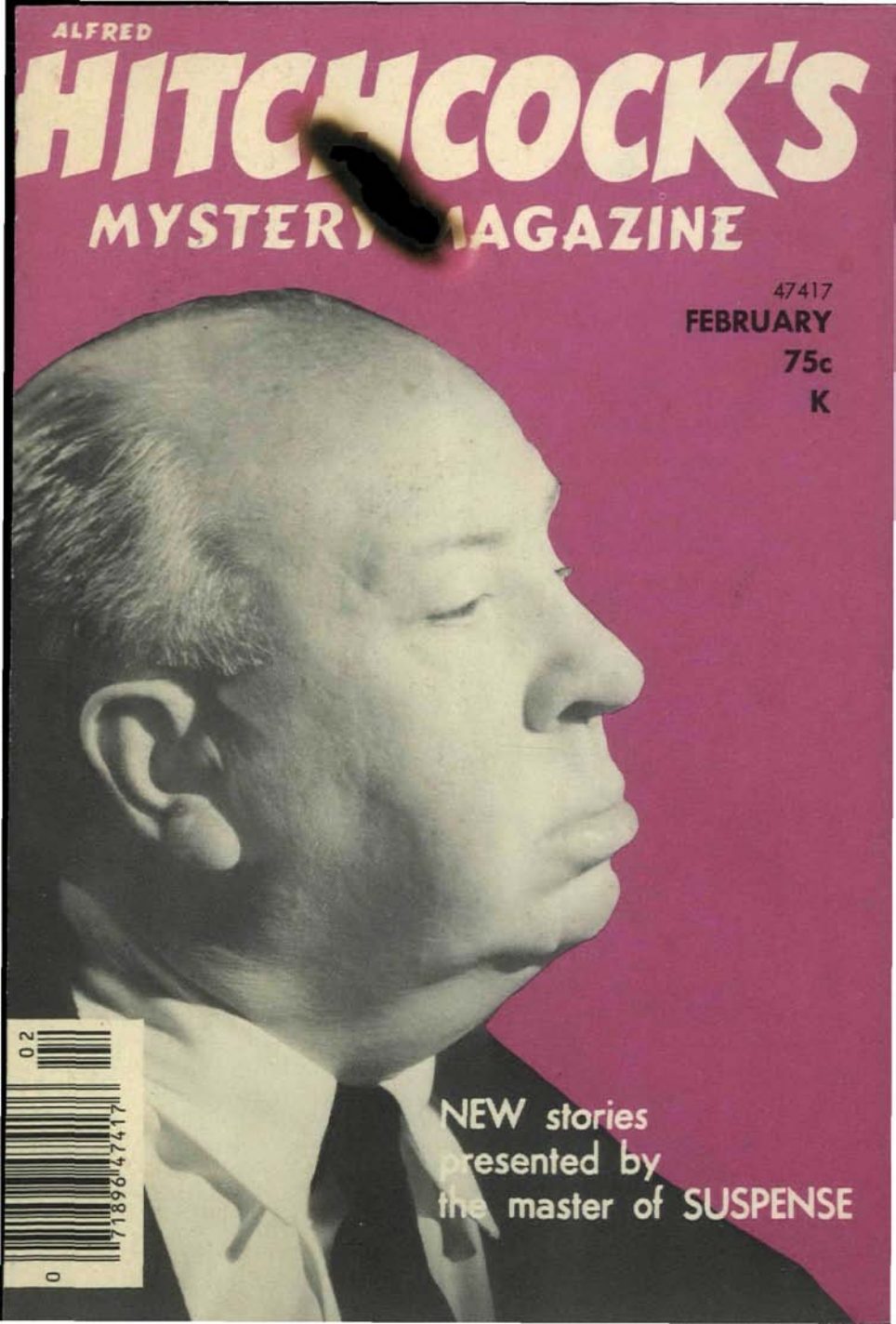
ALFRED
HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE
47417
FEBRUARY
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NEW stories
presented by
the master of SUSPENSE

February 1976

Dear Reader:

So long as we are privileged to have among us writers like those within, we should fare well in our pursuit of murder and murderers. If, however, you number among your acquaintances one who confuses suspense with bridge construction, and bizarre with a market, then do your good deed in the name of mystery and direct him to the nearest newsstand. He will be a friend for life—mine as well as yours.

This month, lunacy is what you will encounter first in these new tales, in a crackling good Jake Pilgrim story by Frank Sisk titled, enticingly, *Plague Among the Pinkletinks.* Throughout, I am sure, you will enjoy a large return on your investment of time—clear to the final earnest word. I might say here that though I have dealt with windows before, it never was quite the same as William Bankier's superlative novelette titled, clearly enough, *The Window.*

As always, good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 21, No. 2, February 1976. 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.

Both "plague" and "pinkletinks" are fully explained in due course, though not with equal ease.

Once a year, usually late in April, I try my very damnedest to get away from it all by passing between the rocky mandibles of East Chop and West Chop. These sea-girt promontories, each with its own white lighthouse, guard the blue tranquillity of Vineyard Haven's harbor and this harbor is my port of entry to the peace that's part of Martha's Vineyard before the summer hordes arrive. As soon as the ferry slides into its slip the urban tensions begin to ooze from my body.

This latest arrival was no different from those past except for one feature. A funeral cortege—one hearse, two limousines—was drawn up on the dock, apparently waiting to board the ferry for the trip back to Woods Hole. As I eased my vehicle off the ramp, with a sidelong glance at the black-garbed mourners, I reflected that here was a somber manifestation

of peace, peace in its ultimate guise, and at the same time I realized that during my previous sojourns on this island the form of death had never once crossed my holiday path.

I drove unhurriedly toward Oak Bluffs and past it, heading toward Edgartown. A poet could have described the sky as cerulean. The clear air was tangy with salt from the sea. Beach plums were showing their first white blossoms. Occasionally a cardinal flashed across a greening meadow.

Nearing the outskirts of Edgartown, I turned on the radio in order to catch the 11 o'clock news. Three singers (or maybe one singer gone stereophonic) were caterwauling to the accompaniment of cymbals and an electric guitar. They seemed to have a plaint about how bad it was to be flatbroke in Flatbush. I listened for several incredulous moments and was on the verge of searching out

another station when the song came to an abrupt end, as if the singers had been throttled in mid-bar, and a nasal voice announced:

"Hello out there. This is Chatty Chuck Conway—yes, good ole CCC in person—bringing all youse listeners the morning news roundup hot off the griddle here in the studios of WSOB."

There ought to be a criminal statute, I thought.

Chatty Chuck continued, his words no better than the sample of WSOB's music that I'd just heard. With some truly barbarous mispronunciations he reported some national news, then finally arrived on the local scene: a Yarmouth dump fire, a Sandwich school budget, a Jaycee conference in Hyannis. Ole CCC failed to seize my interest until, as I was passing the Edgartown Methodist Church, he said something that made me blink and listen.

". . . is being laid to rest today in the family plot at Falmouth. Mr. Gimpel, a resident of Martha's Vineyard since boyhood, had been employed for the past thirty years by the Vincent Sail and Cordage Company. His death marks the sixth death on the island in as many months, all with the same strange symptoms. In every case the attending physician has been unable to give the exact cause of death. Is there a mysterious plague visiting that enchanted isle? This is a question now being asked by more than a few Vineyarders. Now for the weather . . ."

A plague on the Vineyard yet. What was Chatty Chuck trying to do? Start a riot? I'd wager ten to one that WSOB's mail tomorrow morning would lean ten to one in favor of clapping ole CCC in stocks on the village green for thirty days, a wooden gag in his yap.

My home away from home on the Vineyard is called the Moontide Inn. It's situated with its back to a profusion of scrub oak and lilac and its front within easy walking distance of a beach whose sand in certain slants of light looks opalescent.

In a place where most inns date back beyond the gaslight era, Moontide is quite modern. Each of its 35 rooms is equipped with black-and-white TV, telephone, bath with shower. There's not a hooked rug anywhere on the premises. Its cuisine is always good, sometimes superb. There's an outdoor swimming pool, empty at this time of the year, for those who don't like to touch sand. Beside the pool is a patio protected from the heavenly elements by an

attractive orange-colored canopy.

Many island visitors shy away from the few places like the Moontide, preferring the picturesque old hostelries with uneven peg-nailed floors and out-of-plumb walls covered with dusty samplers ("Never Leave Me To The Pitiless Sea"). As for me, I like to admire the picturesque from a distance; up close it's often uncomfortable.

The Moontide's proprietor is Mrs. Leonora Irvine, a widow, who always manages to make white hair, sun-seamed wrinkles and a slender body look vibrantly young. She is at least 60.

"Good morning, Leonora," I said as I entered the small lobby.

She was behind the desk. Once she recognized me, her blue eyes widened behind the tinted glasses. "If it isn't Jake Pilgrim."

"If it isn't, I've been fooling hundreds of people for years."

"And right on time." She began to come around the desk.

"When I book a room for a certain day I almost always get there on time."

"I mean, Jake, that you're right on time for lunch."

I set the two-suiter down. "I hope so."

"And I've planned something special."

"I'm listening."

"How does swordfish two hours right off the boat strike you?"

"Stunningly."

"Broiled light brown and served with a sauce of melted butter and chopped shallots."

"Oh, Leonora."

"Potatoes mashed with finely grated cheese. A side dish of pearl onions and peas."

"No wonder I'm on time."

"Topped off with warm Indian pudding under a mound of minted whip cream."

"I could kiss you."

"Well, why don't you?"

I did.

"So that's why I can't get to first base," said a grumpy voice behind me. "Ought to be ashamed, Leonora—philandering with every fancy jaybird stumbles off the ferry."

I turned to see a stocky old man standing at the foot of the stairs, one hand holding a small black bag, the other still resting on the chrome railing. His weathered face was cast along the same doleful lines as a basset's.

"Jared," Leonora was saying, "you remember Jake Pilgrim, don't you?"

"Of course I remember him. No man worth his salt ever forgets a rival for the hand of the woman he loves."

"Pish tush," Leonora said.

"Dr. Jared Pray, I presume," I

said, holding out a welcoming hand.

The old boy came forward, grinning, and shook my hand twice, heartily. "How's the private-eye business, Jake?"

"Keeps me on my toes, Jared."

"Then why in hell do they call you flatfoots?"

"Still the back-room joker, I see. What brings you here this early in the day? A croupy guest?"

"I live here now," Pray said.

"Since when?"

"Since my wife died in December," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Hmm. Well, between you and me, Jake, the food is better here than it ever was at home, even though the feminine mystique, so-called—" sad brown eyes swiveling drolly toward Leonora, "—is a hell of a lot more starchy."

Leonora said, "Our dear doctor always puts me in mind of a baby sparrow—all mouth and no bird."

"See what I mean," Pray said.

"Why don't you join Jake for lunch?" Leonora said.

"I wish I could but I can't. I've got another of those damn cases on my hands."

"Another?" Leonora shook her head. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes." Pray turned and without more ado marched to the front door, a sturdy old figure in a rusty brown suit.

"What's he talking about?" I asked.

"He'll tell you all about it later," Leonora said.

Twilight, and across the darkening narrows the swollen finger of Chappaquiddick has turned gray under the mottled amber of the sky; silence, a scented balm that soothes. From where I sit on the patio I can feel my senses bathed in soft currents of peace.

This is it, I tell myself. This is why I'm here—for moments like this.

"There's one place that sure as hell goin down in history," said an unpleasant tenor voice.

I looked up over my shoulder. Standing six feet to my right was one of these dime-a-dozen young men who try with all the hirsute strength within them to resemble Raphael's concept of Jesus Christ: soft dark beard and shoulder-length hair framing a pale oval of a face. This particular dude was presently confounding the image by chewing something—gum, I supposed. Later, when I got a gander at his tan teeth, I figured it could be betel nut.

"Hello," I said, turning back to my view. "Where'd *you* come from all of a sudden?"

"Out back."

"Where out back?"

"I live in one of the cottages out there."

"Oh, I see." There were three tiny cabanas behind the Moontide that Leonora rented to guests who wished to economize by doing their own cooking.

"My name's Armand. Mind if I sit awhile?"

"Help yourself."

Chewing his wad, tentative as a bird, he perched his skinny frame on the edge of a chair twice removed from mine and peered out across the water, usurping my view as well as my peace of mind.

He refrained from speaking for maybe five whole seconds and then he said, "Yeah, man, that lil hunk a real state over there's goin make a big mark in history books."

I withheld comment.

"You cognizant of what that strip a land is?" he asked, chewing.

"Quite cognizant."

"You cognizant what happen there the night of July 18, 1969?"

"Who in the world isn't?"

"Well, yeah, man. It's a matter a record, a matter a history."

"So's the battle of Assandun."

That stopped creepy Armand momentarily. He looked at me askance, an uncertain smile pulling the silken moustache away from his saprogenic fangs.

"He blew it, though," he said at last.

"I suppose so."

"Yeah, he blew it, that's for sure. Or else right now he would be sittin pretty in a White House, man. Now ain't that a fact?"

"A matter of conjecture," I said.

"All the polls said so, back then. Remember?"

"All the polls once said the same about Alf Landon and Tom Dewey."

"Who they?"

"Vita est longa, res publica brevis."

Again stymied, Armand shot me a fuddled look, licked his moustache, reamed out an ear with a twist of his little finger, thoughtfully stroked his nose, fondled his beard, simulated a dry cough, narrowed his eyes, resumed mastication and said, "What's your politics, man—Democrat or Republican?"

"I'm a Prohibitionist," I said, "who'll take a drink when offered."

"I'm a Wallace cat myself."

"Henry, George, Lew or Edgar?"

"I didn't know he had brothers."

I lapsed into a silence so profound that it would have put off anybody but a dolt like Armand.

He regrouped around another subject. "A lot of funny things always been happenin here. On this island, I mean."

I remained bleakly taciturn.

"Like lately," he said. "It's been in a papers. And on radio and TV too."

I remained tight of lip, hard of eye.

"This plague people talkin about. A killer. If you hang around a few days you'll hear the talk. Six dead already and the doctors don't know why." He snickered at the idea. "Even Doc Pray, he don't know what's killin them folks. He told me so las night. A dead end, he calls it. A man's healthy as a bear one day, a couple days later he's like bought it, man. They callin it a plague, like in the olden days."

"Listen, Armand," I said. "Why don't you toddle back to your cottage before you catch cold."

The expression on the face behind the messianic vizard changed from surprise to chagrin to nasty. He muttered something unintelligible, which was probably no compliment, but he got up and shuffled off, leaving in his wake an aura of blessed quietness.

I sat there until twilight became night. The only sound for miles around was that tinkling orchestration produced by the spring peepers, the tiny frogs that cling to trees in the misty lowlands. Scientists call this mite *Hyla crucifer* because of the dark cross it bears on its back. Vineyarders call it a pinkletink.

A drizzling rain outside the dining room window made a good breakfast cheerless. The waitress tried to brighten the mood by predicting sunshine in the afternoon. Then Dr. Jared Pray, appearing in the dining room doorway, easily spotted me among the meager attendance and approached.

"Good morning, Jared," I said, applying honey to a toasted corn muffin. "Pull up a chair."

"Thanks." To the hovering waitress he said, "Make it the usual, Rosie."

"Well," I said, "you look less harried than yesterday."

"Thanks again." Lips pursed, he checked his wristwatch. "Damn it all, I overslept."

"It's only ten of eight."

"And I've got a meeting with Dr. Lovett in forty minutes. Over at Oak Bluffs."

"You'll make it. What's the local medical profession up to—analyzing plague symptoms?"

Pray's gaze was at once accusatory and mournful. "On the island less than twenty-four hours and

you've already swallowed the gossip."

"It was spooned out to me as soon as I got off the ferry."

"In what way?"

"A gray hearse and a couple of black limousines were the welcoming committee at the dock. That kind of told me something."

"Gordon Gimpel, poor man."

"As if that weren't enough, a loose-lipped radio announcer began to make a big thing out of Gimpel's demise. The sixth mysterious death on the island in the last six months, the lad said. He also suggested a plague might be afoot."

"Damn fool. That's Charlie Conway. He thinks he's Yarmouth's answer to Walter Cronkite."

"There's no plague, then."

"Of course not. Still, Jake, we've got one hell of a problem. Comparatively healthy folks have been dying here for no apparent reason. Or no reason that Lovett and I have been able to pinpoint. Now I've got Joe Wharton with the same damn symptoms—losing his hair, severe abdominal pain, goutish sensitivity of the feet—"

"Whoa there, Doc. Let's zoom in on one case at a time. A fatal one."

Just then Rosie arrived with Pray's "usual," which proved to be tomato juice, bran flakes with cream, and black coffee.

Pray maintained a thoughtful silence for a few moments after Rosie's departure. "I keep forgetting what you do when you're at work," he said finally. "It's quite possible that what we need here right now is a fresh point of view—the deductive logic of a professional gumshoe, if you'll pardon the expression."

"I got the hide of a rhino, Jared. Begin by telling me all you know about the late Gordon Gimpel's death."

"I thought you were supposed to be on vacation."

