the one chance . . .

He had come close other times but he never had a sure thing before; so he had only bet modestly, and always his own money. This time it had been different. They had come to him, and he had bet

only *their* money. What a feeling!

He should be thankful to Sam DeLance; a nice boy really, always polite—never pulled the tricks some of the others did. Yes, Checker remembered how the others would make fun because his English wasn't perfect or because he couldn't understand some of their words.

Checker pulled his coat collar up to fend off the sharp, night breezes. Everything was done now. It was time to go home to sleep, and then later on—perhaps in a few hours—the fifty thousand dollars . . .

Vito Spinelli's fingers absently massaged the sides of his coffee cup as he slowly read the unfamiliar words: "Arsenic poisoning results from consuming a fatal dose of arsenious acid which, when absorbed into the blood, will cause violent effects."

His eyes ached from the few hours of sleep he had gotten after he had sent Tommy Harris home. He stifled a yawn as he realized he still had his regular shift coming up that evening. The pressure was on, and if he had needed a reminder, that wake-up call from the captain was all it took!

It had started him thinking, though. Arsenic—everyone's heard of it, but how much do we really know? It comes in solid form and it has no taste; beyond that, there was little else about which he could be sure.

So he had gone to the police laboratory, and the chemists were more than happy to answer his questions. Yes, arsenic can be obtained commercially; yes, if used properly, it can provide beneficial results; yes, the subject may not even be aware he is being poisoned until too late.

They showed him manuals and textbooks where the words and phrases were a jumble of chemists' jargon and scientists' work product. Finally they sent him to the encyclopedia, and here he was able to understand a little.

"Arsenic is used in many drugs which are administered for various skin diseases," he read, "and it is also given in a tonic, especially for anemia. Inhalation or ingestion of arsenic gas or dust can prove fatal, especially if given in repeated small doses."

He thumped the book closed and remembered. Hadn't Tommy Harris said the boy had been sick several times on the court the last few weeks? What if someone had been slowly poisoning him, giving him small doses, little by little?

He glanced at the report from the hospital. The boy hadn't lived more than a few moments after

he had collapsed. There hadn't been time for the antidote to work. So whatever dose he got must have been administered not long before he walked onto the court, because arsenic works rapidly . . .

Checker Casnik was awake even before his alarm clock went off. The vision of money, green bills hanging from a tree as he neatly picked them like apples, had filled his dreams. Twenty years of waiting, he told himself over and over. It had been worth it.

He pushed himself up on one elbow and surveyed his dingy one room. The pullman kitchen, with enamel chipping from the old stove, the heavy dining room table with its uneven legs, the closet door that wouldn't shut—all this would be behind him soon. Someone else could fight with the landlady about enough heat in the winter or about the plumbing; for Checker Casnik, a new world was waiting.

His eyes fell on his work pants, askew over the back of a flimsy wooden chair. Dark smudges stood out on the legs, and he wondered if the arsenic could have stained.

Of course not, he reminded himself. Arsenic is colorless. The spots probably came from the digging. Hadn't he wiped his hands a few times?

Yet something wasn't right, something he should have remembered; he flopped back in bed and wiped his hand across his eyes. Did it have to do with work? He glanced at the clock and saw the afternoon was half over. He'd better get a move on. It wouldn't look good if he were late to work.

He climbed out of bed and reached for his pants. As he did, an acrid, pungent odor hit him, and suddenly he remembered . . .

"What are you looking for?" Tommy Harris asked.

Vito Spinelli shrugged. "I'm not sure."

They were in the basketball coach's office in the bowels of the field house. Above them, they could hear the pounding and shouting of afternoon practice. It sounded like a hundred elephants.

"Look, Lieutenant," the coach said, "if you don't need me—"

"It's got to be around here," Spinelli said. "It's got to."

"What does?"

"The answer—how Sam DeLance was poisoned."

Harris opened his arms. "Be my guest, look where you want. Only . . ." he nodded toward the pounding upstairs, ". . . I've got a basketball team to run, and this is

an important practice—after losing Sam and all."

Spinelli drew a copy of the hospital report from his coat pocket. "In here it says that Sam must have been poisoned just a few minutes before he collapsed. That means it had to happen in the warm-up or in the locker room."

Harris nodded.

"Is there anything to eat or drink in the locker room before the game?"

"No, I don't allow it. I want them playing with their bellies empty. It makes them meaner and quicker."

"How about on the bench?"

"Just the water bucket, and a couple of bottles of sugar water and fruit juice."

Spinelli smiled. "Now *that's* something."

Harris shook his head. "No way. Everybody, including me, drinks from those things. Any arsenic in there and we'd all be dead."

"You're sure?"

"Positive." Another pounding came from upstairs. "Lieutenant . . . ?"

Spinelli pushed himself to his feet. "Okay."

As they went through the door, the detective caught a strong whiff of wintergreen. "I might as well check the locker room," he said.

"As you wish," Harris said, and led him down a dimly lit corridor, to a large metal door.

Harris pushed it open and stood aside to let Spinelli enter.

Before them was a solid array of lockers and benches and tables. On an opposite wall was a bulletin board plastered with newspaper clippings and mimeographed notices.

Another doorway, at the far end, led to the exercise room, with its horde of metal equipment.

Vito strolled along the row of lockers, reading the names scratched on small pieces of adhesive tape. Near the end he came upon "DeLance."

He pulled at the closed locker, but it wouldn't open. "You got a key?" he asked Tommy Harris.

"I think so," the coach said. "If I don't, the locker man has a master." He reached into his pocket.

Vito's practiced eyes scanned the room, searching for a bottle, a rag, a discarded envelope, anything that could have a trace of arsenic. He bent to look under the lockers, and he drew his finger along the edge of the nearest bench. All he got was a noseful of dust.

Harris was standing over him, holding a key outstretched. "This is the one."

Vito pushed himself to his feet with effort. Crawling around the floor of a men's locker room was not his idea of pleasure. "Did they grab DeLance's street clothes when he was put in the ambulance?" he asked.

Harris nodded. "He was brought in here first and laid over there." He pointed to a table. "They stripped him down because he was tearing at his clothes; you know, the pain and all."

"How long did it take before the ambulance came?"

"No more than fifteen minutes."

"So all that time," Spinelli said, "he was lying on this table and dying."

Harris nodded.

The policeman turned the key in the locker door, and slowly it swung open. At first, Spinelli saw nothing but shadows—but then he spied a bundle on the bottom of the locker.

"It's DeLance's uniform," Harris said.

So it was: shirt, pants, socks, sneakers, athletic supporter—everything that had been stripped from him the night before.

A pungent odor wafted from the bundle in Spinelli's hands; not the usual athletic smell—not mildew, not dampness.

Then he smiled. He had it, the whole thing, the answer. The clothes smelled of garlic—and what also gave off a garlic odor?

Arsenic! He remembered the encyclopedia: "Inhalation or ingestion of arsenic dust can prove fatal."

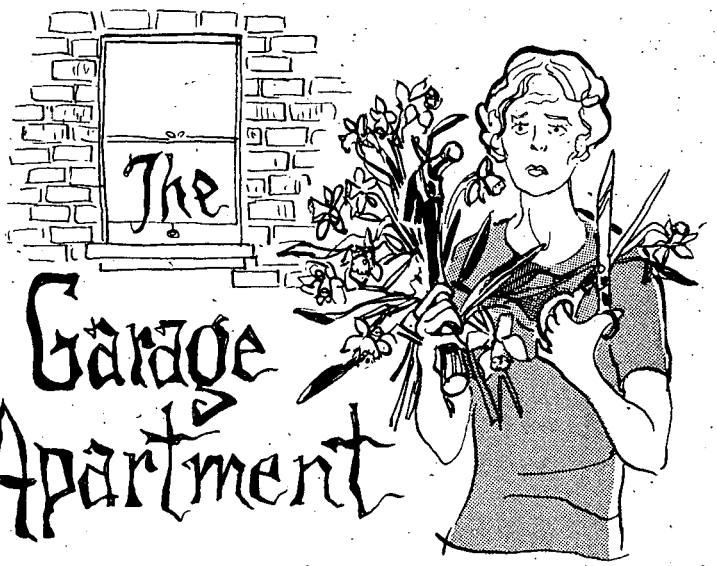
What better way to get arsenic dust into the body than by having it absorbed? Basketball's a fast game, and the body perspires freely, opening the pores, and this allows the arsenic dust placed inside clothing to be ingested into the bloodstream . . .

"Who's responsible for issuing uniforms to the players?" Vito asked. "For laundering them, too?"

Before Harris could answer, the locker room door burst open, and a small stubby man stood in the doorway.

"Why it's his job, our locker room attendant," Harris said with a smile. "I want you to meet Checker Casnik . . ."

Although not recommended heartily, this may be one way to fix a troublesome problem.



The Garage Apartment

"I don't know why I should feel this way," Sylvia Hawkins mooned into a cup of cold black coffee. "I drink too much coffee these days. And now I'm talking to myself." She sighed.

Sylvia rose wearily from the kitchen table and sloshed the bitter brew into the sink. She rinsed the cup and opened the dishwasher. The door sprang out of her wet fingers and slammed the cup to the floor.

"Not another one," she groaned. It was the third out of the set of coffee mugs to go in a month. One broke in the move from San Francisco. Last week, one mysteriously fell off its handle while full of hot coffee. Now this. The cups must be jinxed. Imagine Judy giving her a jinxed moving-day present. Sylvia sighed again, and got out the broom and dustpan.

The thought of Judy, immersed in the trials and errors of first-

time motherhood, brought a pang of regret. Sylvia would have enjoyed being nearby—not to meddle, just to be there, to watch her first grandchild grow and to help Judy over the rough spots. Instead, she was three thousand miles away, getting settled in a new home, getting oriented in a new community, while John was grasping the challenge of an even more exalted position with the company.

Ah well, that had been the pattern of their lives for more than twenty years. Seven different cities—never more than a few years in any one place. No wonder Judy had dug in, married a native Californian and had no desire ever to go anywhere again.

by Joyce Harrington

Jody, on the other hand, was a born wanderer. The world was his back yard. No pair of twins was ever more unalike. Now Jody, a dropout from Stanford, was somewhere in South America teaching an emerging Indian tribe to grow bigger and better plantains and to wear shoes.

Sylvia realized with a start that she was leaning on the broom, the dustpan filled with shards of broken cup about to slip from her forgetful fingers. "Dreaming again. Miles away." Miles away, but with her eyes fixed out the back window, focused on the red brick garage across the lawn. Or rather, on the windows above the garage—the blank white windows with the shades pulled down.

"I wonder if Mrs. Pickens is busy cooking up some new complaints."

Sylvia grimaced with distaste and dumped the broken cup into the trash can. Put the broom and dustpan away, she mused. Funny, how she had to keep telling herself what to do next.

Roaming the first floor of the house, Sylvia caught her reflection in the tall mirror over the fireplace in the livingroom. She stopped, staring. Did she really look that bad? The glass was old and slightly distorted, but still . . . The old brown slacks that she wore for doing odd jobs were wrinkled and bunchy, and her blouse was faded and missing a button. Bad enough, but were her shoulders really that slumped? Did her face really look that old? Not old exactly, but sour. She moved closer to the mirror and tried a hesitant smile.

"Oh, no! That's even worse. No makeup, that's what's wrong. I'll put on some makeup."

Upstairs, Sylvia took off the ill-

fitting slacks and the old blouse. She left them in a heap on the bedroom floor. From her closet she selected a bright pink shirtwaist dress. The dress seemed a bit tight at the waist.

"Am I dreaming or am I becoming hippy in my old age?"

The full-length mirror on the closet door didn't lie. There was even the beginning of a stomach. Sylvia forced her shoulders back and stood tall.

"That's better. Not perfect, but better."

At her dressing table near the window, the cruel morning light showed frown lines around her eyes and tiny pouches under her chin. The pink dress reflected color up her throat, but her face gleamed back at her, yellowish and frightened. Frightened?

"What am I afraid of? Of getting old? That's absurd. I'm Sylvia Hawkins, forty-six years old and in good shape. Just a little tired, that's all."