"It's a rainy morning."

"All right. But first let me phone Lovett and move our appointment up to lunch."

"Go to it."

Pray downed the tomato juice and got up and went to the lobby. Two minutes later he was back at the table. He poured cream on the bran flakes, tried a spoonful with a growing look of satisfaction and then said, "Gordon Gimpel was a patient of mine for, oh, twenty years at least. Not that he was ever sick. But he came to me as did his wife and children for periodic checkups and treatment of the minor aches and pains that hit all of us from time to time. My records show that Gor-

don's last illness occurred four years ago—a slight touch of the flu. I prescribed bed rest and aspirin. Three days later he was fully recovered and back at work."

"That radio pundit mentioned Gimpel working in the same shop for a long time."

"He was an old hand at H. R. Vincent's. The company itself goes back to the War of 1812. They made cordage there originally—still do—stitched new sail and repaired old. Still do that too. But now they're into anything blue water that comes to mind: sailboats and power, life jackets, pennants, scuba gear, compasses, Fathometers."

"I get the picture. What did Gimpel do there?"

Pray stowed away more bran. "Charge of inventory, as I understand it. He had some sort of high-sounding title but I can't remember it offhand." He chewed meditatively. "Worked his way up. Started years ago twisting rope. He was due for retirement next year."

"How old was he, Doc?"

"Sixty-four. Strong as an ox. Sound heart. Blood pressure of a twenty-year-old. Steady habits."

"Well, what were the first signs that he was sick?"

"He came to my office three weeks ago, complaining about back pains and nausea. At first I figured it was one of these imported bugs that fly around nowadays—you know, Hong Kong miasma, Singapore crud. I advised him to go home and take it easy for a few days. He ignored the advice. Seems the inventory for the summer season was beginning to flow into Vincent's, and Gordon was the indispensable man. A week later he was an emergency case. His wife phoned me at midnight. As soon as I examined him I sent for an ambulance. At the hospital—"

"There *is* a hospital on the island?"

"Sure. At Oak Bluffs."

"Pardon the interruption. Go on."

"Well, Lovett and I were able to agree at once that Gordon Gimpel was afflicted by the same damn malady that had already killed five others in the last six months—four of my patients and one of his. Identical symptoms: vomiting to the point of dry heaves, rasping breath, semiparalysis of the legs, gouty sensitivity of the feet, excruciating stomach cramps. In short, the man was in agony. We tried to keep him mildly sedated but it didn't help much. It hadn't helped the others either. But in Gimpel's case we tried something new—a

tracheotomy—to ease his breathing difficulties. It seemed to help a little but he died within the week."

"You began by mentioning a man named Wharton."

"Joe Wharton. He's the latest. It's just possible I may have got to him in time."

"How's that?"

"He came to me as soon as he began losing his hair."

"That's one of the symptoms?"

Pray drank some coffee. "It seems to be one of the first symptoms—loss of hair and nausea."

"You didn't mention the loss of hair in Gimpel's case."

"Gordon Gimpel was bald as an egg. That's why I made an incorrect diagnosis at first. In each of the preceding cases there was a loss of hair almost overnight."

"What about autopsies, Jared?"

"We tried to get permission in every instance after the second death. Lovett, you see, wears two hats: general practitioner and county medical examiner. But there's an ingrained prejudice hereabouts on cutting into the dead. Louise Gimpel—Gordon's wife, his widow—finally gave us an okay. But we found nothing significant. Some deterioration of liver and kidneys, which could have been normal attrition in the body of a 64-year-old man. And that's it," Jared summarized.

"Is Wharton in the hospital?"

"That's where I tried to send him. But, no, he's home. That's another ingrained prejudice. You don't go to a hospital unless you're unconscious."

"Where does he work?"

"At Vincent's."

"Well, that's interesting."

"As a matter of fact, Wharton took over Gimpel's job when Gimpel finally collapsed. The inventory, you know."

"I see. Who else among the six dead worked there?"

"None."

"Maybe you could fill me in on their backgrounds over that second cup of coffee."

"All right. Break out your pencil and paper, Jake."

Beside the windows in my second-floor room squatted an easy chair upholstered for maximum comfort. I sank into its deep enfoldment. The outside view was again Chappaquiddick, rain-veiled now, which recalled to mind last night's unsavory contact with Armand, the collector of lost causes. In the hueless eastern sky I detected a faint pearly glow where the morning sun should have been. Rosie might be right. The weather might clear in the afternoon.

I looked down at the open notebook in my lap.

Penciled across the top of the ruled page is the printed word CHRONOLOGY and below it an orderly column of my own crabbed scrawl:

1. Jos. Wharton, 42, res 9 Pdmnt Rd, Edtown, employee Vinc Co, stricken 18 Ap, still alive at home under treatment Dr. Pray.

2. G. Gimpel, 64, res 22 Pana Wy, Edtown, employee Vinc Co. stricken 4 Ap, contin wk contrary orders Dr. Pray, hosp 12 Ap. died 19 Ap.

3. Howard Shannon, 52, res 30 Camp Gr Rd, Vinhav, self-employed, gas stat East Chop, stricken 7 Feb. hospitalized 9 Feb, treated by Dr. Pray, died 14 Feb.

4. Mary Shannon, 50, wife of Howard, res same address which is also rooming house operated by Mrs. Shannon, stricken 20 Jan. hospitalized 28 Jan, treated by Dr. Pray, died 3 Feb just 4 days before husband hit by similar malady.

5. Fannie De Mello, 17, res 114 Nant Bay Dr, Oak Bluffs, high school senior, worked last summer waitress at Tom's Big Snack Shop, Seaview Av. OB, stricken 11 Dec, hospitalized same day, treated by Dr. Pray, died 19 Dec.

6. Theodore Fife, 18, res 5 Assn Ter. OB, high school senior, employed last summer lifeguard by Ocean Beach Assn, OB, stricken 16 Nov, hospitalized 19 Nov, treated by Dr. Lovett, died 23 Nov.

7. Wallace Swanberg, 38, res 3 Dockside St, Edtown, owner-op of fishing trawler and fish mkt at 10 Dockside St, stricken 25 Oct approx., treated at home by Dr. Pray from 29 Oct to 4 Nov when he died, still at home, first of series.

Scanning these notes, I became certain of one thing. There was no plague implicit. None of these deaths overlapped as would be the case if contagion were present. In fact, their very sequentiality bespoke, sforzando, an ominous plan. One death glided into another.

But how were they related?

Certainly not by any perceivable pattern of employment. True, both Gimpel and Wharton worked for the same company, but the others were gas station proprietor, housewife and rooming-house keeper, part-time waitress, part-time lifeguard, fishmonger.

Age was not a common denominator either. Their ages spanned the years from 17 to 64.

Geographical location? Well, the dead had all been residents of the northeastern part of the island, but they'd been scattered among three different towns—

Vineyard Haven, Oak Bluffs and Edgartown.

Still, a pattern emerged here: linked pairs. That was it. Gimpel was linked to Wharton by virtue of their employment at the same place. Howard Shannon was linked to Mary Shannon by marriage. Fannie De Mello and Theodore Fife were not only seniors at high school but both of them had worked at summer jobs on the same beach. This left dangling only Wallace Swanberg, the fishmonger, and (who knows?) his opposite number may already have begun to lose cranial hair.

Rosie was right. After lunch the sun burned through the leaden sky and suddenly the wet day acquired an effulgent sparkle. I decided to set aside the "plague" problem for a while and pleasure myself with the twenty-mile drive along the southern side of the island to Chilmark and up to Gay Head.

This headland called Gay rears 150 feet above the booming waters. Geologists claim it plunges millions of years back into time. Within its varicolored strata of rock have been found fossils of whales, camels, elephants and even sequoias.

As I approached the famous Gay Head Light, whose base is the color of the reddish clay in the gullies around it, the westering sun nearly blinded me. I got a pair of dark glasses from the glove compartment. The world changed from dazzling azure to pale blue, and something about this change, something about the shades themselves, started me thinking again about the "plague" victims.

I pulled the car to the side of the narrow blacktop road and stopped. A wisp of memory had been stirred and it was going to disappear unless I could immediately flood it with light.

I sat there for perhaps ten minutes amid the clumps of holly and sassafras, barely conscious of the persistent sound of the surf on the narrow beach below the precipice. Not another car passed. There was a smudge on the left lens of the dark glasses. I removed them and began to clean that lens with my handkerchief when the sun, growing piercingly brighter for a second, seemed to shoot a bolt into my brain.

Yes, I said to myself. *Optics.* That's it. *Optics.* Now if I could only remember the name of the manufacturer.

Making a U-turn, I drove back to Edgartown at a pretty good clip. Relaxation would have to wait for another day.

I still hadn't remembered the name by the time I arrived back at the Moontide Inn, but I had pinned down the city in which this particular optics manufacturer was situated: Springfield, Massachusetts.

From my room I placed a call for Capt. Thomas McFate, who heads the homicide division of the police department in a large Connecticut city. He came on the line at 4:22.

"Good afternoon, Tom," I said cheerily. "This is Jake Pilgrim."

"The end of a perfect day," McFate said, his glum style running true to form.

"I'm calling from Martha's Vineyard."

"That's good. What are you doing there?"

"Vacationing, more or less."

"This call somehow makes me think it's less. So, okay, Jake, what's on your mind?"

"Something's happening here, Tom, that reminds me of a similar happening in Springfield five or six years ago."

"Springfield? You've got the wrong exchange."

"Bear with me, Tom. The Springfield matter concerned a couple of poisonings—a man and his wife. I don't remember their names but the husband—"

"Bidwell," McFate said.

"That's it. Bidwell. You never cease to surprise. His death was first attributed to the complications of a rare disease, as I recall, and it was only after his wife was hospitalized with the same thing that a smart doctor began to suspect poison. The wife didn't die. Later, when the poisoner was caught—and by the way he was picked up in your bailiwick, Tom—"

"That's right, the son."

"The wife's son, yes. Bidwell's *step*son."

"Correct."

"Well, when the kid was caught the newspapers published the symptoms that prompted that smart doctor to investigate the possibility of poisoning. Hair falling out, severe abdominal cramps, numbness of the legs, nausea, the works. Finally the kid confessed that— How old was the kid at that time, Tom?"

"He was 18, 19. I'd have to look it up."

"Anyway, the kid finally told the cops the name of the stuff he'd been dropping in the old folks' coffee and it wasn't one of your run-of-the-mill poisons. It was a chemical substance sometimes used in the manufacture of optical lenses and he got it from the place where his stepfather was employed as a foreman. Do you

remember the name of the company, Tom?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Or the chemical substance?"

"Again no."

"What can you do about it?"

"Call back tomorrow morning at ten and I'll hand you the whole shmeck."

"A thousand thanks."

"And, Jake, I'd like a vacation myself. From you."

I dined that evening with Dr. Pray.

"You know what's been killing these people, don't you, Jared?"

He nodded. "Some sort of poison."

"That seems to be the answer."

"Which leads to the questions Lovett and I have been asking ourselves all day. What kind of poison? And how is it being introduced?"

"And by whom?"

Pray's brown eyes widened. "Do you think it's a deliberate act, Jake?"

"I'm beginning to believe so."

"But why would anyone do a thing like that?"

"That's one more question we may be able to answer tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" The old doctor was still staring at me wide-eyed when Leonora sat down at the table to join us for brandy.

McFate was as good as his word. Over the phone the following morning he gave me the name of the company that had employed Bidwell—Alpha Optical—and the name of the fatal substance—thallium.

"The chemists describe this stuff as a metallic element," he said. "Alpha uses thallium salts in its manufacture of infrared radiation detectors. Bidwell was in charge of that operation. He got Arthur a job there that last summer—the summer he was fatally poisoned."

"That's the stepson's name—Arthur?"

"Right."

"Whose surname did he use—Bidwell's or his own?"

"Just a moment, shamus. Yeah, here it is. He used Bidwell's. His own name was Crapuleux, with an *x* at the end. Maybe that explains it. Want me to spell it out?"

"Don't bother. What ever happened to the kid?"

"Let's see. His attorney claimed Arthur had no idea that a pinch of thallium could be detrimental to a person's health, and copped a plea for manslaughter. The sentence was three to five, which means he's probably been out of the slammer for at least a couple of years. Do you think he's settled

down here on Martha's Vineyard?"

"He or a reasonable facsimile thereof."

"One more thing, Jake. Thallium is also used in certain insecticides and rat poisons."

The H. R. Vincent Company sprawled across a wide strip of waterfront land called Elbow Bight. The main building looked like an enormous red barn. Straddling the peak, pipestem fixtures supported a black-on-white sign which bore the firm's name and advertised underneath it: *Marina, Boatwrights, Sailmakers, Cordage, Saltwater Sundries. Since 1812.*

The main office was contained in a comparatively new addition. Inside, I found a receptionist typing. I identified myself as a man expected by Ferris Vincent.

"Oh, yes," said the freckled cutie. "This way, Mr. Pilgrim," and she led me through the room behind her booth where a mixed company of men and women were operating a variety of electronic office equipment.

Ferris Vincent shared a large glass-walled office with his secretary and a draftsman. The draftsman was working at a tilted table, paying no attention to anybody.

"Hello, Mr. Vincent," I addressed him."Do you have any use for thallium in your business?"

"Doc Pray said he was sending over a detective," Vincent said. "Pilgrim, isn't it?"

"Yes."

He stood up and we shook hands. "What the hell is thallium? Some sort of chemical?"

"It may be the substance that caused Gordon Gimpel's death and put Joe Wharton under doctor's care."

"Oh, Joe phoned in this morning. He's beginning to feel better. Says he'll be back on the job in a few more days. Now what's this about thallium? Whatever it is, I'm sure we don't have any in stock."

"Perhaps one of your employees has a small supply."

"I doubt it. Is that why Doc Pray said you'd like to examine the personnel records?"

"That's the reason."

"Well, Jane's got 'em for you, haven't you, Jane?"

The secretary said, "All here, boss."

"But I'm damned if I know how they'll help," Vincent said. "As of now we employ thirty-three people full-time all year. In the summer we take on an additional dozen or so. Most of these, and that includes the summer help, have been on the payroll off and on for years. Old hands, you know

what I mean. One big happy family."

"Maybe I'll find a malcontent."

"Use my desk. Give the man the records, Jane. I'll stretch the legs."

Sitting at the desk, I opened the first of three manila folders. Vincent strode over to his draftsman, studied the work in progress for a few minutes, then ambled back.

"Do you think there's a poisoner at work?" he asked. "Is that what you think?"

"That's exactly what I think," I said, opening the second folder.

"But what makes you think he's working here, man? This alleged plague, as some folks are calling it, has struck everywhere. Oak Bluffs, Vineyard Haven."

"But it struck last here," I said. "Right here at Vincent's."

"Why would anyone want to poison a fine man like Gordon Gimpel? Or, for that matter, Joe Wharton. Joe is everybody's friend."

"The motive might seem silly to the normal person," I said, skimming through one job history after another. "But unless I've badly misjudged the culprit, I think it's resentment."

"It's pretty hard to buy," Vincent said. "I mean it's pretty far out, isn't it?"

"Who said anybody who'd slip somebody a lethal dose of something is your average homespun taxpayer?"

"Resentment." Vincent shook his head and started to pace again.

"Resentment," I said. "Or frustration. Or—" I stopped talking and concentrated full focus on the page I'd been skimming. "By the lord Harry," I said, raising my eyes to Vincent's expectant gaze, "here we have our twisted personality in living black and white."

"No kidding," Vincent said.

"Who is it?" the secretary asked.

Even the draftsman turned on his stool and looked across the room with raised eyebrows.

I referred my eyes back to the score sheet. "It's a male Caucasian, as the fuzz used to say and still do say in certain backward communities, who gives his age as twenty-five and his last place of employment as Shannon's Super Service, East Chop, and his place of residence—at the time—Shannon's Shady Rest, Vineyard Haven. Does that tell you anything?"

Vincent grunted while the secretary gasped and the draftsman whistled.

"Yes, the dreadful plague felled both the Shannons. I wonder what they did to make this character

resent them. Now, before that the record shows he worked as a dishwasher at a place in Oak Bluffs called Tom's Big Snack Shop. I don't know whether this rings a bell with you but it sure does with me. Fannie De Mello, one of the plague victims, worked there too. And I imagine another victim, Theodore Fife, lifeguard on a nearby beach, often dropped into Tom's for a big snack and a little flirtation with Fannie, much to the resentment of the possibly lovelorn dishwasher. We'll look into that."

"I'll be damned," Vincent said.

"Our lad's next employer? Who else but an Edgartown merchant, one Wallace Swanberg, a catcher and seller of fish."

Vincent said, "The reason I hired the kid was because he'd once worked for Wally and Wally was a difficult man to work for—a real tough bird—and I figured anybody who could work for Wally and not get fired should be an ideal worker for anyone else."

"You've guessed our boy's name, obviously."

"Sure. Armand Bideaux."

"Bull's-eye."

"You actually believe Armand is responsible for Gordon Gimpel's death?"

"I'll give odds."

"But why?"