With quick fingers she dug into a jar of face cream and slathered her face with fragrant goo. She massaged and slapped and pinched until her face tingled under the mask of white cream. She finger-painted circles on her cheeks and made grotesque faces at herself, laughing aloud at her near-hysteria.

The doorbell erupted shrilly into the silent house.

"Oh, damn! Just a minute." She quickly tissued off the cream and ran to the door, feeling shiny-faced and greasy.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the lumpish creature announced. The chewed-over bun of a face showed no regret at all, and the dry raisin eyes peered intently over Sylvia's left shoulder. She wore a sleazy wool coat of dusty magenta with three gaudy buttons, and a stiff black Dynel wig.

"Oh, Mrs. Pickens. Good morning. Won't you come in?"

"No, I don't have time. I have to get to work. I can't afford to be late. I can't spend my mornings giving myself beauty treatments. What a pretty dress. So youthful."

"No. Yes. Thank you." Sylvia felt herself shrinking under the envious barrage. Ordinarily, Sylvia could hold her own in any gently murmured cat fight, but this woman's hatred and jealousy were so transparent, her own weapons so meager. Sylvia remained polite and tried to feel sympathy for the stunted creature.

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Pickens?"

"Oh, I don't expect *you* to do anything about it. But maybe you'll be good enough to have

someone fix it. When Mr. Pickens was alive, he never let things get into a bad state. Fixed things right away, he did. It's the bathroom window. It's been stuck all winter, and now that spring is here I'd like to be able to get it open."

"Yes, of course. Well, I could come over and have a look at it right now. Or if you'd like to leave me your key, I could have a repairman come over while you're at work."

The shapeless figure ballooned with indignation. "I don't believe in handing out house keys right and left. And I don't want *anybody* tramping through my apartment when I'm not there. Don't you read the papers? Don't you know about the crime rate? Think I want to get murdered in my bed? No, thank you!"

"Well, I'm sorry . . . I didn't think . . . I'll try to get it fixed later this afternoon. What time will you be home from work?"

"I always get home at four o'clock. I don't suppose you noticed that. I usually take a nap as soon as I get home. My job is very tiring, very exhausting. But if you're going to get the window fixed, I guess I'll just have to skip my nap. Four o'clock, that's when I get home."

"I'll see you at four, Mrs. Pickens. Have a nice day."

"I'll have a hard day, as usual. And if I don't hurry, I'll be late. Maybe you have time to stand here gabbing, but I don't."

She turned abruptly and minced down the porch steps as if her shoes pinched. At the ornate iron gate she turned. "If you can't take care of that window, maybe that handsome husband of yours can do something about it."

Mrs. Pickens smiled. The smile became a leer and the black eyes challenged Sylvia. Sylvia blinked and looked again, but the dumpy figure was waddling self-importantly up the street, the black curls bobbing and gleaming artificially in the brilliant sunshine.

Sylvia closed the door and drooped against its massive frame. "So that's it. She wants John to fix her window. She thinks I'm lazy and frivolous, and incompetent. She practically accused me of both spying on her and ignoring her in the same breath. She wants to get John up in her apartment." It ought to be funny, but it wasn't, somehow. Poor old thing. Sylvia wondered how old Mrs. Pickens was. Fifty? Sixty? It was hard to tell with that absurd wig she always wore.

Sylvia felt a sudden damp chill and realized that her dress was clinging wetly to her back, that stains of darker pink had spread

under her arms, that cold drops trickled between her breasts and down her sides.

"Oh, damn! What now?" It was as if all the things she could have said, should have said, to the vile Mrs. Pickens were pouring out of her skin, drenching her in cold disagreeable sweat. She felt dizzy and slightly nauseated.

She pulled herself up the stairs, clinging to the banister, and collapsed onto her unmade bed.

"What's wrong with me? Maybe I should see a doctor." She thought back to her last visit to the smiling young Dr. Weng in his cheerful modern office near Golden Gate Park. She remembered the Chinese doctor-doll that reclined, coyly naked, on his polished walnut desk. He'd told her that in the old days, well-bred Chinese ladies never disrobed for their doctors. Instead, they delicately pointed out their aches and pains on the pale ivory body of the doll forever smiling placidly upon her teakwood couch. From there it was all guesswork, and the delicate ladies often died smiling placidly.

The dizziness passed and Sylvia sat up cautiously.

"No placid smiles for this delicate lady. I'll have to find a doctor and make an appointment."

Yet the thought of the effort involved in locating a doctor dismayed her; phoning comparative strangers for their recommendations, explaining vague symptoms to a possibly unsympathetic ear. After all, what symptoms did she have? A slight dizziness and an upset stomach. A touch of a cold sweat. All gone already. Probably something she'd eaten. Nothing to bother a busy doctor about. Never mind the thin aura of foreboding that hovered constantly at the edge of her consciousness. The unshakable feeling, however slight, that something awful was going to happen. The nightmares . . . She hadn't told John about her nightmares. John had enough to worry about, getting a new department organized, establishing himself firmly as a senior vice-president and next in line to head one of the company's far-flung enterprises.

Sylvia stood up, testing her equilibrium. The pink dress, so gay and encouraging an hour ago, sagged in tired wrinkles and still felt slightly damp. Her skin felt itchy, as if somehow it didn't fit quite right.

"I'll take a shower and start all over again."

With the hot water cascading over her, washing away the morning's megrims, Sylvia shampooed

her short hair lavishly and thought about all the things she knew she should do to soften their newness in the town. Some of the company wives had a bridge club and she had been invited to join. She would call and attend the next meeting. She would find out about a tennis court. Even this dingy little eastern industrial town would have a tennis court. She would plan a dinner party. She would find some volunteer work to do. Surely there would be some way she could be useful, and get to know people in the process. She would make an appointment to get her hair done. Even though it was crisp and curly, it was beginning to straggle and the gray was making noticeable inroads.

If the children had been younger and living at home, Sylvia would by now have met other children and their parents, would have attended PTA meetings, would have become involved. It had always happened automatically, without her thinking about it, when the children had been living at home. Well, she *would* get involved—that was the key to feeling at home in a new place—and she would do it today. Just as soon as she got the drapes hung.

Dressed for the third time that morning and carefully made up, Sylvia headed out to the garage for the ladder. She crossed the lawn, noting with pleasure a wide area at the back of the garden where daffodils nodded in the gentle spring breeze. "I'll cut some later," she decided. "They'll look lovely in the dining room. Maybe I'll take some to Mrs. Pickens at four o'clock. Make up for her lost siesta."

Trailing back across the lawn with the aluminum ladder balanced on her shoulder, Sylvia paused to gaze at the solid brick structure that was her new home. It was an old house, pretentious in its ponderous Victorian elegance. From the rear, the view was of peaks and gables, and a funny series of three small arched windows at the back of the attic. They looked down on her critically under their rococo eyebrows.

"That attic could certainly stand some exploring. I'll have to set aside a day for that. I wonder if it's haunted."

She glanced back at the garage, a red brick rectangle lacking ornamentation of any kind. No ghosts there. Only the dreadful Mrs. Pickens. The windows of the garage apartment still showed blank and white. Didn't she ever raise her window shades?

Sylvia spent the rest of the morning perched on the ladder in the livingroom carefully position-

ing the rods for the new drapes. The luxurious fabric gave pleasure to her hands as she inserted hook after pronged hook into the pockets at the top of each panel. The result when she finished was more successful than she had hoped. The deep bay window with its cushioned seats, once angular and forbidding, had become a cozy nook for reading or daydreaming. The pale gold drapes brought the room into focus and diminished the heavy dark woodwork that crept halfway up the walls. Sylvia was heartened by her success, and the earlier unpleasantness of the morning retreated into a shadowy corner of her mind.

Over a diet lunch of yogurt and unsweetened tea, she thumbed through the Yellow Pages of the phone book, making notes of tradesmen and shops that might be useful. There was no listing for Window Repair, although several window cleaners advertised their services. Perhaps one of them could do the job. At any rate, she would have to look at Mrs. Pickens' stuck window before she would know what to tell a repairman. Perhaps she could fix it herself. Maybe all it needed was a little elbow grease. Mrs. Pickens might be disagreeable and ugly, but she didn't look particularly strong.

Now that the drapes were hung, the afternoon loomed empty and endless. For all her good resolutions, Sylvia could not bring herself to call the bridge club, did not make a hair appointment, did not go any further with planning a dinner party. Nor did she make any inquiries about finding a doctor. The dizziness had passed. Time enough if it returned.

When the phone rang at three o'clock, Sylvia didn't know where the hours had gone. The empty yogurt container with a crusted spoon inside it sat on the kitchen counter. Dregs of cold tea stained the bowl of her cup. The phone rang five times before she could tear her eyes away from the back window.

"Sylvia, are you all right?" John's voice carried more than a hint of anxiety.

"Yes, of course. What could be wrong? Are *you* all right?"

"Oh, well, I thought . . . the phone rang so many times . . . Yes, I'm fine." Now his voice was too hearty. Sylvia decided he had something bad to tell her. The cloud of foreboding had slipped back somewhere between the yogurt and the phone call. She realized that her teeth were tightly clenched, as if to hold back thoughts too dreadful to speak.

"I was busy, John. I hung the

new drapes in the livingroom." Sylvia heard her own voice, brittle, like a cracking bone.

"That's good. How do they look?"

"Fine. Perfect." Sylvia paused and consciously relaxed her tense jaw. "John, Mrs. Pickens was here this morning. She said her bathroom window was stuck."

There was a silence at the other end of the wire.

"Did you hear me, John?"

"Yes. What are you going to do?" Now his voice was guarded, apprehensive.

"Well, I thought I'd go take a look at it. Can't do any harm. Can it?"

"I guess not. Look, Sylvia, I called to tell you that I'll be a little late getting home tonight. Carter has called a late afternoon meeting that might go on until after six. I have to be there."

"Yes. Well, that's all right. I haven't any plans for this evening. It's funny," she continued. "You sounded so worried, I thought you were going to tell me some bad news."

"Oh, Sylvia, you shouldn't let yourself look for trouble everywhere." John sounded weary, but he suddenly shifted gears and forced brightness into his tone. "By the way, Carter said his wife was looking forward to having you join the bridge club. Why don't you give her a call?"

"I will. I promise I will. This afternoon. After I take care of Mrs. Pickens' window."

"Are you sure you can handle it?" A heavy layer of doubt underlined the question, and Sylvia flamed with resentment at the implication that she was unable to cope with Mrs. Pickens or her window or anything else.

"Of course I can handle it. Nothing very difficult. It's probably like all the rest of her complaints—sheer fabrication with a slight basis in fact. A moron could handle it." Sylvia felt her voice shrilling out of control. "On the other hand, I'm sure she'd much rather have you fix it. Would you like that better? We can let it go until the weekend and then you can go up there and fix the window *and* the drippy faucet *and* adjust the thermostat *and* look for the imaginary leak in the roof. And then you can sit down and hold her fat little hand and listen to how much better things were when Mr. Pickens was alive and how difficult it is to be a woman alone."

"Sylvia, Sylvia. Hold on. I'll come right home. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Maybe I can make it back in time for the meeting."

Sylvia said nothing. What was she doing? Why was she acting like this? She can't expect him to come rushing home every time Mrs. Pickens has a brainstorm.

"Sylvia! Are you still there?"

"Yes. I'm still here," she whispered. "It's all right, John. I don't want you to come home." She searched her mind frantically for some way to reassure him. "I think I'll start cleaning out the attic. There's an awful lot of old junk up there. Who knows, I might find a hidden treasure. Or a ghost." She laughed, trying to put more mirth into the sound than she felt.

"Well, if you're sure you're all right."

"I'm sure. Good-bye, John."

"Bye. Don't forget to call Mrs. Carter."

Sylvia put down the phone and, for lack of a better idea, trudged up the back stairs to the attic. From the inside, the three small supercilious windows seemed quaint and comforting. Afternoon sunlight poured through them, imprinting three golden arches on the dusty attic floor.