"You assigned him, according to these records, to the stockrooms."

"Yes."

"Working for Gimpel?"

"Gordon was our inventory coordinator."

"Chances are that unwittingly he did something that uncoordinated Armand."

"All right. But why would he then poison Joe Wharton?"

"Didn't Wharton take over Gimpel's job?"

"On an acting basis, yes."

"Probably Armand thought he was more qualified for the position than Wharton."

"Ridiculous."

"To you it seems so. Not to Armand."

"But he's not very efficient at the job he has. That's why we use him as our gofer."

"Oh, perfect!" I closed my eyes and shook my head. "He's the one who goes for coffee and doughnuts and all that."

"And he's very good at it," the secretary said. "Never flubs up on who gets what—you know, coffee black with one sugar, black with two sugars, with cream and no sugar, with cream and—"

"And two grains of thallium," I said.

"Oh, heavens!"

Vincent looked at his watch. "Isn't he due here right now with

the morning coffee and crullers?"

The secretary nodded.

Two minutes later, bearing a cardboard carton on his shoulder like a waiter, Armand entered the room. He inclined his hairy head in deferential salute to Vincent and shuttered off a wink of the eye to the secretary. The ruin of brown teeth was exposed in what might be seen as an ingratiating smile, but the smile faded fast when the eyes finally discovered me walking toward him.

"Good morning, Arthur," I said.

He sidestepped and moved in the draftsman's direction. I went on and stood with my back to the door.

"Or should I call you Crapuleux?" I said.

"Go to hell, man." His eyes darted from Vincent to the secretary. "Who is this cat, boss? He don't know me from Adam."

"I know you from Armand Bideaux," I said. "I know you as Arthur Bidwell. And so do quite a few others."

He looked pleadingly at Vincent. "Boss, this man is crazy. He's a, he's a Prohibitionist. He tole me so himself."

"That's right," I said. "I drink my coffee straight. Without thallium."

Charging forward, Armand hurled the carton of coffee and crullers at my head. He missed. I didn't. The jab that jarred his whiskered chin not only gave him ten minutes of solid zzzzz's but also knocked out three teeth. For this last he has yet to thank me.

That evening on the patio Leonora asked the good Dr. Pray, "Why didn't Joe Wharton die of that poison, Jared?"

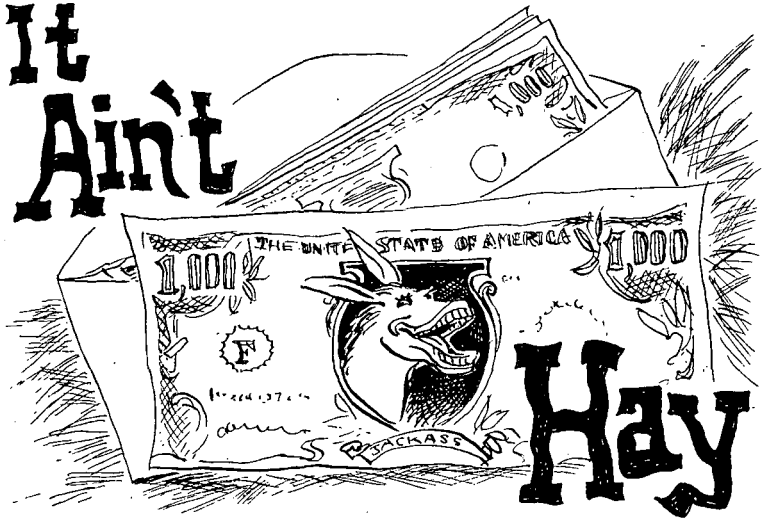
"He didn't get enough of it. The lethal dose is ten or twelve grains. Apparently 'Bideaux' used about two grains per serving, otherwise it would have been detectable in the coffee. Wharton had absorbed perhaps six grains when he began to lose his hair and we got him out of harm's way."

"I won't be able to drink coffee for a week," Leonora said.

"Let's go inside and have something strong," I said, and we did.

Winding up someone's affairs may literally involve tying up loose ends.

It Ain't Hay



He flashed his tin. She unchained the door and let him in.

"Lieutenant Harding. From the Bunco Squad. Miss Colum?"

She nodded. She cocked her head to one side, making her an even more birdlike little old lady. He looked around with a practiced sweep and caught the open drawers and the half-filled trunk. He lifted his eyebrows.

"Seems like I'm just in time. Planning to leave?"

"Yes, I hope to get away this afternoon. You see—"

He frowned her to a halt. "I was counting on you to help us." Then he cleared his face. "Well, it won't take long. Maybe you can still help. What time do you leave?"

"I'm hoping to make the 5:09."

"Ah. Plenty of time. This job won't take more than a half hour."

She cocked her head the other way. "I don't understand, Lieutenant. In what way can I possibly help the police?"

"You can help the police and

yourself at the same time. It's in connection with the two young women who took you for eight thousand dollars two weeks ago."

Her eyes widened. "But how—"

He grinned. "No, I wasn't there when you came in to report it. And I haven't read the report. But I can tell you almost word for word how it goes. You've just left your bank after making a sizable deposit. A stranger, a nice-looking soft-spoken girl, comes up to you on the street. She begs your pardon for accosting you but you have a kind face and she's unfamiliar with this part of town, and has a problem and doesn't know where to turn.

"She has just found an envelope full of bills and doesn't know what to do now. She looks around, takes you to one side, and opens the envelope for a peek. She shows you a packet of brand-new thousand-dollar bills. She says she's counted them and there are one hundred and twenty of them. One hundred and twenty thousand dollars! More money than you knew was in the whole world."

He gave her a mildly reproachful look. "You should've known right there. The U.S. Treasury no longer issues one-thousand-dollar bills."

She laughed ruefully. "Lieutenant, I'm afraid I'm not familiar with anything larger than a twenty-dollar bill."

His eyes flashed. "That's what gets me about these parasites. They pick on those least able to lose large sums." He drew a deep breath and let some out. "Anyhow. The girl tells you she has a retarded child, or something like that, and can sure use the money. While you're talking, another girl appears and gets into the conversation.

"It turns out that this second girl works for a lawyer. She'll ask his advice. She makes a phone call and comes back. The lawyer has advised her that the large bills most likely mean the money is mob money. The crooks who lost it would never dare claim it if the girl who found it turned it in to the police. They would have too much explaining to do to the tax people.

"So, as it would come back to the girl who had found it anyway, after six months, there's no sense turning it in now. The lawyer has also advised that, since the three of you know about it, the three of you must share the windfall . . .

on condition that each of the three be able to show she can live for six months on what cash she already has without dipping into the 'hot' money.

"In the meanwhile, through his connections, the lawyer will arrange to have the thousand-dollar bills changed into smaller bills that you can deposit without raising suspicion.

"Both girls are overjoyed, and so are you. You can certainly use forty thousand dollars, which would be your share. The others quickly come up with the evidence that they can live for six months on what they already have. The one who found the hundred twenty thousand can show a check for an insurance settlement, which is what she has come to town to collect. And the other just happens to have on her the proceeds from some bonds her recently deceased father left her. Now it's up to you.

"You return to your bank, withdraw eight thousand dollars in cash, and come out and show the sum to the others. They look at it and if it's not already in an envelope they put it in an envelope and give it back to you.

"Now the three of you head for the lawyer's office. Once you're in the building, the girl who works for the lawyer says that the lawyer's partner knows nothing about this and that what the partner doesn't know won't hurt him, so the lawyer would like you all to come up one at a time and not in a bunch that would attract the partner's attention.

"The first girl goes up in the elevator. Then the second girl. Then it's your turn. Only, when you reach the right floor and the right office number, you find nobody there's ever heard of the lawyer. There ain't no such animal.

"You feel sick. You force yourself to look inside your envelope. You almost faint. That's right, they've switched envelopes on you. Your eight thousand dollars is gone and what you have is a one-dollar bill on top of a stack of funny money or just plain paper cut to size."

He looked at Miss Colum and with a weary smile shook his head slowly. "And that's when we come in and try to pick up the pieces."

Miss Colum's hands flew to her face. "It sounds so silly now, when you tell it. And to think I let them take me in with a story like that." She lowered her hands and stared at him with owlish earnestness. "But the thing is, when they're talking to you it all seems so plausible. You have no idea."

He grinned. "Oh, I know how

it is, all right. Confidence is the name of the game. They win your confidence. That's where the name comes from. And these people are slick. You weren't the first they've taken in." He sighed heavily. "And I'm sorry to say you won't be the last." He sharpened his voice and gaze. "Unless you help us."

"Me? What can I do? I've already done all I can. I gave the best descriptions I could of the two girls."

He smiled and his voice rubbed its hands. "Well, now, you can do even better than that. We've located the two girls and we want you to identify their pictures." He drew two pictures from an inside pocket and held them out for her to see. "Are these the two girls?"

She rose up out of herself in high excitement. She pointed at the two photos. "They're the ones! They're the ones!"

He gestured for her to calm herself, but she was shaking.

"This brings it all back. The worst of it wasn't the money—though I couldn't afford to lose it. The worst of it was, I felt so *dumb.*" She stared through him. "I looked inside the envelope full of bills and the bills were funny money—they pictured a jackass and had the horselaugh words 'It Ain't Hay.' And I did feel just like a jackass."

"Well, now, Miss Colum, here's your chance to get back at them. You'll help us put them away and get your money and self-respect back."

Her face tightened. "How?"

"Now you're talking, Miss Colum. That's the way." He eyed her keenly. "Do you remember which teller you went to when you made your deposit earlier that day?"

She thought, then nodded. "Yes. He had a little moustache and long blond hair."

"Good. Excellent. We believe the girls and the teller are working together. He gives them the high sign when he spots a pigeon—excuse me, a prospective victim—such as yourself. You can help us trap him."

Her face tightened another notch. "How?"

He smiled. "I see we're going to have to hold you back. Only kidding, Miss Colum. We want them as much as you. Here's how we'll work it. You'll go to your bank and to that teller's window. You'll withdraw most of your remaining money—in cash, which he will count out several times so his fingerprints will be sure to be on the bills. Ask for all new bills—that will insure that his prints will be the freshest and clearest on them. You'll wear gloves and so

will I. We won't take any chances.

"I'll have another detective watching to see who he gives the high sign to this time. We want the whole rotten crew. But you don't have to worry about that part of it. Your part will be over. I'll be waiting to give you department funds in exchange for the bills the teller handled. We'll need those for evidence but you won't have to be out one red cent.

"Then, too, after we arrest them all, we may be lucky and get your original amount back."

"You really think so?"

"Be honest with you, they may have spent some of it. With them, it's easy come, easy go. They like to live high and fast. But we should get some of it back."

"Well, anything would be nice. I'd given it all up."

He got brisk. "Then let's get started. The sooner we start the sooner we finish. I'll drive you to the bank and then either myself or another detective will drive you straight back here and you can wind up your packing. You'll make the 5:09 with time to spare."

She looked suddenly flustered and indicated her clothing. "But I have to change and I have to find my bankbook."

"Sure, take the few minutes."

She started to leave the room, then stopped. "I must seem to you a terrible hostess. I'm ashamed of myself. Our parents brought us up to behave better and I'm letting them down. Here, do sit down. You'll have a cup of coffee while I get ready? You don't mind instant?"

"Not at all."

It took her little more than an instant to bring him his coffee. He sipped it, made a face after she had left the room, but found nowhere to dump it. He sipped on, not wanting to hurt her feelings and risk losing her compliance.

Much more than an instant passed. He pulled his arm up to look at his watch. The hands dragged time along slowly. What was taking her so long? His eyes started to shut. He snapped them open and looked up sharply. But his head grew heavy, lowering to his chest. His heart beat crazily, noisily. He didn't have the strength to shove to his feet. He could not move anything but his heavy, glazing eyes. What had she put in his cup?

When he forced his eyes open again she was standing gazing down at him.

"Now, *Lieutenant*, shall I tell *you* how it goes? You and the girls are a team. They make the first encounter with the pigeon and take her for as many thou-

sands as they can. Then after a few days you come into it, pretending to be a detective from the Bunco Squad.

"You tell the pigeon you have a make on the two girls and need the pigeon's help to trap their bank teller accomplice. Of course there's no bank teller accomplice. You only want her to withdraw her last few remaining dollars and hand them over to you for another funny-money switch.

"This is the 'comeback.' That's what you call this, isn't it? The comeback? I know you're a fake because it's my sister you came looking for and my sister did not go to the police with the story of her victimization.

"I feel half guilty myself because a few years ago, when the same thing happened to me, I was too ashamed to tell my sister I had fallen for a con game. It might have saved her if she had known. At least she wouldn't have been too ashamed to go to the police.

"She didn't want even me to know, but I got it out of her before she died. I got word she had collapsed and I rushed here to see her. We didn't have long together. She faded fast. The shock of being made a fool of had killed her. But before she passed away I learned from her that she had been the victim of a con game.

"Now I'm winding up her affairs. And that includes you. Excuse me a second." She stepped into the kitchen and came right back carrying a length of clothesline.

"The police—the *real* police—will have a few charges outstanding for all three of you, I should imagine. The girls' pictures should prove very helpful in locating them. Is *your* mug shot on file? Are you wanted anywhere?"

His blink gave him away and she nodded with satisfaction.

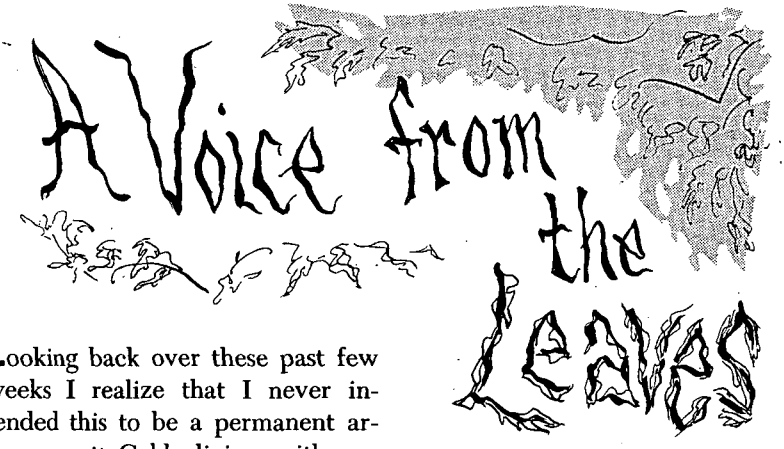
"Then there's impersonating an officer. That should hold you awhile. And so should this."

She held up the clothesline. "I have to go out to use a phone and I want to make sure you'll be here when the police come."

Before tying him up she made as though trying to pull the clothesline apart with a snap, showing him its strength.

"It ain't hay."

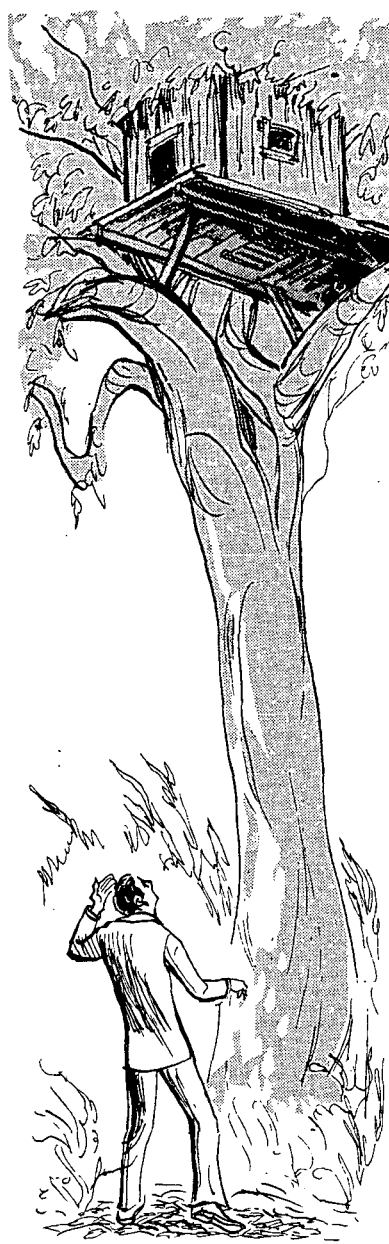
The bearer of gifts may not always have altruistic intentions.



Looking back over these past few weeks I realize that I never intended this to be a permanent arrangement—Cobb living with me here in Chicago, I mean. Call it selfish, but I fully expected him to go back to Fairhill when the new school term began, assuming of course that Sam McAllister had not in the meantime been arrested for murder. Now, whenever I drop hints to this effect, Cobb blandly ignores them with that inwardly meditative smile of his, the smile that makes him look like a teen-age Talleyrand or like his great hero, Lawrence of Arabia, palavering with sly Bedouins under an Eastern moon.

For a lad of fourteen Cobb has remarkable aplomb and presence, and when I see him stalking about this big apartment with *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* under his arm and a look of sober deliberation on his face, I get the creepiest feeling that he's making plans to take over this place—as if it were some strategic border area still in enemy hands; one of my more childish fantasies since it implies that *I* am the enemy, which is absurd.