Along one wall, sagging shelves held stacks of old magazines. Trade journals mingled with ladies' fashions of bygone days. Sylvia was drawn to the picture magazines, years of them piled helter-skelter. She leaned against the wall and thumbed through the pages of her life. Here were college days reflected in Ike's grin; their honeymoon trip to Nassau against the background of G.I.'s wintering in Korea; Judy and Jody toddling while Hillary and Tenzing struggled to the top of the world. No vague forebodings then. Everything was certain. Day followed night; peace and prosperity were just around the corner. Nightmares and cold sweats lay in an inconceivable future. Mrs. Pickens did not torment her with nagging complaints and beady-eyed envy.

"Mrs. Pickens! Oh, no!" Sylvia dropped the magazines on the floor. Her wristwatch remorselessly read four-thirty.

She flew down the stairs and through the kitchen, snatching up a pair of shears and the hammer as she went. The kitchen door slammed behind her as she ran to the daffodil patch and feverishly hacked six or eight yellow flowers from their stems. With the flowers and the hammer in one hand forming a strange bouquet, the shears clutched in the other, Sylvia ran to the side door of the garage. Into the small vestibule and up the narrow stairs she panted, arriving at the tiny landing and the apartment door in an agony of

apology for her forgetfulness.

She knocked. There was no answer. She knocked again, louder this time, her hands encumbered by the tools and flowers she carried. The door shuddered open on angry squeaking hinges.

"That's another thing that's got to be fixed. That door squeals like a sick cat." Mrs. Pickens stood there, squat and malevolent, in a tacky no-color chenille bathrobe. "I thought you weren't coming, so I went ahead and started my nap. I thought, 'Well, she's forgotten. She's not coming. She's so busy with tea parties and such, who can blame her if she forgets a little thing like a window that won't open.' You woke me up, so you might as well come in."

Mrs. Pickens stood back and grudgingly held the door open just wide enough for Sylvia to slide sideways into the room, which was poorly lit and smelled of ancient cooking and sour laundry. It was filled with odds and ends of heavy old furniture. Sylvia didn't want to look too closely lest she be thought prying and critical. She leveled her eyes somewhere between the ceiling and the back of a lumpy seat-sprung couch. The furniture seemed to be coming at her in waves. She felt that she would drown in a sea of old plush and clinging antimacassars.

"I brought you some daffodils. I hope you'll feel free to cut some any time you like. There are so many. More than I can use." Sylvia disentangled the flowers from the hammer and extended them to Mrs. Pickens.

Mrs. Pickens shrank from the flowers. "That's very kind of you, I'm sure. Of course, you couldn't know about my allergies. You'll have to take them away with you. I can't even touch them long enough to throw them in the garbage or I'll be sneezing for a week. The window's this way."

Sylvia followed Mrs. Pickens into a long cramped bathroom. The window was at the narrow end, covered with a cracked pink plastic curtain. Pink plastic shrouded a white claw-footed bathtub. Sylvia squeezed past Mrs. Pickens and the bathtub, and laid her tools and the flowers down in the sink. She drew aside the pink curtain and looked at the window. She noticed that the catch between the upper and lower sashes was firmly closed.

"Mrs. Pickens, this window is locked." Sylvia exulted in her victory over the horrid woman. A small victory to be sure, but nonetheless, one up for Sylvia. "No wonder it won't open."

"Of course it's locked," the petulant voice snapped back. "All

my windows are locked. Think I want some cat burglar creeping in on me at night? But even when it's not locked, it won't open."

The dreadful illogic of this statement circled in Sylvia's mind like a snake biting its own tail. *It won't open even when it's not locked, but it's locked so no one can open it.* Sylvia picked the hammer out of the welter of crushed daffodils in the sink. With one hand she slid open the catch and tried to raise the window. The window refused to budge.

"I told you it was stuck. Didn't you believe me?"

Sylvia glanced over her shoulder. Mrs. Pickens stood preening in front of the bathroom mirror, twining black Dynel around fat white fingers. Her fingers looked like slugs crawling through the wig. The awful bathrobe gaped and Sylvia glimpsed sagging white skin where green veins popped and exploded into frightful networks. Her ears rang and she felt a wave of dizziness approaching from some distant well of fear. She turned back to the window and began tapping gently with the hammer across the top and all around the sash.

"I don't know what good you think that's going to do. Do you think I haven't tried that? I've pounded that window until I thought my arm would break. You're just going to leave hammer marks all around it and the window still won't open. Well, it's your property so you can do as you like."

The voice blared on and on, while Sylvia tapped and strained at the window, praying for it to open and shut Mrs. Pickens up for good, praying for a breath of clean spring air to rush in and dispel the dizziness that was racing in upon her, trapped as she was in the narrow corner of white tile. The window remained obstinately closed.

". . . I said, why don't you just give up? You're not doing any good!" Mrs. Pickens shouted in her ear.

Sylvia hadn't noticed that the woman had crept so close. She leaped and the hammer twisted in her hand. It struck the pane and glass flew tinkling in all directions.

Mrs. Pickens loomed, gloating. "Oh, now you've done it! Isn't that just beautiful? Thought you knew what you were doing and just made things worse. I suppose you think you can put a new windowpane in, too."

Sylvia, crouched by the window, could think of nothing but how to stop the terrible voice.

"Be quiet," she murmured. "Please be quiet."

Still, the voice went on. "Won't your husband be happy about this? Won't he think you're just the smartest thing in the world? Nobody can say the window's not open now. It's open all right. Permanently open."

Sylvia watched her own right arm raise over her head. Curiously, she watched it go up and up, the hammer in her hand. She watched it come down. Her body moved along with her arm, strong and slim and powerful. She saw Mrs. Pickens floundering in the bathtub, her wig knocked askew, a thin trickle of red dripping off its shiny black fringe. The voice was no longer saying hateful, hurtful things, but the spongy mouth worked and uttered sounds, ugly, gulping, flaccid sounds. It had to stop. Sylvia covered her ears, but she could still see the mouth moving.

"Stop," she whispered. "Please stop."

She scrabbled in the sink basin. Daffodils fell, broken-necked, to the floor. Her hand came up gripping the shears.

John Hawkins drove his car into the garage and crossed the lawn, savoring the mildness of the spring evening. The meeting had run late but had been successful as meetings go. The real work of getting the new line into production would fall on his shoulders, and he looked forward to the next months of problems and pitfalls to overcome.

The sky was darkening to gray with a few streaks of pink as he approached the house. There were no lights on. Could Sylvia have gone out? Good for her if she had—but no, her car was in the garage. Maybe she was sleeping. John shook his head and opened the back door. She was sleeping altogether too much these days. Dr. Weng had said she would be all right, but still, John worried.

He walked through the kitchen and the dining room, flicking on lights as he went. There were no dinner preparations under way. All right, he would wake her up and take her out to dinner. He hurried down the hall and into the foyer. The elaborate chandelier, when lit, showed no trace of her. He called up the stairs.

"Sylvia? You up there?"

On the stairway, he let his feet sound heavy so that she could waken and not be startled by his sudden presence. He peered into the dark bedroom, but could see nothing and heard no sound of breathing. He switched on the light. The unmade bed and the heap of clothes on the floor set off a slight ping of alarm. Sylvia

wasn't sleeping. At least, not here. He toured all the rooms on the second floor. Lights sprang up as he searched the house. He remembered she'd said something on the phone about cleaning the attic. He raced up the back stairs, sure that he would find her up there. An accident, maybe. Or a return of that dizziness that had plagued her after Judy and Jody had *both* left home. And that business with Mrs. Pickens . . . But Dr. Weng had said she would be all right.

The dim hanging bulb in the attic shone down on a scattering of old magazines on the floor, but there was no sign of Sylvia.

Downstairs again, he went through the arch into the dark livingroom. When he found the light switch, he suffered a momentary disorientation. The long awkward room was changed; no longer did the ceiling seem impossibly high, nor did the walls tilt down an uncomfortable perspective. He remembered that Sylvia had said something about new drapes. They made the difference. It had become a reasonable room for reasonable people to live in—except for one thing. He whispered her name.

"Sylvia."

She huddled in the deep window seat, staring into the light as she had probably been staring into the darkness. She was hugging herself with rigid elbow-pointing arms, rocking and rocking. He sat beside her, adding his arms to her protective cocoon.

"Sylvia, what happened?"

She moaned, deep and guttural, without opening her mouth. He rocked with her and spoke softly, trying to ease her out of the trance.

"Sylvia, I'm here now. Everything's all right. I'm here and you're safe. But you've got to tell me what happened."

At last, he felt her body lean against him. Her arms relaxed and fell limply into her lap. She opened her mouth wide and he heard her jaw crack with the release of tension. Then she spoke.

"John? She's dead, John. Mrs. Pickens. I killed her."

"You killed her?"

"Yes. I killed her and she's dead. She won't come back anymore."

"Well. That's good news. A little drastic, perhaps, but good. Don't you think so?" John held her closer and smiled into her pale upturned face. "Maybe we should hold a little celebration. Or a wake."

"What? Oh, yes. I see." She shivered slightly in spite of the comfort of his presence. "But John, it was so awful. I couldn't

help myself. I just couldn't listen to her anymore."

"All right. Let's have it all. How did you do it?"

"With a hammer. And the kitchen shears. Up in the garage. Oh, John. The blood. It splashed all over the bathroom. All over everything. The daffodils." She looked down at her spotless dress.

John laughed. "Oh, Sylvia. When you do something, you really go all out. Couldn't you have arranged a neat little accident? Or a nice clean incurable disease?"

Sylvia smiled faintly. "It's really finished now, isn't it? She can't possibly come back now, can she?"

"I wouldn't think so. But I'm no expert on these things. Why don't you call Dr. Weng and tell him what's happened? See what he thinks."

"Maybe I will. Tomorrow." Sylvia rose and stretched. "Right now I feel so free. A little shaky, but free." She tried to laugh, but her laughter came out in dry breathless sobs. "I think you're right, John. We ought to celebrate. There's a bottle of champagne in the refrigerator. Good old California champagne. I'll get the glasses and we'll go up to the garage apartment and drink to the timely death of horrible Mrs. Pickens."

Sylvia's excitement was contagious. John had the bottle of champagne in his hand before his natural caution reasserted itself. He caught Sylvia's arm as she was opening the back door.

"Do you think it's a good idea to go up there, Sylvia? To . . . ah . . . return to the scene of the crime? Maybe we ought to just lock the place up for a while, forget that there is an apartment over the garage."

"John dear, I could never forget. I need to see it again, to get it straight in my mind. I don't want to live the rest of my life with that last vision of her in a bloody heap in the bathtub. I need to get everything clear right now."

"If that's what you want, dear, it's all right with me." He opened the door for her. "Let's go and remove all traces of Mrs. Pickens from our lives."

Sylvia chattered gaily as they crossed the wide dusk-shrouded lawn.

"I remember the first time I saw her. She was a short, stout, middle-aged lady, eager to talk to somebody about her problems. She used to corner me in an empty aisle at the supermarket and rattle on about her loneliness. I felt sorry for her. You would have, too, John, if you'd seen her.

This was about a month after Judy's wedding. Jody had just left for South America, and I was beginning to have those dizzy spells. Just about a year ago.

"Then she started coming to the house. The first time it was something about needing help with some medical forms. She always had a reason for being there; I couldn't turn her away. Each time she came she was uglier, more demanding, more critical, but still so lonely and unloved. When I realized that she never came when there was anyone else in the house, that I was the only one who'd ever seen her, well, that's when I really started to get frightened. I hated her, but I couldn't stop her from coming. And the dizzy spells were getting worse. That's when I . . . when . . ."

Sylvia's rapid chatter trailed off. She raised both arms and peered through the failing light at the thin white lines that scarred the insides of both wrists.

"Well," she continued, "when I got out of the hospital and started seeing Dr. Weng, she never came back. I didn't see her again until we came here. I thought everything would be different here. A new town, new people to meet, a whole new environment. No more Dr. Weng, but I thought I could manage on my own. And there *she* was, living in the garage apartment as if she'd been there for months, just waiting for me to arrive. Oh, John, I tried not to let it upset me. I tried not to let you know she was back. But she frightened me so. And made me angry at the same time."