I first met Cobb McAllister when I returned to Fairhill for the first time in fourteen years in response to Sam's letter telling me that Cobb's mother was dead.



by Donald Olson

Dead and buried, actually, and I thought it exactly like Sam to have been punctilious and feeling enough to inform me of Vinnie's death—but not in time for me to attend her funeral. Like most people who come from small rural towns I'd cherished the illusion that nothing would have changed while I was away: the people, the quiet pace of life, the house where I was born, and especially that wilderness of heart-carved trees called Cobb's Woods, the enchanted playground of our youth. Yes, I clung to this last illusion despite common sense and Vinnie's last letter in which she'd reported that a Midwestern firm had bought most of the acreage along the State Road and planned to build a number of condominiums to be called Fairhill Farms.

As it was, trains no longer stopped at Fairhill and Sam had to drive all the way to Breezeford to meet me at the airport. Physi-

cally, he hadn't changed all that much, still wary-eyed and thin as whipcord, his manner as cool and self-contained as when he and Vinnie Cobb and I had been such close chums. He'd never been much of a talker and the inhibiting sadness of the present reunion did not help break the ice as we drove to the village.

I did ask him if Vinnie had been ill for long before she died, but all he said was, "No, nothing like that," and I got the distinct feeling, despite his reticence, that he had a great deal on his mind and sooner or later would seek to unburden it.

We passed the Kidwell place and the livery stables, and as I had mentally prepared myself for the devastation of those holy places of my youth, not far up the road I was surprised and delighted when we approached Cobb's Woods and all that came into view was a single broken-windowed shell of a new apartment building, all brick and half-timbering, rising out of the long grass which all but hid a winding access road. Behind and around this solitary eyesore Cobb's Woods lay undisturbed in the sunset, evoking a flush of enchantment still strong enough to bring tears to my eyes—tears for Vinnie, for myself, for the lost sweet wonders of childhood brought back so vividly.

"They were going to put up a whole string of 'em," Sam explained, without my asking.

"What happened?"

"Company pulled out. Bad luck and bankruptcy."

We slowed down, waited for a truck to pass us, then swung across the road and into the drive of the old Cobb homestead where Sam and Vinnie had lived ever since their marriage.

"Cobb!" Sam's voice rang with urgency as he walked into the front parlor. "Where the devil's that kid got to?"

He went from room to room calling the boy, but no one answered.

"Relax," I said. "He'll show up."

"Kid's been told. Since all the trouble he knows he ain't supposed to wander off this time of day."

"Trouble?"

"Shootings. Killings. Vinnie didn't tell you?"

So he knew that Vinnie wrote to me. But that would have been like her, not to have deceived him about it.

"I haven't heard from Vinnie in months."

While another man might have reacted to this with dripping satire, Sam merely smiled his politely

disbelieving and enigmatic smile.

"I mean it, Sam. I haven't."

He ignored the protest and told me about the "trouble." "All began with that infernal apartment project. Rumor said it was Mafia money. But they say that about everything nowadays, even in these parts. Anyway, they built one, the one you saw. Then one of the bricklayers was shot dead. Figured it was a hunter's stray bullet, but then another one got it. And there was a rash of vandalism, one kind or another. Finally got it up, though. Couple of tenants moved in. One of 'em was shot dead, right through her bedroom window. Other was wounded. Paralyzed. Couldn't trace who did it. Figured they were shot with a rifle stolen from the Kidwell place when they were in Florida. High-powered job with a fancy Bushnell scope. Johnny Kidwell let me use it once when we went hunting together. Well, that put the lid on the project. Really spooked the deal. Nobody'd touch the place. Then the firm got into money troubles and that was the end. Everybody steers clear of there now. Even the kids. Except Cobb, of course. You can't keep him out of those woods. You remember how we were. He ain't no different."

Sam stood at the window looking across the State Road at the fringe of trees in front of which you could just make out the faint golden wash of the setting sun on the brook where it straggled out of the glade and lost itself in the pastures of the outlying farms.

"It's that damned tree house," he muttered. "I swear I've thought more than once of chopping it down out of there."

"*Our* tree house? It's still there?"

He gave me a rueful glance. "We built it to last forever, remember?"

The tree house. The heart of it all, the center of our activities, the symbol of all my happiest memories where golden summers cast their endless spells. I thought of it and I thought of Vinnie as she had looked at seventeen, clad only in green shadows up there among the leaves, smiling as she kissed me . . . that last perfect summer.

"You think Cobb's there now?"

Sam frowned. "I'll skin him alive if he is."

"I'll go look."

He protested, said I must be tired and would want to unpack and shower, but these were only excuses, I knew, and what really bothered him was that he wanted to talk about it, whatever it was, and here I was already rushing

out of the house before I'd hardly got there; but I couldn't help it. More than anything else at that moment I wanted to see the tree house, the way it would look up there in the setting sun, which was so often the way it appeared in my Chicago reveries.

I crossed the road and the pasture into the shadows of the deep glade, following the brook to the big rock where forget-me-nots and shiny yellow cowslips grew as thickly as when I had waded upstream as a boy. I didn't try to scale the bank as I would have then, but followed the brook to the glade's end, then circled back toward the tree from behind.

I stopped under the branches and looked up. "Cobb? Cobb McAllister? You up there?"

Silence. Even the birds grew still, while all around me the smell of the woods and the textured pattern of the sunlight on the leaves were like keys that opened long shut doors of memory.

I told him my name, whether or not it would mean anything to him, and said I'd helped build the tree house, and then I added: "Let me come up and I won't tell your dad you were here."

A voice came down to me out of the leaves: "Watch out below."

A thick knotted rope dropped at my feet. It appeared to be the same old rope. I gripped it and managed to scale the trunk to the lower branches, then clambered through them to the green-painted trapdoor, hauling myself through it to sprawl panting on the platform outside the one sizable room crammed with sleeping gear, candle stubs, ropes, knives, books, binoculars, tin plates and cups, all the essentials of tree housekeeping which hadn't changed since I'd spent so many happy hours there.

Vinnie had sent me pictures of Cobb at various stages of his development so I was not surprised to find him such a sturdy, handsome youth, big for his age and with an even more adult gravity of manner. He gave my hand a brief, unembarrassed shake. I offered my condolences. We chatted easily enough and presently I asked him if his mother had ever talked about me. He said, "Oh, sure. About all of you. All the fun you had. Heck, yes."

Surprising how many things hadn't changed. It might almost have been a shrine furnished with sacred relics. I reached out to the shelf for the Pyle *Robin Hood,* showing Cobb my name scribbled on the flyleaf. He smiled politely and I wondered if my excitement must strike him as silly in a grown man, for there was something

about the watchful remoteness of his attitude that disconcerted me. I tried to act my age as I studied the view from the one small window facing west, straight across the treetops to the windows of the abandoned condominium.

"When I was last up here you could see all the way to the Overhead Bridge."

"Yeah, I know. Till they built that stupid apartment building. But we lucked out. They *were* going to build a whole mess of 'em."

Though the horizon was streaked with red the glade below us was already thick with night shadows. "Your dad told me about the shootings. Aren't you scared being out here alone this time of day?"

He was quietly amused. "Why? Who'd want to kill me? Sometimes Vinnie and I'd stay here till after midnight, watching the stars."

Vinnie. I didn't like that. Children calling their parents by their Christian names is a modernism that always offends me.

On our way back to the house I asked him the same question I'd asked Sam: if Vinnie had been sick before she died.

Cobb's tone was tart, as if something smarted on his tongue. "He say she was sick?"

"Who?"

"Sam. Did he tell you that?"

"Not exactly."

"She wasn't ever sick. She fell. From the upstairs porch."

His words, or the quiet, offhand way he spoke them, chilled me as we passed out of the woods and along the brook flowing dark as mercury through the gray-lit stubbly pasture.

"I hadn't heard from her for months."

His voice quickened. "She wrote to you?"

"Occasionally."

"What about?"

"Her painting. Things like that. You."

"What'd she say about me?"

"How proud she was of you. Mother stuff. You know."

"She sure did love the tree house," he said with a faraway, gentle conviction. "We used to spend an awful lot of time there." He kicked a branch out of the path. "*He* didn't like it." This last he said with an obscure but trenchant emphasis, and though I knew he was talking about Sam I couldn't tell if he meant that Sam didn't like the tree house or didn't like their spending so much time there. Not for the first time in my life I felt a profound pity for Sam; it seemed his destiny always to be a third wheel.

"You don't blame him, do you,

Cobb?" I felt impelled to ask him.

"For what?"

"For feeling that way about the tree house."

"Heck, no. I guess he's got a right."

We came to the barbed-wire fence along the road; he climbed over, I crawled under. Before crossing the road he turned to look at me. "Tell me something, will you? Did he say she killed herself?"

"Good heavens, no."

"Because she didn't. My father killed her."

I couldn't have been more shocked, he said it with such utter authority. "You can't be serious, Cobb."

"No one could prove it, even if they tried. But just the same, he did. And he's going to pay for it. I'll see to that."

He opened the door for me. As I passed by him into the house he added in a low voice, "Just thought you ought to know. In case something happens."

After supper Cobb disappeared to his room and Sam and I sat in the kitchen drinking beer and talking about the past, only now I wasn't so sure I wanted to hear whatever it was he was having such a hard time getting off his shoulders. I didn't believe what Cobb had said, but neither could I forget the shock of those words.

The clock struck midnight; I'd lost count of the number of beers Sam had drunk. At one point I asked him if I could look at Vinnie's old albums, all those snapshots of us as kids. He said he hadn't laid eyes on them for years, not since Cobb was a baby, that Vinnie must have stuck them away someplace. I said it didn't matter but he insisted on looking for them and when he finally brought them to me he suggested I keep them. "I never look at them anymore," he said.

As I turned the pages I began to notice something very odd: there wasn't a single picture in which I appeared; they had all been removed. I looked up at Sam but he wasn't paying any attention; in fact, his eyes were shut, and I was afraid he might fall asleep before imbibing enough courage to speak his mind.

"So Vinnie wasn't sick," I said rather sharply, and his eyes came open.

"No."

"Then how . . . ?"

"Killed herself."

I seemed to go on rocking involuntarily, as if the steady rhythm would soothe my pounding heart. "You can't mean that."

"Hell, I don't *know*. Not for sure."

He told me the story without my urging, how he'd gone looking for Vinnie one day just before dusk. She had gone for a walk and when it began to thunder and she hadn't come back he started to worry and walked up and down the State Road looking for her. Then he'd taken it into his head that she might have gone to the tree house. She had a thing about that tree house, he said, with just a trace of bitterness. Both her and the kid.

"It was just about dark when I got there. I called but she didn't answer. There was no reason to think she was up there, but I was sure she was. Don't ask me why. You live with someone fourteen years you get like that, reading each other's minds, sensing things. I kept calling. Then it hit me. I got to thinking maybe she was up there, but not alone. With somebody, you know what I mean? I said, 'I'm coming up there, Vinnie.' That's when she spoke out. 'No!' she said, real scared like. 'Don't come up here! I'm coming down.' And the *way* she said it, you know . . . I never kidded myself about Vinnie. She was honest about it. Never once in them fourteen years did she say she loved me. She was always honest. That's what made it work for us. Honesty, I mean. It can be stronger than love. It holds up, you know. And when I heard her voice, scared like that, telling me not to come up there, I got this awful sick feeling that maybe she *hadn't* been all that honest. And lately, last few weeks, she'd been acting sort of funny, like she had something on her mind. Maybe all those years . . .

"I lost my fool head. I never get mad, not very often. You know that. But, hell, I'd been so damned *good* to Vinnie. So damned fair. I'd done things for her no man in his right mind would have done. I said, 'I'm coming up there, Vinnie,' and I grabbed the rope and started pulling myself up when all of a sudden she fell. Or jumped. Without a word, without a cry. She was dead, that quick. And I still had to *know*, don't you see? I couldn't go through the rest of my life not ever being sure. So I left her there, wasn't nothing I could do for her, and I climbed to the tree house . . . There was no one there."

He tilted his glass and emptied it in one long draft. "Well, I carried her home and made it look like she'd fallen from the porch up there. Don't ask me why. It just seemed more . . . fitting."

"Did anyone see you?"

"You mean Cobb? No. He was

asleep in his room at the time."

"You sure?"

"Of course. Why? Did he say something?"

I couldn't bring myself to say it. "It's just his attitude."

"I know what you mean. He doesn't take to me. More like his mother. Books and stuff. That damned tree house. Ivory tower, that's what it was. For both of them. Cobb, he don't know one end of a fishing rod from the other. And he'd never go hunting with me unless I practically forced him." His head sunk lower, chin almost on his chest. He was quite drunk. "I'll never stop wondering. I'll always hear her voice coming down out of the leaves like that. Like rain, like birds in pain, or panic." After what seemed like a very long time he looked up at me, eye to eye. "I loved Vinnie. You know that. I couldn't show it, not with words. But I always loved her. I did what I could to prove it. She knew that."

I was touched, impressed, but more than anything else, confused. I felt so positive that he was leaving something out, or lacked the courage to tell me why it was so important to him that *I* should hear all this—and I would never find out, not that night. He was so drunk by then I had to put him to bed without knowing the full story.

The following day, a Saturday, I went up to the cemetery on Pine Ridge Road and laid some fresh forget-me-nots among the withering funeral bouquets on Vinnie's grave. Below me the village drowsed, the traffic hummed no louder than bees along the State Road, the green mystery of Cobb's Woods looked in the near distance like one of Vinnie's delicate, sun-washed pastels. Heading in that direction, I skirted the condominium and seeing no one about I found an unlocked door and went inside. It was the usual sleazily-built structure, small rooms, fake marble baths, miniature kitchens in shades of cocoa brown and avocado. From one of the top rooms I looked out across the long grass and undergrowth to Cobb's Woods, but it was impossible to pinpoint the tree house.

I found Cobb there, of course, at the tree house, his nose in a book. I offered him a candy bar, conscious as I did so that it was with almost the identical feeling I had placed those forget-me-nots on Vinnie's grave, as if it were a bribe, an apology, a plea for understanding if not forgiveness, and Cobb accepted the offering as if he knew this—which of course he could not.

We talked, among other things,

about the aborted building project, Cobb explaining that the entire area had been scheduled for leveling and speaking proudly but not boastfully of his role in fighting the plan. "I helped circulate the petition against rezoning. Vinnie composed it. It was a real beaut. Lawyer couldn't have done a better job. It *was* against the law, you know, building that apartment house. The neighborhood had to be rezoned first. We got over a hundred names against it. But they had the money. They bought off the mayor and his cronies. Vinnie was really broken up about it. This tree house meant everything to her. She always said everyone ought to have a secret place where they could store their dreams and memories and know they'd always be there when they wanted them."

Such talk made me uneasy. I said, "Do you think they'll ever catch whoever did the shootings?"

"I sure hope not."

He laughed at my surprise. "Well, heck, look at it this way. Whoever pulled the trigger, it was the mayor and his pals who were responsible. They didn't have any right rezoning this area."

Sam's words came back to me: *I'd done things for her no man in his right mind would have done . . . I always loved her. I did what I could to prove it.* I tried to believe that I was giving those words an arbitrary meaning.

"Was your mother pleased?"

Cobb's expression faltered, as if the candy bar he was munching had turned bitter in his mouth. "It saved the tree house, didn't it?"

"I asked you if she was pleased?"

"Look!" he suddenly cried. "There's McNutt, my pet squirrel. I'll bet he smelled my candy bar."

That afternoon, knowing I had to get back to Chicago by the following day, I was determined to bring things to a head, and when Sam and I were alone I mentioned what Cobb had said about the rezoning business. "I guess Vinnie did all she could to preserve that tree house."

His lower lip jerked forward. "Vinnie was a dreamer. I could have told her it wouldn't do no good."

"But violence did."

His eyes were wide open but giving nothing away. "Sometimes that's what it takes."

"Yet it was all for nothing. She didn't live to enjoy it." I was prompting him as boldly as I dared, but perhaps he'd changed his mind; perhaps he'd decided he couldn't trust me after all. This possibility made me angry enough to prod him even more bluntly.

"Listen, Sam. Don't think I'm not aware of what I owe you. I've never forgotten. I'm willing to repay you any way I can. If you need help all you have to do is ask. If you've done something and it's bothering you and you want to talk about it, I'm ready to listen. And I give you my word. It'll go no further."

He looked at me rather strangely as I said this, and then, dropping his gaze, he loudly cleared his throat.

"You got somebody with you? In Chicago?"

"You mean living with me?" I grinned. "Not at the moment, as it happens."

"Take him with you."

It caught me unprepared, maybe because I was expecting, if anything, a more explicit confession.

"Please," he said. "Just for a while, anyway. At least till school starts."

"Why, Sam?"

"Better for him. All this moping and brooding ain't good for him. He needs a change."

The reticence of the man went too deep; he wasn't the confessing sort, and I had no right to badger him.

Nevertheless, I said, "He thinks you killed Vinnie."

"That's a lie."

"I know that. Maybe you'd have done anything *for* her . . . I know you wouldn't have done anything *to* her."

His voice was blade sharp. "That's not what I meant. I meant it's not true he thinks I killed Vinnie."

"It's what he told me."

"You're wrong. You must have misunderstood him." He backed away, and I realized that we'd been standing toe to toe, like boxers. "What the hell, it don't matter. Will you take him away? Or will you run true to form and do your damnedest to avoid responsibility?"

I deserved that. I let it pass. "Will he come?"

"Only one reason he wouldn't. That damned tree house."

Our eyes met, and I knew what I must do. It was true, of course. If Sam was in danger of being exposed the boy would be better off out of it all, away from him.

It took me less time than I thought, even though I probably worked harder than necessary knowing that I had to get it done before Cobb finished his chores and headed for the tree house. My emotions while I was doing it were as confused as my motives. It seemed to me that when I would pause in my exertions it was Vinnie's voice I could hear in

the leaves around me, crying out against what I was doing, and I would be struck by a terrible sense of loss and shame and betrayal, and would have to whisper to myself: "It's only the wind in the leaves; it's only the wind."

Later, at the house, I didn't hear Cobb when he came in because I was upstairs packing, and it wasn't until I heard their voices ripping into each other that I went to the door and listened, and when I went down I found them squared off and furious in the middle of the kitchen.

"You're lying!" Cobb screamed. "I know you did it. You always said you'd tear it down. You hated it!"

If he'd been dead Sam's face couldn't have looked more like a corpse's.

Cobb turned to me in a frenzy. "He did! He destroyed the tree house! Vinnie's tree house. Our secret place. He said he would and now he's gone and done it. He was always jealous!"

"Not of you, boy," Sam murmured. "Never of you."

When there was nothing left between them but a bitter residue of hostility I took my cue and spoke quietly, reasonably, setting forth my proposition that maybe Cobb would like to come to Chicago with me for a while, an invitation to which he promptly agreed, without a moment's forethought, almost as if he had expected it, and Sam's eyes met mine in a secret smile of victory.

I had made up my mind to say nothing to Cobb about the past, with one exception, which my conscience insisted be made. On the plane I told him that I was sure he was mistaken about his father.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"He didn't kill your mother. You mustn't believe that."

"Oh, yes. He killed her."

"That's simply not true, Cobb."

His voice was as reasonable and patient as if he were explaining algebra to a poet. "I don't mean that *he* pushed her off the porch. But that doesn't mean he didn't kill her. Like those other people that were killed. The mayor and his buddies didn't actually shoot them, but it was still their fault. My father's an evil man. He never did the right thing by Vinnie or me. But he'll be sorry. He's going to pay for it. You wait and see."

Neither of us made any further reference to that conversation and for a while I thought that bringing Cobb to Chicago had been an excellent idea, that all he had really needed was to get away from Fairhill and the tree house, and Sam. Naturally, I wondered if

Cobb could possibly suspect that Sam had shot all those people, but I've come to believe that he does not. Cobb has been with me nearly a month now, and when I mention Sam's name to see if his hostility toward him has diminished, he seems hardly to remember whom I'm talking about—or so he pretends, at least. I think that if he did suspect Sam he would have dropped some hint to that effect, even if he condoned and admired Sam for it. After all, he had been quick enough to accuse Sam of killing his mother.

Strike that last sentence. As it happens, I was wrong even about that. Two weeks have passed since I wrote those words and much has happened, so much that I'm almost too stunned to grasp its full significance. The evidence is there, I've seen it with my own eyes, so what else *can* I believe? Yet it's all so grotesque, so appalling, I find myself refusing to accept it, for though I believe in the *existence* of evil—it's all around us, I'm sure—this particular manifestation of it is simply too horrendous to conceive.

First, I'd better explain that on the surface nothing happened to disturb my peace of mind during the first week or so that Cobb was here. I'd let him do pretty much as he pleased and we seemed to take pleasure in each other's company. I'd told him to treat the apartment as his home, although I hadn't quite that degree of independence in mind that he gradually appropriated. I didn't mind his making a point of always locking his bedroom door whether he was in there or not—boys can often be funny about that sort of thing—but I did think he might have been more heedful of my warnings about wandering around Chicago after dark. After all, I told him, it isn't exactly Fairhill, and that he looks so much older than he is would, if anything, increase the risk he might be taking. All he said in reply was that he was looking for something, something he had to find as soon as possible, and yet he refused to tell me what it was, saying only that it would be a surprise.

As to the evidence I mentioned, this is how it came to light: Cobb had gone out for the afternoon, locking his bedroom door behind him as usual, and I was in my study working on a report when I discovered I needed to refer to some data packed away in the closet in Cobb's room. I'd never bothered to mention that I had a duplicate key to his door—I think he knew I would respect his privacy even if I had—and I un-

locked the door and was rummaging about in the closet looking for the particular file I needed when I noticed a shirt on the floor in the corner. Thinking it must have fallen from a hanger I started to pick it up when I found that it was wrapped carefully around a small wooden box.

Not meaning to pry, but simply curious, I opened the box and found two things inside: a small package wrapped in brown paper, and an expensive Bushnell rifle scope. Call it memory, call it instinct, call it anything you want, I knew at once, and infallibly, that it was the scope stolen from the Kidwell place and used in the shootings at Fairhill Farms.

At the same time I knew that I was wrong about Sam, as if by holding that scope to my eye I could see what actually happened, could see Vinnie, tormented by suspicion, going to the tree house alone at dusk and finding the rifle and scope hidden there, and suddenly Sam was there, threatening to come up, and I could picture her terror and panic, her fear of having Sam discover what Cobb had done. In such blind distress she would have done anything to stop Sam—yes, I think she would even have jumped—but Sam had climbed to the tree house anyway, not looking for a gun, which he might not have noticed even if it was there, but for a man, a rival.

Yes, it all could have happened like that, or if not exactly like that, then in some way not so very different. There was, of course, another possibility, one which I refused even to let myself consider, for after all Cobb is only a boy, he's not a monster. He might have been capable of stealing a rifle and shooting strangers in one mad last resort to preserve his beloved tree house, but if his mother had somehow discovered what he had done and reacted in a way that had angered or displeased him, he still would not have been capable of harming her himself. That idea is unthinkable.

Four more days have passed, giving me time to reflect on my discoveries, and more of the pattern has become clear, almost all of it, and I'm beginning to understand how totally I've deceived myself. Sam knows the truth, of that I'm almost certain; nothing else would explain his behavior, or the things he said which I was so quick to misconstrue. His single purpose in calling me to Fairhill must have been to persuade me to take Cobb away from there, not only because that whole bad scene only nourished the boy's paranoia, or whatever one wished to call it,

but because sooner or later he might be driven to some other act that would ultimately expose him to the authorities. Why Sam had not been more frank with me I can't be sure. Perhaps he doesn't trust me; after all, he never did.

Something else now: that other item in the box. When I unwrapped that small package I found what in some ways was an even greater shock to me than the gun scope—a collection of all those snapshots from Vinnie's album, the ones in which I was pictured. Now, Sam would never have told Cobb the truth about me, at least I don't think he would have, and I'm even more sure that the boy would never have learned anything from Vinnie; in fact, she must have hidden those albums away to be sure he would never come across those pictures and guess the truth. Obviously, he *had* found them. Then what? Had he faced Vinnie with them, one day up there in the tree house? Vinnie would not have lied, I'm sure of that. Later on, needing someone on whom to place the burden of guilt for his mother's death, regardless how it had happened, what could be more logical than to have chosen his father, just as he had blamed the other deaths on the "mayor and his buddies."

For you see, Cobb never did accuse *Sam* of killing his mother. What he'd said, with such curious emphasis and precision, with such diabolical candor and subtle duplicity, was that his *father* had killed Vinnie; and on the plane he'd been so careful to say, "My *father's* an evil man. He never did right by Vinnie and me. But he'll be sorry. He's going to pay for it. You wait and see."

You wait and see. Even then I should have seen through his grim little joke.

I should have realized what he was telling me when he referred to his *father* both those times, for he never called Sam his father, any more than he called Vinnie by anything but her Christian name. He was talking about the person in those snapshots, the person who looked so startlingly like himself.

He was talking about his real father. About me.

Cobb came in a few minutes ago, stuck his head in the study door and waved a small package, announcing very gaily that he'd found what he was looking for—finally.

"What is it?" I asked.

He only laughed. "I told you. A surprise." Then, as if it were the biggest joke in the world, he

added: "Actually, it's for my father. He'll really get a charge out of it."

With that he disappeared into his room, locking the door behind him, of course, and I've been sitting here trying to make myself believe that my reasoning about all this is absurd, way off the track, preposterous, and for all I know maybe it is. I certainly don't want to panic myself into the blunder of opening my mouth and saying a lot of things I'd later regret. There's no point in trying to excuse my past behavior if I don't have to, of trying to make him understand that it wasn't that I didn't *want* to marry Vinnie when she became pregnant with my child. I simply wasn't ready for all that. I had dreams, plans, ambitions. Vinnie understood. She never blamed me. She never stopped loving me, either, which is probably why they hate me.

If they do hate me, both Sam and Cobb, is it remotely, wildly conceivable that they've been acting together in all this? That they have, for their own madly inscrutable reasons, *set me up*?

No, I must be mistaken. How could there possibly have been a gun in that package he waved in front of me? Just because he may have succeeded in stealing a rifle and scope in Fairhill doesn't mean he would have the skill to swipe a handgun in Chicago. He's clever, yes, but hardly that clever.

I've given up on the report; I can't possibly concentrate with that rock music blasting through the wall of Cobb's room. I can't imagine what's got into the kid, he never had it that loud before. He's always been the soul of courtesy and thoughtfulness.

I really must do something about it, but for some reason I have the strongest reluctance to get up and walk to his door and tell him to please turn it down. Not that it would do any good; he'd never hear me. Not even a cannon could be heard over that frightful din.

Now his door is opening, very very slowly. And would you believe it? He's turned that volume up even *higher*!

There may be circumstances when one would benefit from a handicap—temporarily.

Mike Hagen, finally wakened by the persistent ringing, reached out to the bedside table for the telephone. "Hagen," he mumbled sleepily.

"Boss, this is Gussman at the pier. Stickup aboard the ship. Guy with a knife made the purser open his safe. Got away with a hundred grand, the third mate said. He called the cops."

"Guss, tell Cap'n Svensen I'm on my way over."

"He ain't aboard yet, Boss. The third mate phoned him. The second mate's in charge right now."

Dropping the handset back to the cradle, Hagen switched on the bedside light and tumbled out.

His niece knocked on the door. "What was it, Uncle?"

"Robbery aboard the *Bornvale.*"

"I'll make coffee."

"Peggy, I can't stop for it."

Hagen, hefty and fifty, with speckled black hair and square jaw, threw on his clothes, dashed the residual sleep from his eyes with a hasty cold-water rinse in the bathroom and rushed out into the warm spring air to the garage. Hovering close to the speed limit toward the George Washington Bridge in the light traffic, Hagen reviewed his security arrangements for the transfer of the canvas sack containing the hundred thousand dollars to the *Bornvale,* another of the occasional shipments of American currency to a

La Plata bank associated with the Bornholt Lines' wide interests in Latin America. One of his men had escorted the cashier's-department's man from the West Side office building to the downtown pier, using the company limousine, and had obtained a receipt after seeing the sack locked in the purser's safe. The driver, too, was one of his men, and he could vouch for him and the escort. This was the first time a shipment had been heisted, or even subjected to an attempt.

When Hagen arrived at the pier entrance on deserted West Street, only a single unmarked police car was outside. The headlights suddenly blazed up as two men hunched into the front seats. Braking alongside, Hagen slid out, recognizing Baron of the local precinct detective squad, whom he'd known before resigning from the police department to become Chief of Security for the Bornholt Lines.

"Mike," Baron called out, "go back and hit the hay again. A clean getaway in a motorboat. And, Mike, it's sure one for the book—the heister was a deaf-mute. Next thing, it'll be a blind man with a dog."

"A deaf-mute!" Hagen echoed, incredulous.

"He wasn't dumb, though. He kept the paper he'd written his instructions on, so nothing for the lab. No prints, either; he wore mittens. The hundred grand makes it a Robbery Squad case, so the boys will be along later."

As Baron drove off, Hagen headed for the tall pier gates and banged on the little door set in them.

Gussman opened it. "Boss," the gateman said anxiously, "the cops gimme a good goin' over. I told 'em I didn't let anybody down to the ship except crew members, an' I took a good look at their passes, like I always do." Gussman jerked his thumb toward the uniformed customs guard standing at the door of the little office. "He'll back me up."

As the guard nodded, Hagen said, "OK, Guss. The cops are satisfied the heist was pulled off from a motorboat."

Striding down the dimly-lit pier with its depression-reduced accumulated general cargo awaiting the next ship, Hagen reflected that it must have been a hurriedly planned job; it wasn't known until yesterday afternoon that the money would be shipped. Aboard the *Bornvale*, only the captain and the purser had been told of it so far, though the other officers would doubtless learn about it after the ship had sailed, in the

course of general conversation among them. Someone in the cashier's department could have leaked word to a waterfront mob. He might yet recover the money.

Hagen bounded up the freighter's gangway. A sailor lounging on a workbench, a transistor radio beside him, rose and challenged him with a look.

"Chief of Security," Hagen announced.

"The second mate's waitin' for you up in the chartroom, sir." The sailor pointed toward the three-deck bridge superstructure.

At the top of the three flights of steps, Hagen sniffed in the aroma of percolating coffee as he passed through the adjoining wheelhouse to the chartroom. The second mate looked around from the chart table. He was spare and dark, approaching thirty, a worried expression on his lean face. He wore officer's blue trousers and white shirt, minus black necktie.

"Harper," he said dolefully, extending his hand. "The gateman told me to expect you, Mr. Hagen. Maybe you'd like a cup of coffee."

"Mr. Harper, tell me what happened first."

"Well, I was in here making chart changes," Harper began in an unhappy tone, "when Mr. Finley, the purser, came running up in his pajamas and said he'd just been wakened by a man with a knife and made to give him a sack with a hundred thousand dollars in it from the safe. He was so scared he could hardly talk."

"What time was it?"

"Around one o'clock."

"What action did you take?"

"I ran down and shook the third mate. He's single like me and sleeps on board in port. The ship's phone had been disconnected because of the six a.m. sailing, so I sent him up to the phone at the gate to call the police. Also to phone the captain and the chief mate at their homes. They're on their way down. I'm expecting Cap'n Svensen any minute now."

"Where were you during the robbery?"

"Right here." The second mate gestured at a chart spread out on the table, a batch of printed notices on it. "Every time we come back from a voyage we get lists of changes to be made in charts and sailing instructions. It's my job as navigation officer to mark them up. So I took advantage of this port watch to catch up. I've been at it since coming on duty at midnight. It helped me to stay awake. I was ashore nearly till midnight, so didn't get any sleep."

"One of the detectives outside

the gates told me the getaway was made by motorboat."

"I heard it race away." Harper glanced at an open porthole on the offshore side as the siren of a craft out in the river sounded a long blast. "I thought at first it might be a police launch coming alongside to inquire about something, so I went out to the wing of the bridge. I was just in time to see a motorboat rounding the end of the next pier and heading up the river. I couldn't make out anyone in it in the dark."

"At least you saw the direction it took. You didn't hear it come alongside?"

"No. It must have coasted up. I wish I had heard it coming alongside," the second mate added disconsolately. "This had to happen to me, during my watch and while I was in full charge of the ship. Someone'll have to be the fall guy, and who else but me?"

"Is the purser still up?"

"He went back to his room after the detectives had finished with him. I doubt if he's asleep yet. He's pretty well shook up. The robber threatened to kill him with the knife."

The purser's room and adjoining office were two decks down in the bridge superstructure. Hagen knocked lightly on the purser's door and entered in response to a feeble, "Come in." The purser lay in the bunk beneath the two open portholes, with the reading lamp on. He sat up as Hagen closed the door. Finley was stoutish and middle-aged, with a florid, pudgy face and fleshy jowls.

Hagen moved up beside the bunk. "Mr. Finley, I'd like to get particulars about the holdup firsthand from you."

The purser drew in a deep breath, as if to fortify himself against reliving his experience. "I thought for sure he was going to kill me."

"How did it begin?"

"Why, all of a sudden—when my lights went on and woke me up. I thought at first the ship was at sea and I was being called out for something. Then I saw a man standing over there by the door. It was shut and he had his back to it, not like a man who'd opened it to call me. He had on a knitted woolen helmet—you know, the kind mates and sailors wear on the bridge in freezing weather—which covered his face except for eyes and mouth. He had knitted mittens on, too, and a knife in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other. He came over to me without speaking a word, and I knew why when he thrust the paper at me to read."

The purser gestured with a

trembling hand at a pair of horn-rimmed reading glasses. "I put them on, but I didn't need to. The writing was in plain block letters, in pencil. It said I was to open the safe and give him the sack of bank money. After that, I was to stay in my office for another ten minutes if I wanted to stay alive. It said he was a deaf-mute, but if I shouted or made any sound to attract attention, he had a way of knowing it and would kill me."