John opened the door to the small vestibule at the side of the garage and held it for Sylvia to pass through. "Maybe we can clean this place up now, and find a new tenant for it. A friendly tenant."

"That would be nice. Yes, I think that would be a good thing." Sylvia took a deep breath and started up the narrow stairs. At the top she pushed at the apartment door. It squeaked loudly and swung halfway open. "It won't open any farther. I think it's warped." She turned to John. "Hold my hand," she whispered. "I'm not really frightened. I know exactly what we're going to find. But hold my hand, anyway."

Hand in hand they entered the musty darkness above the garage. The cold champagne bottle in John's free hand sent shivers up his arm. Sylvia clutched the two glasses upside down by their stems. Together they tiptoed like trespassing children into the room, colliding with tables and chairs as

they tried to find their bearings.

"Where's the light?" John asked.

"There's a pull cord here somewhere."

John groped in the air and tugged. A cold, dim, overhead light sprang on and crept over the crouching bulk of the heavy old furniture that filled the apartment.

"We'll have to get rid of all this stuff. I wish we could pass it off as antique, but I'm afraid it's just old."

"The bathroom's over here. Come on, John." She pulled him eagerly to the door of the dark, narrow cavern. "I want you to see. I want to see."

The fluorescent light in the bathroom flickered and then flared harsh and blue as Sylvia depressed its switch. A faint breeze gusted through the broken window, bearing with it the smell of approaching rain. The pink plastic shower curtain waved its tattered ruffles around the bathtub. Crushed daffodils lay on the white tile floor amid a sprinkling of splintered glass. Sylvia bent and retrieved the hammer from under the sink.

"You see!" she cried. "It's all just as I left it. Just the way it happened. Now look in the bathtub. You look in first, John."

John parted the shower curtain and gazed down into the tub. "I'd hate to have you coming after *me* with a pair of scissors in your hand!" he exclaimed. "We'll have to put a new bathtub in here."

"Open the champagne now, John. We'll drink to the end of Mrs. Pickens and pour a libation on the poor old bathtub."

The exploding cork ricocheted off the white tile wall and foaming wine sprayed the starry wound in the bottom of the tub. Sylvia's kitchen shears lay bent and useless on the cracked white porcelain. There was nothing else in the tub. No blood. No body. John filled the champagne glasses.

Sylvia raised her glass and saluted the empty tub. "Good-bye, Mrs. Pickens, whatever you were. Alter ego, hallucination, dark sister. I'm not afraid anymore. I can grow old without being useless and lonely. I've killed my fears. I will not become you."

"Amen," said John. They each drank deeply. "Now let's go get some dinner. I'm starving."

"So am I. And tomorrow . . . Well, tomorrow's not too far away, is it? We'll see what happens tomorrow."

When success seems surely at hand, one may be rudely shocked into reassessment.

Come Ride With Me

by Donald Honig

With the exception of an occasional farmhouse set back in the rolling hills, the only lights for miles around belonged to the Quick Stop roadside diner. The flashing neon light beat on and off rhythmically, lurid and persistent in the night.

The lone man walking along the side of the highway had been watching the sign for some time, his eyes fixed upon it. Despite the night's chill air he was walking slowly, contemplating that sign with a dim, faraway look in his eyes. Wearing a parka, the hood thrown back, his hands were deep in the slit pockets on either side of the jacket. The fingers of his right hand were fondling a .38 revolver.

When he came within several hundred feet of the diner, Gannon stopped. He studied the three cars parked under the blinking neon sign, none of them belonging to the police. Having satisfied himself on this point, Gannon moved on again. He approached the diner slowly, a cool, hostile look in his eyes as he peered through the diner's windows at the men sitting at the counter. They all seemed preoccupied, as people in lonely eating places late at night generally do.

Gannon mounted the steps and went in. The men at the counter looked up at him for a moment,

then turned their faces back to the plates in front of them. The place was quiet, except for the country ballads coming softly from the radio.

Gannon settled himself on a stool at the end of the counter, away from the other men. He folded his hands on the counter top and sidled a glance at the other customers.

Three cars were parked outside, three men at the counter. Each of the men had a shabby, rural look—rough clothing, sallow weather-beaten faces. None of those automobiles outside was much of a bargain either, but then Gannon couldn't have expected much more, given where he was.

The counterman, bald, with a frank, smiling face, approached him. "Didn't hear you drive up," he said. "What can we do for you?"

"Just coffee."

"That'll do it?"

"Very nicely," Gannon said.

When the man had gone to draw the coffee, Gannon bent his head and gazed down into his folded hands. Sitting, he realized how tired he was. He had been walking for hours. He was going to get himself a car now, no matter how beat up it was. He was tired of walking and, more importantly, he had to get out of this area; that was the paramount thing.

The counterman returned with the coffee and set it down. "Something else?" he asked. "Piece of pie?"

"Nothing else," Gannon said, and the man went away.

The country ballads were gone from the radio now and the news was coming on. Gannon brought the coffee to his lips and fixed his eyes expectantly on the radio, as though it were about to address him directly. The announcer began talking about a man who had earlier that day attempted to rob a supermarket. A young clerk had tried to foil the holdup and been shot dead. The holdup man—murderer, now—had escaped on foot. All persons in the area were warned to be on the lookout for him. Motorists were cautioned against picking up hitchhikers.

Then the announcer read a description of the wanted man, sending it out through the night into the livingrooms and kitchens of the scattered farmhouses, into automobiles on the road, and into the brightly lit interior of the Quick Stop diner.

Curiously, almost critically, Gannon listened. They had his age guessed correctly, within a year; the color of his hair was slightly wrong; his height and weight

were approximately right; and of course they mentioned the parka, which was still on his back.

Gannon put his cup down and looked at the other men. None seemed to have paid attention to the broadcast. The three heads were still bent over their plates, the three jaws working in unison. The counterman was scraping the griddle with a spatula. The broadcast had come and gone. The tension Gannon had felt during the broadcast began to subside. He resumed sipping his coffee, holding the warm cup in both hands.

At the sound of a car entering the diner's lot, Gannon turned his head. This was what he had been hoping for—a big, powerful, late-model car. Give him that and he could break through any roadblocks that might have been set up down the highway.

A man got out of the car and hurried toward the diner. He was in his mid-thirties, well-dressed, and Gannon especially noted the man's topcoat; that would be much better than the damned parka, which everybody knew about now.

When the man entered the diner, the counterman said, "Hello, Lee."

The man didn't answer. He seemed agitated, and headed for the phone booth on the far side of the diner, the leather heels of his shoes clicking on the tile.

Gannon got up, dropped a quarter onto the counter and quietly left.

Outside, he headed straight for that appealing car. Nearing it, he looked back over his shoulder but no one in the diner was paying any attention to him. Gannon opened the back door of the car, got in, closed the door behind him and crouched in the dark, pressing himself against the front seat. His right hand was deep in the pocket of his parka, clutching the .38.

He waited. The minutes passed. He began to wonder if the man had sat down for a meal. Nevertheless, he kept his head down. He was patient. He had time. He could wait.

After about fifteen minutes, Gannon heard those leather heels clicking across the paved parking lot. Then the front door opened, the dome light flashed on for a moment but went off as the door slammed shut. The engine started with a smooth hum. The car, however, lurched out of the parking lot with a jackrabbit start that threw Gannon against the back seat.

The car picked up speed, racing along the highway. Gannon waited for several minutes, a smirk on his face. Then he drew

the .38 from his pocket and slowly rose in the dark. The man behind the wheel did not immediately notice him.

"All right," Gannon said.

The man was startled, his shoulders jerking forward, his head twitching around.

"Keep your eye on the road," Gannon said. "This thing you feel against your head is a .38 revolver."

"Who the hell are you?" the man demanded, his voice brusque, angry.

"I'm the man who's going to borrow your car," Gannon said. "You'll slow down when I tell you to."

"You must be the guy they were talking about on the radio," the man said, his eyes flicking in and out of the rear-view mirror.

"That's right," Gannon said. "So you do just as I tell you and don't try to be a boy scout."

"Do you know who that was who was just in here?" the counterman was saying to his customers. "That was Lee Carstair."

"That was him?" one of the men said.

"Sure was," the counterman said. "He's livin' in a beehive, that boy."

"Why so?" another man asked.

"You ain't heard?" the counterman asked. "Why, Lee got caught embezzlin' money from his father-in-law's company. The old man fired him last week, and now I heard the wife's left him, and the old man is goin' to press charges. That was the old man he was telephonin' just now. I heard him say the name."

"From all the shoutin'," one of the men said, "I guess Lee didn't hear what he wanted to hear."

The counterman laughed. "No sirree. That boy's got problems high as a mountain."

"Slow down, I say!" Gannon shouted. "Slow down, damn you, or I'll kill you!"

Lee Carstair laughed hysterically. The car was barreling along the highway at 90 miles an hour.

"What are you doing?" Gannon screamed.

"You picked the wrong guy," Carstair yelled.

They came to a long curve around a rock wall where the highway had been blasted through. Carstair lifted his hands from the wheel and covered his face.

"Oh, God," he said softly, allowing the hurtling car to smash itself furiously into the rocks.

Where an aura of violence prevails, for the sake of expediency one frequently is called upon to accept more than the eye discerns.

When I returned from the dressing area at the rear of the Magic Cellar nightclub, the houselights were dimming for Christopher Steele's grand finale. I sat down quietly at the corner table I shared with four of the top brass of Lorde's Department Store ("Serving San Franciscans Since 1927"), and watched Steele raise his hand to cut off thunderous applause.

He waited until the room became completely silent. Then he said, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. You have been very attentive to my small displays of illusion, and I feel you should be rewarded. I shall show you something that is impossible, something that cannot be done. You are about to witness an effect that you will wonder about and talk about for the rest of your lives. You will tell people about it, and they will not believe you; but you will have seen it with your own eyes." He paused, smiling enigmatically. "I would appreciate your silence for the next ten minutes."

Steele bowed and stepped back to center stage. Ardis, his assistant—who had been with him longer than I had been his manager—joined him. They stood facing the audience, fingertips touch-

ing, while two stagehands brought in an ornate golden chair and placed it at the rear of the stage.

"The greatest mystery of all," Steele said, "is the mystery of time. Time and its effect on Man. The mystery of aging, of life and death. I present to you now a visual allegory and, if I may, a miracle!"

He stepped forward, and Ardis, at his nod, walked to the high-backed chair and sat. The lights dimmed to a single spot.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Steele intoned, "please keep your seats and do not be alarmed at what you see here now. I invoke the aid of Osiris, Egyptian God of Life. Oh mighty Osiris, keeper of

by Bill Pronzini & Michael Kurland

the mysteries, guardian of the keys, make your presence felt on this stage tonight. Come forth, come here, come—now!"

Slowly, so slowly that you weren't really sure that it was happening, Ardis began to change. She slumped over in her seat and her arms and hands became lined and wrinkled. Her legs grew twisted, gnarled. Her face became ancient beyond the ages of Man, as old as Time.

She straightened up and stared out at the audience, this incredibly old hag, and her eyes flashed, even sunken as they were in the parchment of that ancient face. As we watched, the very flesh became transparent, the white dress she wore grew evanescent—and both disappeared, revealing the skeleton beneath. Finally the skeleton was all that remained. Then it collapsed in on itself, leaving only a pile of bones and a handful of dust on the chair.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention," Steele said, as the lights went up and broke the spell. "That ends my show for tonight."

The audience stared. The chair, with bones and dust, remained. Finally one man began to clap and again everyone broke into thunderous applause. As it died down Steele smiled and clapped his hands twice, sharply. There was a flash of light, a puff of smoke, and Ardis—young and beautiful—stood once more beside him. This broke up the audience completely. They whistled, stamped and screamed while Steele and Ardis bowed low and then walked off the stage.