The purser gulped. "He pressed the point of the knife against my neck and made a queer sound in his throat—you know, like some mutes do, as though he was trying to impress on me what would happen if I didn't follow his instructions."

"What kind of knife was it?"

"A sheath knife, like sailors sometimes wear working around the decks. He wore a blue denim shirt and jeans, all looking brand-new. Like I told the cops, if he hadn't been deaf and mute, I'd have figured he was a sailor from some other ship, or from a tow-boat maybe, because of his clothes and knitted stuff, along with the knife."

"Was he tall or short, heavy-set?"

"Around medium height, I'd say, and on the lean side. With his head covered, I couldn't tell if he was dark or fair. I was too scared anyway to take much notice. When I went into my office to open the safe, my hands were shaking so bad I couldn't get the combination right. Twice I missed it. The guy acted as though I was stalling—pushed my head back and drew the knife across my throat to show he meant what he'd said. I was lucky enough to hit the combination on the third try. By that time, I was dripping sweat, scared I'd forget the numbers, let alone set them."

The purser shivered. "The guy grabbed the sack even as I was lifting it out. Then he held up both hands with the fingers spread out, all ten of them, to warn me to stay put for ten minutes. I let a good ten go by before I figured he'd left the ship, then ran up and told the second mate."

"The deaf-mute took the sheet of paper with him?"

"Grabbed it back after I'd read it and stuck it into his pocket."

"Hiding his face seems to indicate he was known to you, and he printed his instructions to conceal his handwriting. Are you acquainted with a deaf-mute?"

The purser gave his head an emphatic shake. "Not a single one."

"He was someone who was familiar with the layout of the ship,

the location of your room and office, or else he was directed to them by someone on board." Hagen walked over to the office doorway. Reaching inside, he snapped on the light switch, revealing the tall safe in the far corner, opposite the passageway door and the little shuttered window through which the purser conducted ship's business. A desk and a table were littered with crew lists, discharge slips, and forms, one still in a typewriter. Lying beside the machine was the blue tissue duplicate receipt for the bank-money sack.

"The place is in a bit of a mess," the purser said apologetically from the bunk. "I got behind in my work yesterday afternoon. My wife stayed at a hotel while the ship was in port, and I'd arranged to have dinner with her before she left for the airport to catch a plane back home. I was delayed through having to wait for the bank money to come aboard. Right after I'd checked it into the safe, the second mate came in and told me my wife was on the phone, wanting to know if I'd left the ship yet. I went out and told her I was on my way, then dropped everything and rushed ashore. I came back around ten-thirty dog-tired, and turned in."

Hagen switched off the lights. "I presume you didn't mention over the phone why you'd been delayed."

"I most certainly did not," the purser snorted. "Not even at the hotel."

"As the robber's instructions specifically mentioned the bank money, it's plain he knew of it, and either came by the knowledge legitimately or it had been leaked to him. Also, the job called for swift planning, with a motorboat available, a man who knew the layout of the ship, even a deaf-mute if none other was to be had at short notice, with perhaps an accomplice on board." Hagen paused. "What do you know about the sailor on gangway watch?"

"Not much. He's a new man, joined the ship a couple of days ago. Sturgis is his name. The detectives got nothing helpful from him, the second mate told me."

"I might be luckier."

Hagen went down another deck to the gangway. The sailor was seated on the bench, listening to the muted radio, his attention at the moment directed beyond the stern at the lights of a ship steaming up the river. He looked around at the sound of Hagen's approach and rose. Sturgis was a husky young man in his twenties,

with longish brown hair and beard, his khaki work shirt tucked loosely inside patched jeans.

"Where were you during the robbery?" Hagen asked.

"Right here, sir, listenin' to my radio." Sturgis gestured at the transistor radio.

"Then you heard the motorboat race away."

The sailor nodded. "I went across the deck to the other side. It was just goin' around the end o' the pier, headin' down-river. I didn't know it was a getaway boat till the second mate came runnin' down, all excited, sayin' there'd been a holdup from a motorboat alongside."

"The robber must have had someone help him climb aboard —put a line or a ladder over the side. Did you hear or see anything suspicious around that time?"

"That's what the cops asked, too," Sturgis replied resentfully. "Like they was tryin' to make out I helped the stickup guy. It coulda been one o' the crew sneakin' up from below, on the other side, makin' no noise. Like I told the cops, I didn't have nothin' to do with the holdup."

"You're new to the ship."

"Sure. I've been out of a ship for months an' was glad to get this one. Only it turned out she's to lay up when she comes back from the next voyage," the sailor added sourly.

Hagen pondered for a moment or two, and then returned to the chartroom. Harper was still making changes on the chart. He looked around at Hagen with the same worried expression.

"I'm ready now for that cup of coffee, if the offer still holds good," Hagen said.

"Sure thing. I'll keep you company."

Hagen followed the second mate into the wheelhouse. Harper set out a fresh cup for Hagen beside his own on the locker and poured from the percolator, black for Hagen.

"Did you find the purser awake?" Harper queried.

"Yes, and got his account of the holdup. I also talked with Sturgis, the sailor on gangway watch. He told me the ship is to lay up at the end of the forthcoming voyage."

"That's so," Harper said dolefully. "Word came through late yesterday afternoon. Two sister ships, too. The depression's catching up with the Bornholt Lines." He sighed. "That's the least of my worries right now. I hope you found out enough to recover the money and help to make me less of a fall guy."

Hagen sipped his coffee. "I got

a line on what appears to have taken place, or what may not have taken place. From past experience, it naturally occurred to me that the purser may have faked the robbery—conspired with someone to come alongside in a motorboat around one o'clock, then dropped the sack into it and rushed up to you with the holdup story."

"You think that's what happened?" Harper asked eagerly.

"Finley's state of shock appears to be genuine."

"Perhaps he's a good actor."

"But why would he make up so bizarre and hardly credible a story by posing a deaf-mute as the robber?"

"Perhaps for that very reason, to make it seem unlikely he'd have made up the story."

"Again, why would he have the deaf-mute warn him not to leave his office until ten minutes had gone by, when it would have taken only two or three at the most to reach the rails and the motorboat?"

Harper shrugged. "Perhaps Mr. Finley slipped up there."

"If we assume that the robbery occurred as the purser described it, then the robber must have had someone help him up the ship's side from the motorboat, perhaps also to signal the motorboat when it would be safe to sneak up alongside. My thought turned to Sturgis, the man on gangway watch."

"Of course. He's a new crew member. He may be a partner in the holdup, or else was bribed to tip off the motorboat to come alongside."

"He joined the ship two days ago, before it became known that the bank money would be put aboard, so he couldn't have been planted for the robbery. However, he could have been approached yesterday afternoon and bribed. Also, he could have supplied the robber with mask, mittens, and sheath knife."

"That could be why he needed the ten minutes, to give him plenty of time to give them back to Sturgis," Harper suggested eagerly.

"Even that wouldn't have required ten minutes. When I questioned Sturgis about the motorboat, he said it turned down-river. Either he was really mistaken, or else it was a deliberate attempt to mislead any efforts to trace the motorboat. If not the latter, then why was he mistaken? I've got a feeling that the answer to that could clear up the robbery. Maybe I'll have figured it out by the time Captain Svensen gets aboard."

"Am I rooting for you!" The second mate sighed.

When Hagen had finished his coffee, he strolled out to the bridge rails and breathed in the warm salty breeze from the sea. Gazing absently at the darkened freighter lying across the slip at the next pier, he fed information and speculations about the robbery in computer style into his mind. Suddenly, after several moments, it yielded up a logical answer to one of his questions. As if crying "Eureka!" a tugboat out in the river sounded a toot on her steam whistle.

Hagen hurried down to the purser again. Finley was still awake, but with the lights out. He switched on the bunk lamp as Hagen entered and closed the door. "Mr. Finley, you waited a good ten minutes after the robber left before you ran up to the second mate. Why ten minutes? You'd have known he'd left the ship when you heard the motorboat roar away."

"That would have told me how he got aboard, too, which I didn't know at the time. Even then I wouldn't have taken any chances. Anyway, I didn't hear the motorboat. Maybe it was because I was shut up in here, or else I was so scared, about all I could hear was my heart thumping."

Hagen threw a skeptical glance at the two open portholes, both on the same side as the one in the chartroom, and one deck lower. "Mr. Finley," he remarked enigmatically, turning back to the door, "if what I'm beginning to suspect is true, it was too bad you didn't stop to tidy up your office yesterday afternoon."

Hagen headed straight down to the gangway. "Sturgis," he began without preliminary, as the sailor stood up, "you told me the motorboat headed down-river. The second mate said it turned up-river. Did you actually see the motorboat, or were you lying? Obstructing justice?"

The sailor looked at him hesitantly, his face showing fright from Hagen's sharp manner. "I didn't mean it that way, sir. I only wanted to make it look like I heard the motorboat, so it wouldn't look like I was away from the job when the stickup was pulled."

"Then you *didn't* hear the motorboat, although you were across the deck from it?"

The sailor nodded unhappily. "I know it sounds kinda funny, but that's how it was. I didn't have my radio turned up loud enough to drown it out neither. I swear I didn't leave the gangway until just after the stickup. The second mate

told me when I came on watch at midnight not to leave the gangway without his permission. After the stickup, he let me go down to the messroom for coffee and sandwiches."

Hagen stood pensive for several moments, then abruptly turned and climbed the three sets of ladders back to the chartroom.

The second mate laid down his pen and regarded him with a hopeful expression. "Any luck?"

"Call it progress. I got to wondering why the purser didn't think it safe to leave his office after he heard the motorboat roar away. Perhaps there wasn't a motorboat. The purser seemed to confirm this suspicion when I questioned him again and was told he didn't hear a motorboat. Then I scared the gangway man into admitting he lied about hearing one.

"From then on, the reasoning was downhill. If the purser's holdup story was true and there was no motorboat, what about his deaf-mute? He could be someone who saw the duplicate of the bank-money receipt in the purser's office yesterday afternoon, and then went ashore and bought a blue denim shirt and jeans to wear during the heist, along with his woolen helmet, mittens, and sheath knife. He needed ten minutes' leeway to rush to his room with the sack and change back into the clothes the purser would expect to find him wearing when he ran up with the holdup report. To guard against Sturgis chancing to wander into the purser's area and perhaps see him, Sturgis was warned not to leave the gangway."

Even the river seemed to fall as deathly silent as the chartroom. Harper stood rigid, his eyes fixed downward on the white chart, as if benumbed, his face a bleak gray. Swallowing hard, he finally spoke with bitterness. "Ship due to lay up, depression getting worse, it was worth a try. So simple—grab the money, dump the empty sack and work clothing overboard at sea, stow the green stuff in a safe-deposit box at the end of the voyage—"

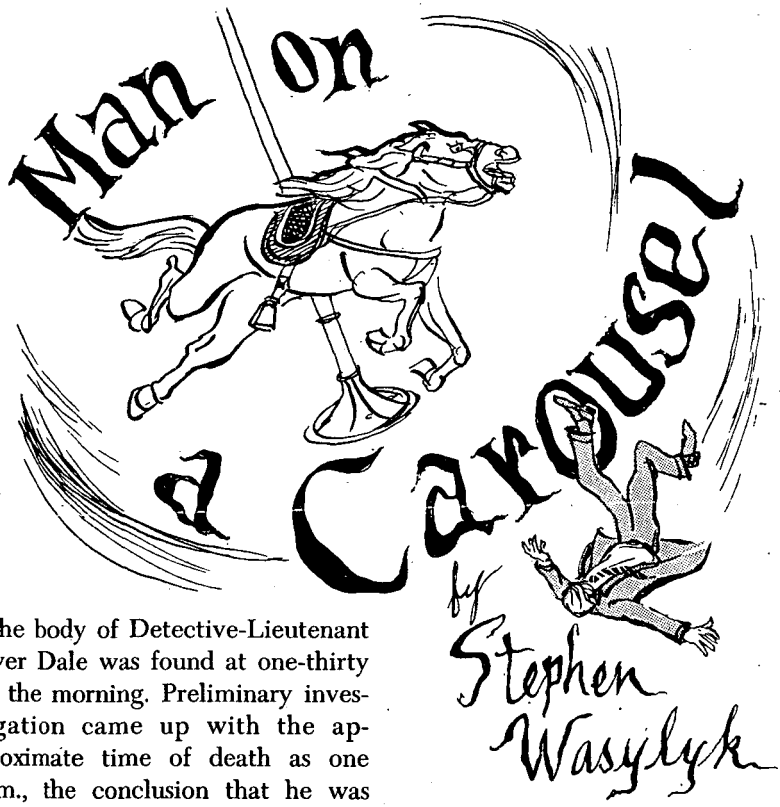
Harper broke off in self-disgust. "I was really being dumb, thinking I'd get away with it. What put you onto me?"

"Ironically, the fact that you're not a deaf-mute."

"I don't get it."

"To forestall a search, it had to appear that the money was taken ashore. You were the only man to hear the nonexistent motorboat."

Even when one learns the truth, he may find it hard to swallow—without a chaser.



The body of Detective-Lieutenant Byer Dale was found at one-thirty in the morning. Preliminary investigation came up with the approximate time of death as one a.m., the conclusion that he was shot twice in the side by someone seated alongside him in his private car, and little else.

Tully Kane heard about it at noon, only because the hot sun had crept high and swung southward far enough to pour through his shadeless apartment window and fall full on his sleeping face, the discomfort forcing him into a consciousness he didn't want and did his best to blunt by daily

downing large amounts of wine or whiskey.

He lay, his eyes staring, his tongue cottony and swollen, debating if he should reach immediately for the half-full bottle of cheap bourbon alongside the bed or prolong the anticipation by waiting.

The crisp voice of the news announcer coming over the small radio Tully had left on all night penetrated his fogged brain when it spoke the name of Byer Dale, and Tully concentrated on what the man was saying, enough to put it all together and understand the main point: someone had killed the only man Tully had ever really liked and trusted.

Tully automatically reached for the bottle, hesitated and pulled his hand back slowly. He sat up, swung his feet to the floor and stood up shakily, a tall, thin effigy of the man he once was, hollow-cheeked, unshaved, his soiled clothes hanging loosely.

For a moment he felt like crying.

He and Dale went back quite a few years together. They had graduated from the police academy in the same class, had been rookies and later partners in the same precinct, had both moved into the detective division at the same time. Dale had gone ahead then because Tully was beginning to find the bottle more interesting than the work, becoming suspended frequently and finally fired almost a year ago for being drunk on duty once too often.

Tully staggered across the unkempt apartment to the bathroom, climbed under the shower with his clothes on and turned the cold water on full, standing there for a long time before shedding his clothes, toweling himself dry and slipping into fresh clothing.

A half hour later he was ready for the street, clean-shaven, looking almost normal except for the bloodshot eyes. He brewed and downed several cups of coffee, controlling the slight trembling of his hand with willpower he had forgotten he retained.

The bottle loomed big in his consciousness, but he ignored it, slipped on a pair of dark sunglasses and left the apartment.

He picked up his car and drove across town, turning into a vacant slot in front of police headquarters. He hesitated at the door of the building, took a deep breath and went inside.

The man he wanted to see was important enough to have his own office opening directly onto the hall, allowing Tully to avoid the embarrassment of walking through the squad room.

Tully knocked, heard a grunt and went in. The man behind the desk was middle-aged, his sparse hair fringing his scalp like spun wool, his face square and chiseled by hard lines. He looked up, saw Tully and glanced away to mask his surprise before rising and holding out his hand. "Good to see you, Tully," he said.

Tully squeezed the hand, touched a small sign on the desk that read: *Captain O. Moran,* and said, "They should have promoted you by now."

Moran smiled. "It will come, Tully. I told you many times, follow the rules and keep your nose clean and you make it. Why haven't you stopped in to see us before this?"

"I was never sober enough and you don't need a drunk wandering around the Homicide division. I'm here because I heard about Dale. What's the story?"

Moran motioned toward a chair. "We're working on it. An alert pair in a patrol car noticed him slumped in his car, investigated and found him dead. Naturally, when they turned up his ID, that brought the whole division in. The initial report says he and his wife had been out for the evening. When they arrived home about twelve-thirty, the phone was ringing. He answered, told his wife he had to go out, and drove off. That was all she knew. He didn't tell her who made the call. The M.E. says it looks like someone sitting alongside him pressed a .38 to his side and pulled the trigger twice. Dale's piece was missing and there's a possibility it was used on him."

"The radio said he was found in center city. Exactly where?"

"Near 11th and Winter."

"That's only three blocks from his apartment. Strictly residential. What could he have been doing there except passing through?"

"We don't know the answer to that. We have teams checking the houses and apartments in the vicinity to see if anyone saw or heard anything."

"What was he working on?"

"Routine stuff. Nothing there that would cause anyone to want to stop him. He couldn't have seen something going down or he wouldn't have been in the car, and he certainly wasn't going to sit still and let someone in alongside him unless he trusted them or was forced to do it." Moran shook his head. "There's nothing easy about this because there are too many guys out there who'd like nothing better than to ice a cop." He leaned back in his chair. "You used to be Dale's partner. Any suggestions?"