The houselights came up and the waitress appeared promptly by the table with a fresh round of drinks. I gave my attention to my guests.

Old Mrs. Lorde herself sat opposite me, straight as a mannequin despite her eighty-plus years. She wore a severe black dress accented only by a massive gold choker. An ebony cane with a solid-gold handle cast in the shape of an elephant was her only other adornment. On my left were Victor Schneider, manager of Lorde's Department Store—a tall, stately man with a small moustache—and Lillian Royce, buyer in the women's clothing department and a very attractive brunette in her mid-twenties. On my right was a thin nervous man with a voice that just managed not to squeak: Lewis Thorp, the store's assistant manager.

"That was quite a performance," Schneider said, sampling his drink, a Magic Cellar specialty called a Levitation. "Quite a per-

formance indeed, from them both."

Mrs. Lorde concurred. "I must say, I am very impressed with Mr. Steele. His act will be good for Lorde's image as well as for business. Very dignified and impressive. At first, you know, when I heard about this after returning from Europe last week, I thought it was cheap and vulgar publicity."

She was talking about Steele's next engagement, which was to spend two weeks in a hermetically-sealed, glass-topped coffin in Lorde's front window—beginning tonight. The idea had been Steele's originally, but after many weeks of subtle talks I had managed to convince Schneider that *he* had thought of it. A good theatrical manager is a good con man.

"My late husband, you know," Mrs. Lorde continued, "was very fond of magicians. He'd seen the Great Carter as a youth and it impressed him greatly. Of course, watching magicians was only a minor passion compared to his love of stamps."

Schneider looked at his watch. "Speaking of Mr. Lorde's stamps," he said, "I'd better call McCarthy. I want to make sure of the time he and his men are coming to move the collection."

Ian McCarthy was curator of the Lorde's Collection, one of the finest of United States issues in the world, featuring the only mint copy of the Hayes Two-and-a-Half-Cent Vermilion, probably the most valuable presidential portrait in existence. The entire issue was believed to have been destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake until, in 1929, this single stamp was found in the drawer of a desk being auctioned off by the post office. Mr. Lorde bought the stamp at auction for $22,000—an incredible price for the time—in honor of his wife who was distantly related to Lucy Webb Hayes, the President's wife.

The collection was periodically moved from one to another of the sixteen state-wide branches of Lorde's—tonight it was going to Sacramento, as usual late at night with top security precautions—and, as you'd expect, it brought in many an admiring philatelist. The main branch here in San Francisco maintained a stamp room which dispensed both rare and common stamps to eager buyers—the practical approach. Old man Lorde had been a hard-nosed businessman as well as a collector.

"Perhaps you had better go over to the store immediately," Mrs. Lorde said to Schneider. Her voice had a hard edge to it, as it had all night when she'd addressed

him. I had the feeling she was not exactly pleased with her manager, for some reason.

"Yes, perhaps I should," Schneider said. He stood and offered me his hand. He was one of those people who think politeness is what separates Man from the Lower Orders. Lillian Royce seemed to think this was an admirable quality.

When Schneider had given Miss Royce a radiant smile and departed, Lewis Thorp leaned toward me and said in his high voice, "Tell me, Booth, how does Steele do that aging trick?"

Trying not to wince at the word "trick," I cupped my hand to my mouth confidentially. "Magic," I whispered.

Lillian Royce giggled.

Steele was sitting in front of the triple mirror removing his makeup when I entered his dressing room minutes later. "Beautiful show," I said. "You left them breathless."

"Thank you, Matthew." He began to don the outfit he would wear in the coffin for the next two weeks: black pants, black turtleneck sweater, black jacket, very somber and correct for a coffin with a glass top. "Have the Lorde's people left for the store?" he asked.

I said they had. "There's a limousine waiting for us out front."

"Was the coffin delivered?"

"Yes. Thorp told me it arrived around six." I had been at Steele's house across the bay in Berkeley at three, when the movers had picked up the apparatus from his basement workshop.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Matthew," he said. With his thick black hair, dark complexion, and deep-set eyes, the all-black costume made him look somewhat sinister.

Ardis joined us, wearing a simple white dress as provocative as any of her stage costumes; her long, auburn hair was now arranged in some mysteriously precise manner. She linked her arm familiarly through Steele's and we walked out to the waiting limousine. Ardis lived in a private wing of Steele's enormous house, and was his closest friend and confidante. If there were any other quality to their relationship, only they knew of it.

The limousine took us swiftly and silently through a foggy San Francisco night to Post Street. Lorde's main entrance was floodlit, and there was a pleasingly large crowd on hand. The publicity I had so lovingly planted in articles, columns, and local TV shows had paid off.

Steele and Ardis waved to the

crowd and hurried inside the store; it was 9:50 and the entombment was set for ten o'clock. I would have gone in with them, but the security guard at the door wouldn't let me pass. The store was isolated except for a few top employees because of the collection. I went over to the window to see how the coffin looked in place. On a two-foot marble pedestal, set about five feet back from the floor-to-ceiling window and parallel to it, the coffin was of dark, polished wood. Inside, through the thick glass top, you could see the white satin lining Steele would be lying on for the next two weeks. The angle, and a couple of lights inside the coffin, gave a clear view of the inside—and of Steele, once he entered. When the glass top was set in place, the crack would be sealed with hot wax, presently bubbling on a brazier to the left of the coffin.

The only other items in the window were a large calendar to record the passage of the days of Steele's entombment, a large clock to tick off the seconds, minutes, and hours, and two great posters in the Houdini style of flamboyance—gaudy electric-blue and yellowish-red announcements of the greatness of Christopher Steele, which were behind the coffin.

Mrs. Lorde and Victor Schneider entered the window, followed by Steele, Ardis, and a committee of four reputable citizens who would examine the coffin and pour the wax to seal the lid and deprive Steele of his air supply. In the eleven years I've been with Steele I've seen maybe a hundred of these committees, and there hasn't been one yet which could spot a gaff unless it reached up and popped them on the nose. Their chances of spotting the gaff—the gimmick that enabled Steele to work the effect—were exactly zero. In this case, as a matter of fact, so were mine; Steele had refused to allow me to examine the coffin while he was working on it.

Steele gave an introductory speech to the crowd via microphone and loudspeaker while the committee probed and prodded at the coffin. He explained how fakirs of the East had developed techniques for shallow breathing that enabled them to live for extended periods of time with little oxygen. He told of the years he had spent mastering this technique and that of slowing his heartbeat. Then he climbed into the coffin and the glass lid was lowered into place. Schneider and one of the committee members poured the molten wax into the groove

around the lid. Steele now had maybe five hours of air left. Two weeks is three hundred and thirty-six hours . . .

"How does he do it?" a voice asked behind me; it was Lillian Royce. "These tricks of his, I mean, like that scary thing in the Magic Cellar where the girl turns into a skeleton?"

I had the feeling that she wanted to talk to someone about anything at all, and I was there and the effects were a convenient topic. I'm always willing to talk with a beautiful woman, and the effects are not really secret, just sort of confidential.

"First of all," I said, drawing her slightly to one side, "don't ever call them tricks. They're effects, or slights, or illusions, but *never* tricks." I could see Steele's face at the extreme angle I was standing, but no more of him. It seemed to shimmer slightly by some illusion of the lighting as I turned away.

"Tell me," Lillian insisted, "how does he do it?"

"I warn you," I said, "magic is funny in one way: when it's explained it seems silly and obvious, no matter how powerful the effect was when you saw it. That's why magicians never explain their effects. You're being fooled, and people resent being fooled."

"I can't figure it out," Lillian said. "I admit he's fooled me."

"It's called the Blue Room Illusion," I told her. "Maybe fifty years old. It involves a peculiar optical property of glass."

"What's that?"

"If a plate of perfectly clear glass is dark on one side and well lit on the other, it turns into a mirror on the lighted side. You've probably noticed this on windows at night."

"Where was the glass?" Lillian asked.

"Picture the stage," I told her. "Ardis comes in wearing that sexy white dress and goes to the chair at the back. The lights dim except for a couple of spots on her. Steele goes into his spiel. That's when it happens. A sheet of clear plate glass—a giant, damned expensive sheet of clear plate glass—is slid into place on concealed tracks diagonally across the stage. It's invisible to the audience because it's meticulously cleaned and evenly lighted on both sides.

"Then, slowly, the lights on the far side of the glass are lowered and the lights on this side"—I wiggled my fingers to indicate which side—"are raised. The glass turns into a mirror, reflecting the image of an identical chair at right angles to the stage, concealed in the wings. An assistant in a copy of

Ardis' costume, made up to look incredibly ancient, is sitting in the chair. The gradual change of lights makes it look as though Ardis herself is aging."

Lillian looked incredulous. "What about the skeleton?"

"While Ardis is in darkness she gets out of the chair and is replaced by the skeleton. Then the lights change back and the glass is silently slid back."

"Gosh," Ardis said, appearing behind me with an armful of posters, "I thought it was magic."

"Ardis," I said, waving my hand between the two women, "Lillian Royce. She buys."

"Indeed?" Ardis said. "Excuse me." She pushed through the crowd and began tacking up display posters on one of the wooden boards framing the exterior of the window. They were identical to the yellow-red ones inside, behind the coffin.

I turned back to Lillian. "I've just had a brilliant idea," I said. "Why don't we—"

A sudden loud flapping sound cut off the rest of what I was going to say, and Lillian and I and the rest of the crowd shifted our gaze to Ardis and her poster. She had slipped: tacked up the top of the poster, stretched out the bottom, and then let go. The poster had, of course, rolled back up.

"The unflappable Ardis," I said to Lillian. "Well, there's always a first time. As I was about to ask you, why don't we go over to Franscatti's and get something to eat?"

"I'd love to," Lillian said.

"Sounds good," a new high-pitched voice cut in, and Lewis Thorp appeared at my elbow. "You won't mind if I join you?"

I was trying to figure out how to answer that politely when Mrs. Lorde emerged from the front door and saved me the trouble. "Mr. Thorp," she called, waving her cane at us, "I wish to see you. You too, Miss Royce." She looked disturbed, angry. "Will you both come up to my office, please. I won't keep you long, Miss Royce."

"The Queen Mother calls," Thorp said.

"Do you mind going on ahead?" Lillian asked me. "I'll join you as soon as I can."

"As soon as she could" turned out to be about twenty minutes after I had arrived at Franscatti's, which caters to the late-night crowd. "I'm sorry. There were some things . . ." She sat down in the booth across from me, looking distracted and unhappy. "I couldn't find Victor," she said.

"Schneider? Why were you looking for him?"

"We're . . . friends," she said vaguely. "Something peculiar is going on, and I don't know what it is. Mrs. Lorde is angry, and Victor is . . . Oh, I don't know *where* Victor is."

"He's probably gone home to sleep, like any sensible man."

"No, I don't think so. He wouldn't leave the store until Mr. McCarthy came to move the stamps, and Mr. McCarthy hadn't arrived yet when I left. He's due any time."

"Well," I said, "I'm sure Schneider is around somewhere. There's no need to worry."

I ordered spaghetti with white clam sauce, and when it came it seemed to cheer Lillian up a bit. We started to talk of, among other things, my life as a magician's manager. "While Steele's lying in that coffin practicing shallow breathing or whatever," I said, "I'm going to be getting TV crews down to film it; keeping crowds in front of the window day and night; seeing that it's played up on local *and* national news. He lies there while I do all the work, which is why he's a genius and I work for him."

"Does he do this sort of thing often?" she asked.

"He doesn't like to repeat himself," I answered. "There're people who make a living just getting buried, but Steele is doing it because he's never done it before. It's a challenge, and he can't turn down a challenge of any kind. That's the way he is."

"Are these effects original?"

"Some are. In Steele's case there's something original in *every* effect—and his presentation is always original, created to fit his stage personality. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a challenge."

It was past 11:30 when we walked the three blocks back to the store. The crowd was still there but its focus had shifted from the coffin in the window to the main door. Drawn up in front were three police cars, a couple of unmarked vehicles with red lights suction-cupped to their tops, and an ambulance.

Steele was snug in his coffin in the great window to the left of the entrance, serenely staring at the ceiling. After checking on him we pushed our way through the crowd. Judging by their conversation, none of them had any idea of what was going on.

A uniformed cop stood at the door, repelling traffic. When we gave him our names he let us in and told us to go up to the executive offices on the second floor. He wouldn't tell us anything else.

Mrs. Lorde was sitting in rigid solitude in the middle of a large

Regency-for-the-masses couch, with both hands firmly twined around the butt of her gold-handled cane. Lewis Thorp sat in a hard-backed chair opposite, wearing an expression that indicated a submerged and unpleasant emotion. Also present were two stoic patrolmen.

"What happened here?" I demanded of the group at large.

Thorp looked over at me sourly, then switched his gaze to Lillian. "It's Schneider," he said. "He's been killed."

"Oh!" Lillian's hand went to her mouth, and all the blood drained out of her face. I thought she was going to faint, but she managed to stumble over to the couch nearest us and drop onto it. She began to weep softly.

"Mr. McCarthy found him," Mrs. Lorde said. "In the Stamp Room." She proceeded to explain that when McCarthy and his men had arrived at the store, they hadn't been able to get into the Stamp Room because they couldn't locate Schneider, who had the only key. Mrs. Lorde had sent Schneider to the Stamp Room to do some last-minute inventorying, and insisted that was where he had to be. So, with her permission, McCarthy and his men had broken the door in. "He was lying on the floor in front of the sales counter," she finished. "Nothing they could do for him. Terrible thing. Terrible."

At that moment a man entered through the wide door to the executive-office area, and we all turned our attention to him. He was short and stocky and wearing a gray suit, the vest of which was buttoned over a blue shirt and old-school-stripe tie. "Sorry to keep you waiting so long," he said, "but there was some routine that had to be gone through first." He glanced at Lillian still sobbing on the couch, and then looked over at me. "You'd be Matthew Booth, is that right?"

"Yes," I said. "And you?"

"Lieutenant Garrett. Homicide."

"Was Victor Schneider's death accidental?" I asked him.

"Not likely. Medical examiner says he was struck in the throat by a blunt object about the size of a thumb, which pierced the skin and the thyroid cartilage, crushing said cartilage and closing the trachea. In plain English, he choked to death because he could no longer breathe. Nasty way to die."

Lillian had raised her head to listen, but now she made a keening sound—one of horror and grief—and lowered her face into her hands again. I thought of say-

ing something to Garrett about his insensitivity, but then I realized he knew exactly what he was doing. He'd been watching Lillian and the rest of us very closely as he talked.

"Perhaps it wasn't murder at all," a voice suggested, and I looked over to see Ardis had entered the room; I'd been wondering where she was. "Perhaps the poor man tripped and fell against that thumb-sized something you mentioned."

"I'm afraid not, Miss," Garrett said. "Any such object would have traces of blood, and there are none."

"Then you didn't find the weapon either?" I asked.

"Not yet. But it'll turn up eventually."

"If Schneider was murdered, who could have done it?"

"We don't make guesses," Garrett said, which meant he didn't have any idea who had done it. "Everyone in this room, it seems, has no concrete alibi for the time of death—except perhaps you, Mr. Booth. Anyone here could be guilty. Or none of you, for that matter. Although, as far as we can tell right now, no one else could have gotten into the store. And you few could play hide-and-seek for hours in this huge-empty place."

"What about motive?" Ardis asked.

"After we talk to everyone here, maybe we'll know more along that line." Another noncommittal answer. "Our first thought, of course, was robbery, since the murder took place in the Stamp Room with the Lorde's Collection. But the collection appears to be intact; Mr. McCarthy is checking it now." He frowned. "We don't even know—yet—how the killer got into or out of the Stamp Room. The only key is still on Schneider's key ring; and the windows are barred with half-inch steel that hasn't been touched in thirty years."

So there it was: what appeared to be a locked-room murder. I thought of Steele downstairs in his glass-topped coffin (the murder would spell the end of his two-week planned illusion; Lorde's now had all the publicity it could handle, whether negative or positive)—but Steele wouldn't be too upset, I knew. Puzzles fascinated him; the more bizarre a puzzle was, the better he liked it. The man thrived on challenges, as I'd told Lillian earlier. Consequently life was never dull around Christopher Steele—but this was the first time I knew of a murder being part of the amalgam.

"I'd better go look at Christo-

pher," Ardis said. "He must be curious to find out what's going on outside his little glassed-in world."

"You'll have to do it from inside, Miss," Garrett said. "The uniformed officers at the door have orders not to let anyone out."

"Really!" Mrs. Lorde said. "You surely don't think any of us are going to run away?"

"It's not that," Garrett explained. "We may want to search each of you before you leave."

"Looking for what?"

"We don't know yet."

"I'll stay inside," Ardis assured the lieutenant, and headed off toward the escalator.

"Why," Garrett asked, "does she want to look at him?"

"I think she wants *him* to look at *her*," I explained. "They have a sign language they use for a mind-reading act. You see—"

"Incredible! Absolutely incredible!"

We turned around. A small, gray man had appeared at the door and was waving a magnifying glass about. "Incredible! Who would have thought such? Impossible! Not even gummed!"

We all stared at each other while the lieutenant strode over to the little man. "Calm yourself, Mr. McCarthy. What is it?"

McCarthy thrust something tiny into Garrett's face. "Here," he said. "Look at this!"

"It's a stamp?" Lieutenant Garrett asked.

"It is not! When you asked me to go through the stamps I said to myself this is a waste of time, a complete waste of time . . ."

"You said it to us too, Mr. McCarthy."

"I was mistaken. It's incredible. This is the Hayes Two-and-a-Half-Cent Vermilion. But it *isn't*. It's an imitation. And not even gummed! Looking at it through the glass, even an expert might have missed it. Incredible!"

"What's the real stamp worth?" Garrett asked the old man.

"Priceless," McCarthy said. "Whatever someone will pay for it. It's a one-of-a-kind."

"Well, what's it insured for?"

"I believe two hundred thousand dollars. But, you understand its intrinsic value could be much higher, depending upon just how badly someone else wanted the stamp."

"It looks like someone wanted it pretty badly," Garrett said. "Let's get that magician up here."

"You don't think—" I started.

Garrett looked at me. "What don't I think?"

"Christopher Steele couldn't have anything to do with this," I

said. "He's been locked in a coffin in plain view of a crowd of people since ten o'clock."

"That may be," Garrett said, "but he's the only one who was in the store at the time of the murder who isn't here now, so we might as well have him. Maybe he can give us a little insight into locked rooms—professionally, that is."

"I'd be delighted, Lieutenant," Steele's deep stage voice said behind us. We turned and saw him standing in the doorway with Ardis.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Garrett demanded.

"Ardis told me what was happening. I had her break the wax seal around the lid and let me out."

"It was all news to you, was it?"

Steele smiled faintly. "I've been sealed inside that coffin for the past three hours, Lieutenant. I did see the arrival of the police vehicles, of course, but I had no idea what had happened."

"I'd like to have a close look at that coffin of yours," Garrett said. "Unless you have objections?"

"Certainly not." Steele's eyes began to gleam. "Did I understand you to say you'd like me to examine the locked room where the murder took place?"

Garrett thought about it. "That might be an idea," he said. "You ever use a locked-room gimmick in your act?"

"Various effects that could be applied to a seemingly locked room," Steele said. "But remember, there is no such thing as a truly 'locked room' in the sense we're using the term. People cannot walk through walls."

I suppressed a chuckle, and Steele glared at me. One of his best effects is to have masons come on stage and build a brick wall in full view of the audience. Then Steele proceeds to pass through it. Houdini invented that one.

Steele shifted his gaze back to the lieutenant. "Can I see that room now?"

"All right. It can't hurt anything. In fact, why don't we all adjourn to the Stamp Room. The lab crew's gone by now."

So all of us went down to the Stamp Room. There was a chalk outline where the body had lain on the worn maroon carpeting, but nothing else seemed out of place. Jutting out from the wall on the right were eight display cases filled with trays of stamps and envelopes, with printed cards telling what each was and in some instances giving historical data. At the rear was a long glass counter

with stamps, stamp albums, books about stamps; these were the items for sale by Lorde's. On the counter top was a telephone, several reference books, catalogs, a charge-card machine, and some pencils. The left side of the room had three eight-foot-high shelves, like stacks in a library, running parallel to the wall with the door; these had trays of stamps and first covers, some of which were for sale and some of which belonged to the Lorde's Collection. The windows were directly opposite, behind the counter. Not only were the bars firmly in place, but the sash was painted to the frame.

Steele walked to the middle of the room and turned in a slow circle, studying everything in it, and I knew that the single turnaround had fixed every detail of the Stamp Room in his mind.

He stared at the counter briefly, turned and walked to the display cases on the right. "Where was the stamp?" he asked.

"Third case from the rear," McCarthy told him. "Incredible!"

"We'll worry about the stamp later," Garrett said. "Well, Steele? Do you see anything we might have missed?" His voice was tinged with irony.

"Perhaps," Steele said. "Mr. McCarthy, what did you do when you found the body?"

"I left the room and called the police."

"You didn't touch anything in here?"

"I know better than that."

"You didn't call from this phone?"

"No. I didn't want to disturb anything."

Steele nodded and turned to Garrett. "You said the room was locked from the inside. Surely there are cylinders on both sides of the door?" With his air of positive command, it didn't occur to the detective that he should be asking the questions and Steele responding. Steele's carefully nurtured stage personality had some use away from the footlights.

"There are," Garrett admitted. "But there's only one key, and it's supposed to be in the possession of the manager at all times, because of insurance regulations. It was found in his pocket."

"May I see it, please?"

Garrett asked another officer to get the "evidence envelope," and the man nodded and left the room. "We'll find the killer," the lieutenant said to Steele. "But to make a case, we have to know how he got out of the room. Can you tell us?"

Steele offered his hand. "I accept the challenge."

Garrett, who was unaware that

he had issued a challenge, shook hands—and then frowned suspiciously. "This isn't a publicity thing, is it? It better not be. I want no statements to the press unless you clear with me first."

"No publicity, I assure you, Lieutenant. The challenge of the puzzle itself is my reward. Just give me access to the information as you collect it, and I promise you the 'locked-room' mystery will be satisfactorily solved. As I said before, there's no such thing as a 'locked room.'"

The officer came back with a large manila envelope and handed it to Garrett, who ripped it open and dumped the items inside onto a glass counter. "Schneider's pockets, contents of," he said.

Steele picked up the key ring and isolated and examined the Stamp Room key. "Not copied recently," he told Garrett, "and no impression taken."

"How do you know?"

"Simple," Steele said. "Your laboratory will say the same. If it had been copied recently there would be some sign of it on the lands, where the copying pantograph would be pressed against it. If it had been impressed, then some miniscule particle of wax or clay would surely have adhered to the inner surface of this groove."

"All right, Steele," Garrett said. "You see anything else there?"

"Not at the moment," Steele answered, but his eyes had a secretive look that I recognized. He was onto something, and he wasn't ready to share it. Steele has a flair for the dramatic and, on occasion, the melodramatic, and his timing is excellent.

There was a point that was bothering me, and I decided to ask: "Doesn't this room have a burglar alarm?"

Garrett nodded. "It does, but not on the door."

"That's right," Thorp said. "The alarm system is wired into the display cases. It sets off a silent alarm in the office of the private security outfit we use."

"Then why didn't the alarm go off when the Hayes stamp was stolen?" I asked.

Garrett turned to Thorp, frowning. "That's a damn good question. Where's the alarm control box?"

"Outside in Sportswear. In a recessed wall cubicle."

"Who has the keys?"

Thorp colored slightly. "Key; there's only one. I have it. One of my duties is to activate the alarm system after closing."

"Let's see it."

Thorp pulled it from his pocket. It was a single key, too large to fit on any ring; about as long as a

fountain pen, and thicker around, with an irregular series of grooves on one end and a large round handle on the other.