"Yeah," said Tully. "What do you know about Clayton Vermont?"

"Not much. One of those men about town who get their names into the gossip columns now and then and that we haul in every once in a while for drunk driving. Am I supposed to know more than that?"

"I thought that maybe the vice squad had picked up something on him or that Dale had told you."

"Told me what?"

Tully left his chair and walked to the window, looking out over the parking lot. His throat felt dry and he gripped the windowsill so that Moran couldn't see his hands tremble. "It all started a couple of years ago, when Dale and I were on the street. We ran into a young girl who'd just bussed into town from somewhere out in the Midwest. You know the type. Fresh-faced and innocent like something out of one of those old Hollywood musicals, ready to tear the big town apart. She lasted six months before they found her dead one morning, OD'd. The detectives put it down as just another junkie who had bought it the hard way, but Dale wasn't satisfied. He started asking around. Turned out she had a boyfriend she'd been seeing regularly, but this boyfriend was too big a man and too important to ever call for her. She used to meet him downtown in the bar of the Colonial Hotel. Dale and I figured that was the guy's bag and if that was the way he'd operated with her, he was probably still operating the same way, so on our own time and out of uniform, we staked out the place."

"You should have turned the information over to the detectives."

Tully whirled from the window. "You know damn well the department wasn't going to reopen a case like that! Even if they located the guy, there was no proof he had anything to do with her death. No detective was going to waste his time on that kind of setup."

"That wasn't your decision to make. Or Dale's," snapped Moran.

Tully waved a hand. "To hell with it. That part's over now. Anyway, we watched and sure enough we turned up a guy who met a girl there almost every night, the same type as the girl who had died. The guy was Clayton Vermont. So we took the next step. We began checking on him. I guess we should have written up what we found, but by that time I was well into the bottle and on my way out and Dale must have had his own reasons."

Moran leaned forward. "Just

what did you find?" he asked.

Tully pushed his hands into his pockets and began to pace the floor.

The phone on Moran's desk buzzed. Moran lifted the receiver, listened, said "Not now," and hung up. "Go on," he said to Tully.

"We all know there's a ring of high-priced call girls operating in town," Tully said. "The department turns one up once in a while but generally does nothing. As long as the girls cause no trouble and no one complains, the department is busy with other things that are more important. Vermont runs the ring."

"You had evidence of that?"

Tully shook his head. "Nothing you could take to court. We dug deeper. We figured there were at least ten women that Vermont controlled, lookers all of them, real class, reserved for men with money. These women were the kind the men not only bought for the evening but could take anywhere without slinking down the back alleys—to dinner, to the theater, to parties. And we found out how Vermont controlled them. He had them all hooked. He feeds them smack and they have to stay with him to satisfy the habit. If they break away they need a new source and Vermont finds out. If they decide to take the cure, he's waiting when they come out, forces a shot on them and they're right back where they started. He never lets them go. When he's through with them, he sells them overseas to London or Tokyo and they drop one step down the ladder. In the meantime, Vermont needs fresh talent coming up. That's why he cultivates the new kids who come to town. Dale and I figured the one we knew didn't want to work for him, knew a little too much or threatened to blow the whistle, so he OD'd her."

"Dammit!" yelled Moran. "You two should have said something to someone! We could have probably broken it up by this time."

"Take it up with the vice squad," Tully said wearily. "If they'll stop busting the street hustlers long enough to listen. Or with narcotics. They both had the same opportunity to make Vermont that we did. But it really isn't as easy as it sounds. Vermont is smart. He keeps a low profile. So do the women. We couldn't even pin down how he got the stuff to them. Maybe the narcs could have, but there was nothing so crude as delivering a bag to their apartment. We followed one all day. She went to the hairdresser, the massage parlor, shop-

ping, a smart restaurant, a bar, a theater. Somewhere along the way she got her daily ration. Not in the arm where the needle marks would show, either. There is no way you could get warrants to bust all of those places to find the one where she was juiced up, and even if you did, you wouldn't have Vermont. We figured there was only one way we could do it. Cultivate one of the women who wanted to break away, line up enough evidence and wait for a situation where we could nail Vermont himself."

"And?"

Tully shrugged. "I was kicked out before we could do that. I ran into Dale on one of my sober days about six months ago and he told me he had found a girl who was working with him. He said it was just a matter of time before he nailed Vermont."

"Damn," Moran said. "He should have come to me with that."

"It was a personal thing."

"He knew how the department feels about personal vendettas."

"I guess he did. It doesn't matter now. What matters is that he's dead and Vermont is as good a candidate for icing him as you're going to get."

"Did Dale mention the woman's name?"

"Not to me. But if Vermont found out she was talking to Dale and put him on ice, she could be next. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"She's a valuable piece of property. He could ship her out."

Moran slapped the desk. "Do you know what you've given me? *Nothing!* Just some cockamamie story about Dale playing supercop on his own that probably came out of a bottle! I can pull in Vermont and question him and what do you think I'll get besides a high-priced lawyer sitting on my doorstep? You tell me there's a woman but how in the hell do I find her? Pull in every high-priced hooker in town and ask her if she was working for Dale?"

Tully shrugged. Right then, he wanted a drink more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. He should have known better than to come here. He wanted to outline the thing to Moran and leave it with him, but he should have remembered Moran would spend more time worrying about Dale not following procedure than in following up the story.

"Do what you want," Tully said, heading for the door.

"Where are you going? I want all this down on the record."

"To get the guy who iced Dale. It looks as though you're not go-

ing to make it, so it's up to me."

"You? Maybe two years ago," snapped Moran. "Not now. You'll get as far as the nearest bar and that will be the end of it."

"Maybe," Tully said. "My liver may be going but my brain isn't spongy yet. I'll work it out. Just be ready to move if I call you."

Moran shook a finger. "You be careful! Get out of line and I'll fall on you as hard as I would on anyone else!"

Tully made a rude gesture and walked out. He picked up his car and drove across town, making it a point to ignore the neon signs for the bars and the cocktail lounges, wanting to stop for one drink and knowing that if he did, he would be through for the day.

He passed the intersection where Dale's body had been found and pulled in to the curb, shifting in his seat, studying the buildings. It was just another big-city crossroads, apartment houses on three corners, a low bank building on the fourth. Ahead and in sight was the apartment house where Dale had lived. Tully frowned. If someone had been waiting for Dale, the logical place would have been his own apartment building, not the street three blocks away. It also wasn't very likely that Dale had stopped to see someone. The apartments were occupied by average, middle-class families, most of them asleep at one in the morning. There seemed to be no reason for Dale to have died here at all.

Tully pulled out into traffic, beat the next two traffic lights and turned into the basement garage under Dale's apartment building. He tipped the attendant a dollar, slid his car into the stuffy gloom, found a slot and took the elevator to Dale's floor.

He pressed the buzzer. The woman who opened the door would never be called pretty. Julie Dale's brown hair was a little too nondescript, her eyes too deeply set, her nose a little too broad at the base and her mouth a little too thin. She was far from her best now, tears marking the eyes and grief milking the color from her face.

"Tully," she said softly. "Come in."

Tully followed her into the apartment.

She turned to face him. "I knew you'd come back. Byer said you would. He tried to find you many times, you know."

"It's a big city and it's easy to lose yourself, especially when you don't want to be found." Tully squeezed her shoulder gently. "I'm sorry it has to be at a time like this. Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head. "The department will take care of everything. All I have to do is show up for the funeral. They'll even give me a nice plaque and a pension."

"Take it easy," Tully said. "You always knew it could happen. It went with the job." He led her to the sofa. "I know they questioned you but I'd like you to tell me what you know."

"Why? You're no longer on the force. What is your interest?"

"I can't walk away from it. I owe it to him."

"Because he saved your life once?"

"That and other things. He covered for me many times when it could have cost him his job. Without him, I'd have never lasted as long as I did. Tell me about it."

"We had been out, dinner and a show and a late drink at the

Rusty Key. The phone rang as we came through the door about twelve-thirty. He answered. I don't know who he talked to but he said he had to go out, that it was something that couldn't wait. It was nothing unusual. He spent very little time at home lately. The next thing I knew Captain Moran and the commissioner were at the door. They didn't have to say anything. I knew. When does the commissioner pay a social call on a policeman's wife at five in the morning?"

"You're sure you have no idea who he talked to?"

"Oh, I have an idea all right but I can't give you any names."

"What does that mean?"

"It was *her.*" She spat the words out. "It wasn't the first time she called. And it never made any difference to him what time it was. He always went."

So he had his pipeline to Vermont after all. It couldn't have been anyone else. "And you don't know her name? Or phone number?"

"No," she said.

"I have to find her," Tully said slowly. "It's important. *Think.* Anything that would help me locate her."

"Why?"

"She was a contact. She was feeding your husband information about a man he'd been trying to get for a long time and he must have been close. I think that may have been why he was killed. She may be in trouble herself, but the thing is, she can help."

She made a little sound, her hands flashing up to cover her open mouth. Her eyes were wide, fixed on Tully, and he could read hysteria building.

He clamped a hand on her wrist and squeezed. "Take it easy," he said softly. "Just take it easy."

He felt her relax. "Moran didn't say anything," she whispered.

"Moran didn't know. Didn't you tell him about the woman?"

She shook her head. "He didn't ask much. Sparing the widow's feelings, I suppose." She rose. "I need a drink."

Tully felt his stomach turn over. "Wait," he said desperately. "Dale was one of the biggest notebook keepers I ever saw. He wrote everything down and I'm sure he must have kept a record of this. Where would he keep it?"

She pointed. "That was his desk. There's a notebook there but I never could understand what was in it."

Tully moved quickly, sliding the drawers out and fingering contents. Behind him, he heard the clink of bottle against glass and

the splash of liquid. His throat burned and his mouth was dry. He forced himself to grip the sides of the drawer.

"Would you like a drink?" Her voice rubbed his raw nerves.

He shook his head dumbly, not trusting his voice. He could think *no* but he knew his voice would say *yes,* and leaning there, his body rigid, his teeth clenched, he saw the small notebook in the bottom of the drawer and he took a deep breath and reached for it.

Tully recognized Dale's strange sort of shorthand, his way of chopping words, abbreviating, using initials. Tully knew it was all there, every meeting, every conversation, enough information to break open Vermont's operation. There was one slight problem: it would make sense to Dale but not to anyone else.

The notebook by itself wasn't enough. Tully still needed the woman and as far as he could make out, Dale identified her only as C. C.

Tully's mind went back to the women he and Dale had tentatively identified as being part of Vermont's stable. None had the initials C. C., but that had been more than a year ago. There would be no point to looking those women up now. They were hardly likely to talk and less likely to be able to identify the woman because one thing that had kept Vermont going was the fact that he isolated the women from each other. Each may have suspected she wasn't the only one that Vermont was working but she had no way of knowing who the others were.

Tully flipped through the book, looking for some idea of where he could locate the woman, and finding none, thinking that Moran had been right. Dale should have written it all up and turned it in and let the department handle it.

Tully closed the book and replaced it. "Listen," he said, "I want you to wait an hour after I'm gone and then call Moran. Tell him you found this book and it looks like something he can use. Don't tell him I know about it."

"All right," she said dully.

Tully looked at her closely. She'd been broken up when he came in. Now she seemed to be in some sort of daze.

"Don't forget," he said. "It can be important."

"All right," she said again, reaching for the bottle. "Are you sure you don't want a drink?"

Tully swallowed hard. "I have to go," he said abruptly. "I'll be by again."

Outside in the hall, he leaned weakly against the wall. It had

taken all of his willpower to walk away from that bottle and he paid for it now with sagging knees and a solid craving. He breathed deeply until he steadied, the half-nauseousness subsiding. He ran a dry tongue around his lips and punched the call button for the elevator.

In the basement garage, he walked toward the small security booth. Two men looked up at him.

"Which of you was on duty early this morning?"

"I was," said the shorter of the two. "What's the beef?"

"No beef. Lieutenant Dale took his car out last night about twelve-thirty. Did you see him leave?"

"He wasn't in last night."

The answer wasn't what Tully expected. All he'd wanted to do was to see if Dale had talked to the man, said anything that would be of help. Tully's palms were suddenly wet. He pulled out a handkerchief and scrubbed at them.

"His wife said—"

The man waved. "I don't care what she said. Maybe he left the car in the street. Sometimes they do that when they expect to go out again. It's easier."

Tully felt confused. How could Dale have known he was going out when the call came *after* he was in the apartment, and if he *had* expected to go out, how could he have parked on the street without his wife asking why?

"Did Dale do that often?"

The man shrugged. "Who knows? I don't pay any attention to what the tenants do. I have problems of my own."

"If he didn't go in and out through here, he would have used the front entrance?"

"Yeah," the man said. "Unless he jumped out of the window."

The other man chuckled.

"Is there a doorman on duty?" Tully asked.

"In this place? They couldn't afford it. The tenants all have keys. We see that no one comes in through this way and that's as good a security setup as you'll get in a place like this. It must work. No one's been killed or raped here yet."

"There's always a first time," said Tully.

He picked up his car and headed out into the street. The afternoon had turned hot and still and Tully felt a hard knot down deep in his intestines that he knew would stay until he took a drink, which meant he would have to live with it for some time yet. What he needed now was

someone to fill in that gap of a year when he'd been out of circulation, someone familiar with what went on in the city after dark among the swingers and the smart set, but he had no time to renew old contacts. He would have only an hour's headway on Moran, who'd have the whole department on his side.

One man he had to see anyway just might be able to help.

He parked behind the Rusty Key and pushed his way into the softly-lighted cool interior, turned down a set of carpeted stairs to the office below the main dining room and tapped at the doorframe.

The man behind the desk was a little on the heavy side, his sideburns fashionably long, his round, fleshy face accented by thick, full eyebrows.

"Tully," he said, rising. "It's good to see you. You don't come in anymore."

"I can't afford your prices, Manny. And you can't afford a permanent drunk on the premises. It would spoil your image as the top spot in town."

Manny chuckled. "We have our share. One more wouldn't matter. What can I do for you?"

"Dale and his wife were here last night."

"So I told the police."

"Anything happen while he was here? A beef with a customer?"

"Nothing like that."

"Did he get or make any phone calls?"

"Not that I know of. Actually, they weren't here very long. I had the impression that they were having some sort of private quarrel. If I remember right, she had three quick drinks. He didn't finish his."

She didn't say anything about that, Tully mused, but then you couldn't expect her to.

"There's a woman around town," he said slowly. "Young, good-looking, lots of class. Probably comes in with a different man each time. The man would be older, with plenty of money. I don't know her name but her initials are C. C."

Manny looked at the ceiling for a moment. "That could be the Conric woman. I don't know her first name because she's one of the newer ones. Been around for only a little more than six months. Doesn't drink but sees that the men with her do. Orders only diet cola for herself. Always wears those dark glasses, but I've never seen her spaced out like some of the others. Seems to have more control of herself, if you know what I mean."

"Ever see her with Dale?"

Manny shook his head firmly.

"How about Clayton Vermont?"

"Nor him either. Why are you looking for her?"

"Information. Do you know where she lives?"

Manny smiled. "You're lucky there. Ordinarily I couldn't give you an answer, but one night I had a congressman here. When he left, I personally escorted him to his limousine. I do that with the big ones—makes a good impression. The Conric woman and her escort came out at the same time. I heard her tell the cabbie to take them to Park Town West. I would assume that her apartment is there."

Tully moved toward the door. "I'll see you, Manny."

Manny leaned back. "You look like you could use a drink, Tully. Let me buy you one."

Tully felt the familiar wrench in his gut. "Manny, if I took that drink, I'd still be here when you closed tonight."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know it was that bad."

"It's as bad as it can get. I haven't touched the stuff since last night and right now I'm moving only on momentum because I haven't had a day without it for six months."

Manny made a sympathetic sound. "Why, Tully? You're too good a man to carry that on your back."

"I've never stayed sober long enough to ask a shrink."

Manny nodded. "If you need help, call me."

It took ten minutes to reach Park Town West, one of the newer, more expensive apartment buildings alongside the multilaned, tree-lined parkway.

The doorman was white-haired, probably retired from another job and using this one to supplement his income, but he was big and broad-shouldered and he flagged Tully the moment he stepped into the lobby. "Can I help you?"

"Miss Conric," Tully said.

"Not in," said the doorman.

"Are you sure? It's important."

"I'm sure. Miss Conric left some minutes ago. I believe she's taking a trip overseas. At least she had her luggage with her and I heard Mr. Vermont tell the cabbie to take them to the overseas air terminal."

"Vermont was with her?" Tully's voice was sharp. "How long ago did they leave?"

"Ten minutes or so."

Tully glanced at his watch and made a quick calculation. "Do you have a phone?"

"Around the corner of the lobby."

Tully dug for a dime while he

dredged his mind for Dale's home phone number.

Julie Dale answered.

Tully wasted no time. "Did Moran get there yet?"

"He's here now," she said. "I'll get him."