"Fascinating," Steele said, taking it from Thorp's hand and examining it. "It must be over thirty years old."

"The alarm system is older than that," Thorp said. "We've been taking bids on modernizing it."

"This thing must be a chore to carry around." Steele hefted the key. "It's solid brass—and look how shiny it is."

"I usually keep it in the safe. Only take it out to turn the system on and off."

"How do you get into the store without setting off the alarm, then?" Garrett asked.

"I don't. The alarm covers the entrance doors, and it goes off when the first person comes into the store in the morning. He has to call the security people immediately and identify himself. It's usually me or Mr. Schneider. Then I reset the alarm."

"Who else has the combination to the safe?"

"Victor Schneider had," Thorp said. "Only he."

"That poses a question," Garrett said. "Thorp here could have turned off the alarm, but he couldn't get into the room."

"Are you suggesting—" Thorp's face flushed dark red. "What—"

"Just speculating," Lieutenant Garrett said. "It's my job. Now, Schneider could have come in here and turned off the alarm, but then we'd have to assume he had an accomplice, since he didn't murder himself."

"Didn't he have to have the alarm off to inventory the stamps?" Mrs. Lorde asked. "That's what he was doing. I asked him to do the first inventory, then Mr. McCarthy would do the second. We always do two."

"It's just a physical inventory," McCarthy said. "He didn't have to touch them or examine them, just make sure they were there. He just peered through the glass."

"One second," Steele said. He disappeared down one of the short aisles between the display cases on the right. "Is this the inventory control sheet?" he asked, coming back out with a clipboard in his hand.

"Yes," McCarthy said.

"Where did you find it?" Garrett demanded.

"On top of the case, about halfway along. It's checked off to item number three-twenty-six. Where would that be?"

"Right about where you found the clipboard," McCarthy said.

"So Schneider got it in the

middle of his inventory," Garrett mused.

"He caught someone stealing the stamp," Thorp said.

"How was the stamp stolen without the alarm going off?"

"A duplicate key could have been made," I volunteered. "Someone could have taken an impression of the lock; it's right out there in plain view of any customer with a piece of wax."

Steele glared at me. "It's not that easy. *I* could have done it, but that's my profession and I've had twenty years' practice. Few amateurs could have done it."

"Well, a man is dead and a valuable stamp is missing," Garrett said. "Somebody did something. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to question each of you separately. Miss Royce, I understand that you and Mr. Schneider were good friends."

Lillian merely nodded her assent. She still seemed dazed.

"Would you come with me, please?" Garrett asked gently. "Let's talk about it." He led her out of the Stamp Room and we all more or less straggled behind. Garrett preempted the private office for interrogation, with Mrs. Lorde's grudging permission.

Steele called Ardis over to us. "Are you still friendly with that young lady who works for the phone company?" he asked her.

"As far as I know," she said.

"Get hold of her. Find an open phone. Tell her—"

"But it's—"

"I know, it's three o'clock in the morning. We'll take her out to dinner next week. Have her get over to the billing computer and get a list of all numbers called from this store since ten o'clock this evening."

"Can they do that?" I asked.

"Computers can do anything," Steele replied with firm assurance.

Ardis went off. Magicians' assistants are used to doing whatever their boss asks of them without question and without hesitation. It's a necessary prerequisite of the job; otherwise one of them can wind up embarrassed, injured, or dead.

Magicians' managers, however, are another matter. "Why do you want the list of numbers?" I asked Steele.

He gave me one of his enigmatic smiles. "Perhaps we'll find nothing, and perhaps a great deal," he said.

"Thanks a lot."

Steele walked over to where Mrs. Lorde was leaning on her cane, scowling down at the floor. "I wonder if I might ask you a few questions," he said.

She lifted her head and re-

garded him with one eye. "What questions, young man?"

"I'll be brief. I imagine you must be distressed by the death of Mr. Schneider and the loss of the Hayes Two-and-a-Half-Cent Vermilion."

"The stamp is insured," Mrs. Lorde said. "A man's life is infinitely more important than a piece of gummed paper. Even a man like Victor Schneider."

Steele raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Victor Schneider was a fool and an incompetent. If he had not died, I would almost certainly have replaced him."

"Incompetent as a store manager?"

"Indeed. His accounting procedures were dangerous and he had a knack for purchasing totally unsalable merchandise without consulting anyone. If I had not been in Europe for more than a year, I would have discovered this much sooner."

"How long had Schneider been your manager here?"

"A little over two years."

"I see," Steele said. "Did you have someone in mind as his replacement, should you have decided that way?"

"Of course. Lewis Thorp."

"Did Thorp know of your displeasure with Schneider? Did he know that he was next in line?"

"He did not. I tell no one what I intend to do until I do it. However, I did plan to speak to Lewis about Schneider tonight; that is why I summoned him to my office earlier. There were interruptions and then this murder and theft, so I did not have the chance to carry out my intention."

"You hadn't as yet mentioned to Schneider that his job was in jeopardy, is that correct?"

"It is. I was waiting until our CPA firm completed an independent audit this past week, but when I had their report, I knew nothing more than I had previously. There are incompetents in every business. So I called a second CPA firm; they will begin *their* audit next week."

"You suspected a shortage, Mrs. Lorde? Embezzlement?"

She tapped her cane sharply on the hardwood floor. "Not exactly. Victor Schneider was a fool but not a knave; he lacked the intellectual capacity for knavery. No, I merely suspect mismanagement due to incompetence. But our CPA's are also incompetent. They couldn't tell, they said, if there were any discrepancies. Do you believe that? Well, I expect the new firm I've hired *will* be able to tell."

Steele nodded thoughtfully.

"I suppose you think it's rude of me to speak so harshly of the newly-dead," Mrs. Lorde said, "but Death is too close a companion for me to hold in reverence."

"A man in death is just what he was in life," Steele said sententiously. "Neither more nor less, and he should be remembered thus." He gave the old woman a courtly bow, and we turned away.

I studied his face, and he had the air of someone doing mental mathematics. He said finally, "Tell me, Matthew, about your friend, Miss Royce. Have you any idea of her feelings toward Lewis Thorp?"

I thought back to my dinner conversation with Lillian. The subject had come up, briefly. "He made a pass at her once, which she repulsed. Subsequently he got himself a steady girlfriend and ignored Lillian—Miss Royce. She happily ignored him also."

Steele fell silent, pondering again as he led the way to Lewis Thorp's office cubicle.

Thorp was sitting at his desk. He looked up and gave us a wan smile as we approached. "Well, Mr. Steele," he said, "any new developments?"

Steele shook his head. "I'd like to hear your ideas."

"If you mean about how poor Victor was murdered in a locked room," Thorp said, "I can't help you. It seems like a baffling crime."

"So it does," Steele agreed.

"Victor must have been killed by whoever stole the stamp," Thorp said. "He must have walked in on him—the thief, I mean."

"That's not likely," Steele said. "He would have known that the theft would be uncovered in the murder investigation."

"Maybe he just wanted time to get the stamp out."

"No, I don't think the theft has anything to do with the murder. Just an unfortunate coincidence."

Thorp worried his lower lip for a moment. "There *is* one other possibility," he said. "Our books have just undergone a surprise audit. The rumor is that there was a major discrepancy."

"You think Schneider may have been tapping the till?"

"I knew Victor rather well. He had his faults, as we all do, but he seemed to be a basically honest man. But he *was* extravagant in his tastes, and he *may* have needed money. If he was embezzling from the store and someone found out about it, he may have tried to blackmail him. And suppose they had a fight of some kind, and Schneider was killed by accident. Or suppose he had an

accomplice who thought that the audit would reveal Schneider's duplicity and killed to keep himself in the clear."

"How could such an embezzlement have been accomplished?" Steele asked.

Thorp considered. "What was done—if anything at all was done—was probably a juggling of purchase records; false requisitions to dummy firms, with the money paid by Lorde's siphoned off. That's done to firms like ours periodically; we have to be on the watch for it. And any one of a dozen people in the store might have helped Schneider falsify records."

"I see. It's an interesting theory, in any case. I appreciate your candor, Mr. Thorp."

Thorp nodded, and Steele and I left him in his cubicle. When we returned to the front area, I saw that Ardis had come up from downstairs and was beckoning across the floor to us. Steele went immediately to meet her. I was about to follow, but Lillian Royce appeared and intercepted me, clutching at my arm.

"I . . . I'd like to speak with you, Matthew," she said. Her nails dug into the tweed of my jacket.

"Of course."

"I know I shouldn't impose, but . . . there's no one else I can talk to just now about—about Victor."

I took her hand. "I understand," I said.

"I've just come from a long talk with Lieutenant Garrett. I did most of the talking. He kept asking questions. I told him the truth, that I was having an affair with Victor. Everyone seemed to know that already. Victor was a nice man, you know. Ineffectual, weak, easily taken advantage of—but he meant well, he always meant well. And they seem to think I might have killed him. Why would I want to kill Victor? Why would anyone—?" She broke off abruptly and buried her face against my shoulder. I could feel her tears against my neck, but she didn't make a sound. I held her.

It was perhaps two silent minutes later when Steele and Ardis came over to us. "I dislike interrupting," he said quietly, "but you could help me if you would, Miss Royce."

Lillian took a deep breath, and then stepped away from me and faced Steele.

He looked at Lillian. "Matthew mentioned your describing Mr. Thorp's acquisition of an inamorata—a girlfriend. Do you know her?"

"Yes," Lillian answered. "Ginny Epworth."

Steele nodded again. Just then

Lieutenant Garrett came out of the private office. "Oh, Steele!" he called, then waited until he reached us to continue: "One of our lab men has a farfetched theory on how the killer got into and out of the Stamp Room, but I'd like you to hear it anyway."

"I don't have to, Lieutenant," Steele said. "I know how it was done."

"What?"

"And I believe I can name the killer of Victor Schneider."

My mouth, I think, dropped open. So did Garrett's. There was a silence; then Garrett said warily, "Go ahead."

"My proof is, at the moment, merely inferential," Steele said. "But if you will bear with me, I believe I can suggest a means for establishing the killer's identity."

"Just name him."

"If you would join us in the Stamp Room, and bring the others with you—and if you would, then give me no more than ten minutes to propound a little scenario—I'll give him to you."

"Just *name* him," Garrett repeated.

"It wouldn't do you any good; you couldn't arrest him. Give me ten minutes, and I guarantee you *can* arrest him."

"I can't authorize you to ask any questions in the name of the Police Department whatsoever."

"I won't be asking any."

Garrett thought it over, then shrugged. "You've got your ten minutes," he said.

We stood or sat on two sides of the Stamp Room, facing each other. Ardis, McCarthy, Lillian, and I were by the door, with a plainclothesman in the doorway. Across from us, Thorp, Mrs. Lorde, and Lieutenant Garrett were in front of the counter. Steele, of course, stood in the center of the room; it was his show.

"I would like to attempt an experiment," Steele said, slowly turning around, his eye catching and examining each of us in turn. "Before I do, I should tell you that there is nothing magic, nothing mystical in what I am about to do."

I suppressed a smile. Always watch a magician most closely when he tells you there is no trick. Steele had everyone else's complete attention.

"There is a psychic aura of the past that is always with us," Steele continued. "It seems to be strongest in the presence of death—particularly violent death. Some people believe that this psychic aura explains that phenomenon we call 'ghosts,' other experimenters equate it with that

strange sense that what is happening has happened before: what the French call *déjà vu*." Steele was using his intense, mellifluous, almost hypnotic stage voice on us, a voice which compelled suspension of disbelief until the effect—whatever he was after—was accomplished.

"With experience and help, a few sensitive people have been able to read this aura like a book, and unfold the story it conceals. I am going to attempt to do this in this room. I will need your help."

Mrs. Lorde was skeptical and impatient. "What is it you want us to do?" she asked.

"Patience," Steele said. "I am about to tell the story that I read in the psychic patterns of this room. I may appeal to one or more of you for help as I go along. Verbal help. That's all I require."

"Go on," Garrett said.

Steele raised his arms above his head. "Let us go back," he said. "Back almost four hours, to the act of murder and all that led up to it." He began prowling about the room, examining the walls, the windows, the display cases, the two aisles between the stacks, and even the floor—as though there were words written there for him to find. "I see this room," he said. "It is empty, waiting. Now Victor Schneider enters. He has come to inventory the stamps; he has a list in his hands and he is checking the stamps off against it, not really examining them but merely seeing that they are there.

"He checks the counter first. Then he goes over to the stacks . . ." Steele disappeared down one of the aisles, then returned and pointed dramatically at the door. "The murderer!" he announced. Everyone stared at the plainclothesman, who was blocking the doorway.

"The door slowly opens," Steele continued, his finger still pointing, "and the murderer enters. He closes the door behind him. I think—yes, he locks it."

"Now wait a minute," Garrett protested. "Schneider had the only key to the room—we know that."

"Do we?" Steele asked. "I told you, Lieutenant, that there is no such thing as a 'locked-room' mystery. The murderer had a key—a duplicate key no doubt made some time ago by Victor Schneider and foolishly, illegally, trustingly given to the killer for the sake of expediency. The murderer used it to get in, and he locked the door with it when he left."

"Then where is it now?" Garrett demanded.

"I have no idea. Let me go on."

Steele stared about the room again, as if to relocate the aura. "The killer is in the room. What does he do? Does he savagely attack Victor Schneider? No. He doesn't see Schneider. He thinks he is alone. He advances—" Steele advanced "—to the counter. Is it the stamp he's after?"

Steele paused before the case that had held the Hayes Two-and-a-Half-Cent Vermilion and contemplated it. "No. There is no aura of violence about this case. It was something else. What?" He ran his hand a foot above the counter as though it were a sensitive antenna tuning in to the auric vibrations. The hand paused and quivered over the far right end of the counter. "The telephone," he said.

"What?" Garrett asked.

"He picked up the telephone. He dialed an outside number."

"What number? Who was he calling?"

"Why come in here to use the phone?" Lillian Royce asked. "There are fifty telephones in the store."

Steele pressed his hands to his forehead. His audience was obviously still with him, but I was beginning to wonder just what the hell he was doing. "I sense fear; fear, and a need for privacy. This person—the killer—locked himself in here to speak on the telephone of something so private that the overhearing of it was a mortal threat to him. Unfortunately for Victor Schneider, he did overhear this conversation."

Steele moved again to the stacks. "What exactly was it that Schneider overheard? The facts of a crime—yes, I sense a crime. Perhaps the killer was making plans with the person at the other end of the wire, plans for immediate escape with the ill-gotten gains of this crime, this theft . . ."

"The Vermilion!" Garrett said.

"No, not a stamp. Not a physical theft. Cheating or embezzling perhaps. Yes—and the killer was laboring under a misconception; he thought his crime had been discovered, that he faced a prison sentence, that his only alternative was to flee as quickly as possible."

Steele pointed a finger at the phone. "So Victor Schneider, overhearing all of this, decided to confront the person. And did so." He spread his hands, and then clapped them together. "Just so quickly are created a killer, and a corpse. No premeditation; just the sudden, overwhelming need to suppress a criminous act . . . Isn't that right—Lewis Thorp?"

Thorp looked startled, but not as startled as the rest of us; I guess he'd seen it coming. "What

are you talking about?" he demanded, his voice harsh.

"There are records, you know, Mr. Thorp," Steele said, walking toward him. "The phone company must have a record of your call. And the person you called—" Steele held his hand above Thorp's head as though drawing forth thoughts "—the young lady you called . . . Miss Epworth."

Thorp brushed aside Steele's hand. "What is this? An accusation based on a damned mind-reading act? I don't have to put up with this. I called Ginny. Of course I called Ginny. Why shouldn't I?"

"From what phone?" Steele asked softly.

"What do you mean? How do I know what phone? I don't remember what phone."

"And the key, Mr. Thorp. How will you explain the key?"

"You mean to this room? I don't have a key to this room."

"But you know where it is, because you put it there," Steele said. "And I'm going to take you to it."

"You must be crazy," Thorp said, backing away.

"You're going to take my hand," Steele said, "and then *I'm* going to take *you* to the key—wherever it is."

We all watched, hypnotized, as Steele took hold of Thorp's wrist. "Come," he said, "let's go find that key. All you have to do is think about where it is, and I'll lead you to it." He pulled Thorp across the room, very much against Thorp's will. "And you can't help thinking about it, can you? That little brass key that nobody knew you had. Just lock the door behind you and hide the key and no one could ever prove you were in the room."

Steele literally pulled Thorp out of the room as he kept up the patter. We all followed behind at a respectful distance. Of course, now I knew what he was doing. It was very impressive on stage, and even more so now when it was being used to trap a murderer. "Just come along," Steele said, pulling Thorp by the wrist. "Which way? Where would you have put it? Over here?" He went to the left, toward the furniture department. "No, I think not." He turned to the right again, with Thorp behind him, still in his firm grasp. "Down here, I think. Surely not too far away, wouldn't want to get caught with it. Paused here to think, did you? Now down here? Ah—of course!" He stopped before a glass display case full of wallets and other leather goods. "Somewhere in here."

"This is ridiculous!" Thorp

shouted, but there was panic in his voice. "What does it prove if there *is* a key in this case? You probably put it there yourself, Steele."

Steele smiled. "Do you really think that *I* would need a key to enter the Stamp Room, or any other room?"

Lillian came forward silently and slid the lock off the door to the case. Steele then opened the door with one hand, the other still firmly wrapped around Thorp's right wrist. "Where now?" he said, his hand running along the top of the various leather items. "I think . . . ah, yes!" He pulled a key holder from one of the trays. There were two keys in it for display, one brass and the other silver. "One of these," he said positively. He lifted the brass one by the ring. "This."

Lieutenant Garrett pushed forward. "Let me see that."

"Here you are, Lieutenant. Handle it gently. I think you'll find Mr. Thorp's fingerprints on it."

"What if it is my key?" Thorp's voice was higher and louder than he'd intended. "That doesn't prove anything!"

"Speaking of keys," Steele said to Garrett, "I suggest you examine the burglar-alarm key—which no one but Mr. Thorp uses, by his own admission—carefully under a microscope. You'll no doubt find traces of blood at the tip, even though Mr. Thorp scrubbed it bright before putting it in this case."

Of course! I thought. Thorp must have had the key in his possession when Schneider confronted him in the Stamp Room; this was the weapon, with its wide blunt tip, that he had in his fear driven into Schneider's throat.

Thorp realized, too, that he was hopelessly trapped; that Garrett had all the evidence he needed now. His gaze dropped, and he sagged in Steele's grasp. Lieutenant Garrett read him his rights, and he was handcuffed and taken away with no fuss at all.

Everyone was talking at once, looking at Steele as if he were some kind of wizard. When Garrett got them calmed down, he asked the question in all their minds: "All right, Steele, how the hell did you do that business with the key? You really didn't have it spotted beforehand?"

"I had no idea where it was until Thorp 'told' me," Steele answered. "It's a technique called Muscle Reading. They were doing it in the Middle Ages."

"Probably getting burned as witches too," Garrett said. "How does it work?"

"There are several books on it," I told him. "Professor Otto Dirk's is probably the best. Published in 1937. Four hundred pages. I have a copy, if you'd care to see it sometime. The technique involves reading a person's subconscious reactions by keeping a tight grip on a muscle, usually in the arm."

"It works so good that you can pull the person?"

"It works better when you pull the subject. Something about his pulling away harder in the direction he doesn't want you to go."

"You live and learn," Garrett said. "But listen, Steele, there are a couple of other things that need clearing up. For one, how did you know Thorp had made a telephone call from the Stamp Room?"

"Simple deduction, Lieutenant. He'd gone in there; he had to be doing something. What does the room offer, really, except privacy? The only lines to the switchboard open at night are those in the executive offices and the Stamp Room. You've seen the cubicle Thorp had to work in. A phone call was the only logical conclusion. He had no way of knowing that Mrs. Lorde's suspicions were directed at Schneider and not at him. With his tremendous burden of guilt, he saw accusing fingers in every gesture."

"I suppose so," Garrett said. "Which reminds me, I've got to dispatch someone to pick up Thorp's girlfriend, this Ginny Epworth; she's obviously an accessory to his embezzlement. But before I do that, suppose you give me another logical deduction: what happened to the missing stamp? Who stole it?"

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant. Despite my pose, I am not omniscient. Perhaps Thorp took it. Perhaps poor Schneider took it, for some reason we might never know. Perhaps some unknown individual took it; after all, no one has examined it closely for weeks, according to Mr. McCarthy. I doubt if it has anything to do with the murder, in any case. And I imagine it will turn up eventually."

Garrett sighed. "All right, Steele. You've been a great help, I admit it. You deserve a publicity break, so I'll see to it you get most of the credit for solving Schneider's murder. It's the least I can do."

Steele smiled—and so, of course, did I.

Two hours later—it must have been almost dawn—Steele and Ardis and I were sitting in the large kitchen of his Victorian house in the Berkeley hills. I had escorted Lillian Royce to her San

Francisco apartment, and then I had come across the bay to ask Steele privately some questions before going home myself.

My first question was: "How did you do it?"

His eyes, deceptively mild, raised from a mug of steaming coffee to meet mine over the table. "How did I do what?"

"The Hayes Two-and-a-Half-Cent Vermilion, damn it."

"Oh. Ardis—"

She tossed him one of the two rolled-up posters she had brought home with her from Lorde's—the two that had been behind the coffin inside the front window. Steele unrolled it, and his fingernail then scraped lightly at an upper corner, the mottled yellowish-red (vermilion) background to the gaudy drawing of himself. A small rectangle of paper came free, and when I leaned close I saw that two thin corner mounts of transparent plastic, the type used to mount photographs in albums, were affixed to the poster. The rectangle was a picture of President Rutherford B. Hayes.

I stared at the stamp. "You could have told me," I said.

"I don't like to worry you unnecessarily, Matthew."

"Yeah," I said. "All right—how did you get out of the coffin?"

Ardis said, "The Blue Room Illusion, or a variant of it. The coffin's lid is a double pane of glass. The bottom pane drops down at a forty-five degree angle. At the same time the lights on one side of the coffin go off, and a set on the other side come on, turning the glass into a mirror."

"Uh-huh. Then Steele disappears, and what the viewers see is—"

"—a reflected image of a photograph of Christopher pasted along the inside of the coffin, invisible from the street."

"Right," I said. "And the necessary distraction?"

"When I let that poster flap, remember? Everyone looked at me, and Christopher rolled out a cleverly hinged panel on the other side. In exactly fifteen minutes, I provided him with another distraction, and he mounted the stamp on the poster with one motion, and rolled back into the coffin. While you were having dinner, that was."

I asked Steele, "You picked the lock on the Stamp Room door?"

"Of course."

"How about the alarm?"

"I turned it off. With a duplicate key. I took an impression of the alarm lock as a customer in the Sportswear Department last week."

"One more question: you didn't

figure out that Thorp had made a phone call from the Stamp Room through deduction alone, did you?"

"Not really. When I entered the room the second time, with you and everyone else, I saw immediately that the telephone had been moved. So I knew then that someone had made a call in the interim—either Schneider or his killer, since McCarthy and the police had not used the instrument."

"You know," I said, "this insane passion of yours for taking on all challenges, and for creating your own when there's none around, almost got you rung in for murder this time. If your timing had been off, or if someone had spotted the stamp . . ."

"But it wasn't, and no one did," he said. "I had to solve poor Schneider's murder to make sure I wasn't implicated in the appropriation of the Vermilion or in the homicide itself. Now *there* was a challenge."

I shook my head wearily. "You're going to return the stamp, naturally."

"Naturally. I'll arrange for it to be found somewhere in Lorde's. And its 'theft' will forever remain a mystery."

"What next, you maniac?" I asked him. "What *next*?"

"Oh, I don't know," he answered. "I've sort of been considering the crown of Henry the Seventh."

The hell of it was, I couldn't tell whether or not he was kidding . . .

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