"Just listen," Tully said when he heard Moran's voice. "You've got the notebook and you've talked to Julie, so you know this doesn't come out of any bottle. Vermont and a woman named Conric are on their way to the overseas air terminal. They left ten minutes ago, which gives you time to get out there and intercept them."

"We're on our way," said Moran.

Forty minutes later, Tully swung his car into a no-parking zone in front of the terminal, left it and headed for the door.

A uniformed security man reached for his arm. "You can't leave that car there."

"Forget the car," Tully said. "You come with me. You may have to hold a couple until the police get here and it could be your chance to be a hero. Stay close and don't ask questions."

Curving ramps at each side of the lobby led to the upper level where the airline ticket counters were located. Tully didn't know if he'd passed Vermont and the woman along the way or if they were ahead of him at one of the ticket counters so he went up a ramp fast, his head swiveling, scanning the crowd and he was halfway to the top when he saw them come into the lobby, Vermont lean and dapper in a turtleneck sweater and leisure suit, his dark hair long and framing his tanned face; the woman with him tall and graceful, her body a showcase for the flowered traveling outfit, blonde hair soft and delicate as cotton candy, a woman who left a ripple of turned heads in her wake.

Tully spun and ran down the ramp, the security guard with him, and they were almost at the bottom when Moran came through the door along with another detective and Julie Dale.

They all reached Vermont and the woman at the same time. Hemmed in, Vermont stopped, his eyes wary.

Moran flashed a badge. "We'd like to talk to you, Mr. Vermont."

"About what?"

"The death of Detective-Lieutenant Byer Dale."

"I know nothing about that and we have a plane to catch."

"There will be other flights," Moran said. He turned to the woman. "Are you going with this man willingly?"

"Of course," snarled Vermont. "What is this?"

Moran ignored him. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he told the woman. "We know about you and Dale. We found the notebook. Are you willing to make a statement and testify?"

The woman sighed, almost in relief. "Yes," she said.

Vermont's eyes shifted, looking for a way through the crowd that had surrounded them.

"Cuff him and read him his rights," Moran told the detective.

The detective moved, opening a clear lane before Julie Dale. Tully saw the movement out of the corner of his eye, saw the snub-nosed .38 leave Julie Dale's handbag and lunged, too slow and too late as the gun roared.

The Conric woman jerked backward, spun and collapsed. Tully's hand clamped over the gun and twisted it from Julie's hand as a soft murmur welled from the crowd.

Moran quickly knelt to examine the woman, then lifted his eyes to Julie, the message clear that the woman was dead. Moran's face turned white—there was fury in his voice. "What for?"

"If it wasn't for her, my husband would be alive."

Tully looked at her and saw what he had been denying to himself and he couldn't refute it.

"She had nothing to do with it," Moran said. "Vermont—"

"No," interrupted Tully. "Not Vermont. Just why he was leaving the country with her I don't know, but it wasn't because he killed Dale."

He put an arm over Julie Dale's shoulders. "Tell it now, Julie," he said gently. "You had an argument on the way home and you grabbed his gun and shot him and left him there and walked the rest of the way. That's why the car was never in the garage last night. It never reached there. You went home and made up the story of the phone call."

"It could have been true," she said dully. "She called him every night."

"That was part of his job."

Her voice was bitter. "That's what he used to tell me, but his job couldn't have been that important. Look at her, Tully. Look at her and look at me and tell me it was all part of his job." Her eyes demanded an answer. "Tell me, Tully."

Tully said nothing. Julie was looking for reassurance that her jealousy was justified, otherwise she had killed two people for nothing and she didn't want to live with that, but Tully couldn't help her and neither could anyone

else because the two people who knew the answer were dead.

Strange, he thought. He had begun to feel that she was lying when Manny told him about the quarrel, but even then he hadn't wanted to believe it. If an average citizen had been killed like that, the first suspect would have been his wife. But a cop? There were always so many more likely candidates around.

Moran looked sick. He had broken the rules by bringing Julie with him in the car. Why? Probably sympathy, the inability to refuse a request by a cop's widow. He would have had no way of knowing she wanted to kill the woman—but that was Moran's problem. He had always been great for the rules. Now let him hang by them.

Whatever case there would have been against Vermont was washed out, all of Dale's work down the tubes, and someone else would have to start from the beginning.

Tully felt very tired. His head ached and his intestines were tied in knots, his tongue thick in his mouth. He closed his eyes and rubbed a hand over his face. It was all so useless. He'd realized that a long time ago.

He had watched and been part of the mayhem in the streets; the death and the dying; the brutality and the violence of a society that fed on itself and from somewhere had come the overpowering conviction that life was nothing more than a ride on a drab, gray-painted carousel that whirled round and round, carrying faceless people who crushed each other as they fought for seats on carved horses that rose and fell silently to the unheard music of a mysterious band organ; all of it going nowhere, accomplishing nothing and completely meaningless, and the only way to get off that carousel was to die.

He handed the gun to Moran. "Take care of her," he said.

"Where are you going?"

The trick, thought Tully, was to forget you were on that carousel in the first place.

"To get a drink," he said.

Man's peculiar duty, ascribed to Marcus Aurelius, is to love even those who wrong him.

Blind Spot

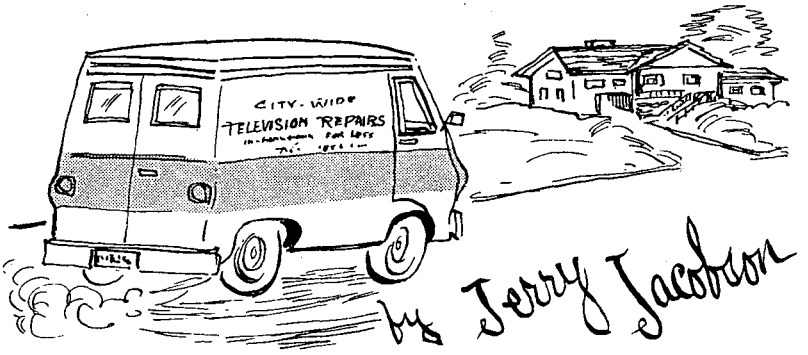
Under a dawn that was gray and foreboding and as lifeless as prison grays after ten washings, Rupe Hunter shuffled into his cramped little kitchen with dulled eyes. He made coffee and felt the desperation throb at his temples, felt the old losing of ground to pressures and age. He was forty-two and no longer bright-eyed, nor eager for new worlds to conquer, though conquer them he must if he were to survive. He felt, lately, a fatal victim to the Parkinson principle which dictated that work tended to expand itself to fill the time allotted for its completion. Hunter read books; he was not a stupid man.

He stepped outside and got the morning paper. He lived upstairs-rear in a dingy, clapboard walk-up where cooked cabbage and crying kids filled the stale air. This was his world for the present. He could live this way, Rupe Hunter firmly believed, if it were in compensation for a dream. He did not presently have that dream in mind or in grasp, but it figured to come along.

The disorienting thing about dreams—the *disquieting* thing—was that Rupe Hunter was not accustomed to having them, nor of having them fulfilled. Twenty of his forty-plus years had been spent behind the walls of prisons. The constant threat of arrest was his shadow. He read the want ads for amusement, watched young girls for detached sport. When you were over forty and marginally skilled in but a single occupation, and you possessed a past that could not be shared, certain of life's events and pleasures were forbidden you.

Hunter remained a moment on

the rickety porch to take a few gulps of pungent air. Below him, on a field of oil-sogged, hard-packed earth, Mandich was directing a wrecker that had crawled into his yard with another mass of crumpled steel, gesturing and shouting obscenities at the driver.



He spotted Hunter on the porch and waved to him and Hunter nodded back. Mandich had once offered Hunter a job disgorging parts from these wrecked automobiles which were heaped in small gray mountains in his yard, but Hunter had just experienced a good week and had turned down the offer. He wished he'd taken it up as steady employment, but his pride would stand in the way of any begging now. He'd told Mandich he worked at a foundry and let it go at that.

Back inside, he poured some coffee, wolfed a stale cinnamon roll, and then called Sharpe. Their friendliness over the months of their association had dwindled to terse tolerance. Hunter was growing tired of the business; Sharpe was cheating him at every turn and there was only a single side to the street. Hunter had always felt he'd had more to lose than Sharpe, and so took the risks and the cheating as acceptable irritants in order to maintain his freedom and his income.

"Sharpe?" Hunter said when the unctuous voice oozed across the line. "It's Rupe Hunter. We got unfinished business from last week. I'm calling to discuss it."

The "unfinished business" involved Hunter's theft the previous week of fifty electric typewriters from a ramshackle warehouse on the docks. The warehouse had been rented by Vincent Patricelli, whose chief enterprise was thieving from wholesale office-equipment firms. Hunter rarely stole

from stealers, because that sometimes bought you a set of traction chains and a hospital room marked "intensive care," but when he'd picked up on some loose bar-talk and learned of Patricelli's single guard at the warehouse, Hunter couldn't resist the easy hit. Now, with a little prosperity, Hunter was kicking himself for not picking up a one-time partner and five hundred typewriters.

"To—*discuss it,* Hunter?" Something ironic in Sharpe's mocking tone told Hunter the upper hand he thought he was holding had been quickly finessed to a losing position. "I suppose you mean the price-per-unit, Mr. Hunter."

"Yeah, I do. You said you didn't know anything about the wholesale price for these newfangled electrics and to get back to you in a week. Well, I'm getting back to you."

"So you are, Mr. Hunter. All right. Concerning your typewriters, I've learned they wholesale for $159.50 apiece."

"That checks with my figures," Hunter said eagerly. "For a total for the fifty of them of $7,975."

"I've also learned, Mr. Hunter, that on the evening before I took delivery, fifty electric typewriters of identical make and type were stolen from a warehouse being leased by Vincent Patricelli. Just where did you say *you* got *your* typewriters again?"

"I told you that—a wholesale office-machines place in the downtown district. The name of the place is my business."

"The reason I make mention of it," Sharpe said, "is the serial numbers on your machines duplicate serial numbers on machines stolen from Mr. Patricelli."

"So we're all thieves," Hunter said. "Something stolen twice isn't diminished in worth."

"Ah, but something stolen from *Vincent Patricelli,* that's another matter. I don't have to tell you that Vincent Patricelli runs the lion's share of the illegal import-export business in this city. If I'm caught selling his electric typewriters and it's learned I'm not a bona fide sales representative, it could go very hard on me. Dead hard, if you catch my meaning, Mr. Hunter."

"So we're talking discount for anguish," Hunter said.

"Anguish, hazardous duty and any future pain I might incur."

Hunter was gripping the phone receiver as though it were Sharpe's slender neck. "So how much?"

"Five hundred for the lot."

"Five *hundred*!"

"Temper, Mr. Hunter. By in-

forming Vincent Patricelli who stole his merchandise, I could get twice that. Plus compensation for returning his goods. I run a small enterprise, Mr. Hunter. I must scrape and grovel, and I have no network of protection."

"All right. Five hundred."

"I'll send my man around in a half hour with the money."

"No, not today," Hunter told Sharpe. "I'm going out this morning."

"Business, residential or other?"

"Residential."

"I can use sterling silver flatware," Sharpe said. "I find it to be in high demand just now, and the price of silver is good, but it must contain the usual 92.5 percent silver and not more than 7.5 percent copper."

Rupe Hunter wrote "sterling flatware" on the back wall of his memory. "What about wear and condition?"

"As I say, Mr. Hunter, it's a seller's market just now. Depreciation is not a factor. Also, I have outlets for corporate bonds that have reached maturity. Thirty percent of face value. You won't find a better deal in town."

This, too, Hunter placed in his memory bank. "I have to go, Sharpe. I'm on a time schedule with this one."

"I'll send my man around in the evening, then. Say, eight o'clock. Is that agreeable?"

"Eight's fine," Hunter agreed, and hung up the phone.

Hunter kept a garage roughly ten blocks from his room. It was a double garage of sturdy oak which preceded by thirty feet or so a hill of parched grass and an old Victorian home whose granite was now the color of elephant hide from years of assault by weather and pollution. Its octogenarian owner was a widow named Peabody whose lonely fate it was to have outlived her husband and all four of her children. Two cars had been sold for debts and taxes and the endless procession of funerals, leaving the garages bereft of occupants. Hunter had spotted the ad announcing their rental availability and had inquired that same afternoon. The old woman had rented him the garage on the spot, without even a cursory check of his background or his bank balance. Deep into the warm, lush, contrary world of senility, the woman had even gone so far as to replace the faltering doors with heavy new ones adorned with expensive locks so that Rupe Hunter's van would be safe from vandals and thieves, the irony of it escaping forever her faltering mind. Hunter was even granted use of the woman's late

husband's rich array of electrical tools, which fitted Hunter's needs so perfectly the sudden windfall actually had him thinking his life was moving onto a new course which would be a rainbow's slide to riches.

When Hunter showed up at his garage at 10:00 a.m., the street was deserted of people. Here lived in urban terror the elderly wives and widows of old money made in banking and real estate and medicine. On this quiet street the women had their necessities delivered, formed protective thief-watch societies, and watched with increasing alarm the encroachment of the city's slums.

When Hunter threw back a single garage door to daylight and stepped inside, his nostrils twitched at the sharp smell of paint that was not yet completely dry. He closed the door quickly and snapped on a light. The van, red-and-white this time, looked good; professional. Six months' employment at an auto-painting shop had rewarded him with the skill to mask and letter and body-stripe, had taught him about sprays and enamels and resins. His chest grew warm with pride as he looked at the results of four days of tedious, lonely work: CITY-WIDE TELEVISION REPAIRS. In-home repairs—FOR LESS. TIdewater 8-3866. Day or night.

Carefully he leaned down and touched an index finger to a fender and felt it yield under the thin layer of soft stickiness. Quickly, as though burned, he pulled the finger away and inspected the damage. He saw only the faint whorls and ridges of a fingerprint. No rain was forecast for the day. The paint would stand up for the hour's work ahead.

He backed the van carefully out of the garage, locked the doors and drove off, the anticipation of danger and excitement rising in him once more. One could tire easily of the work of daylight burglary, but never of the ancillary thrills: of the days of disguised and surreptitious surveillance; of preparing his bogus workman's identity; of artfully repainting his truck to reflect that new identity; yes, even of the thought of close brushes with discovery and apprehension by police. Only two things truly terrified him, as they terrified all daylight burglars: the sight of a front door wide open and the sight of a dog chain untethered to the fierce object it was designed to restrain.

The Charles Pifers had no dog. They lived on a wide avenue of expansive lawns and stately poplars overlooking a blue bay. If the

street on which Edna Peabody lived was representative of old money, Highland Drive North reflected the city's emerging wealth, and its emerging doctors, lawyers, politicians. Here were lush green grass, lush green money, and possessions; *new* possessions, not the pitiably dated possessions which drew rust and dust and dismissal on the streets where Edna Peabody lived.

Hunter had done his homework. From his surveillance, he had learned of the Pifers' routine. Each weekday morning at 8:45 a.m., they left together for their separate professional jobs, Pifer's as a clinical psychologist, his wife's as a juvenile-court counselor. From what Hunter had been able to observe, the couple seemed to be members of a car pool because each morning a black sedan would arrive, its male driver would pull into the Pifer driveway out of Hunter's sight and a minute later would reappear with the Pifers ensconced in its back seat. At 5:30 the car again turned up to deposit the Pifers. The driver stayed only long enough to drop off his passengers. The Pifers did not come home for lunch.

Every Tuesday and Thursday a housekeeper arrived at the Pifer residence by cab at 10:00 a.m. on the dot, a burly woman with her graying hair bunched behind her head in a bun. The cabdriver left her out at the curb and returned to pick her up at the same spot at 3:00 p.m. Today was Tuesday. It had to be Tuesday or a Thursday. No one living in this neighborhood would allow a television repairman into his home without some sort of supervision. Misfortune was turned on such slender oversights as this, but Rupe Hunter was not a burglar who made blunders.

At 10:30, he moved into this winding, opulent boulevard. The sun, high in the morning's blue sky, threw diamonds into the bay. Birds sang this rich world awake softly, and Oriental gardeners were already hard at work all down the block keeping this green world immaculate and in its perfect order, unaware this world was about to be disturbed in broad daylight.

Across the avenue from the Pifer home, a man in shorts and a safari jacket was trimming a high green hedge while his shaggy Afghan hound chased low-swooping birds.

Hunter pulled in at the curb. The man ceased his cutting and turned, lightly regarding the truck and its driver with impassive eyes.

"Good morning," Hunter said

cheerfully, his pleasant greeting causing the man's expression to warm. "I'm looking for the Pifer residence, 1582. The house numbers are hard to read from the street as they are set so far back from the roadway."

The Afghan made another dashing sortie between the man and Hunter. The shears rose and pointed across the quiet street. "The Pifers are just across the street from me. Over there. The oak and glass house."

"Yes, I see it. Much obliged."

The man's look turned wary. "The Pifers aren't home now, you know. They both work."

Rupe Hunter smiled easily. "I know. The housekeeper is supposed to let me in. Pifer probably wants to watch the baseball game tonight. Thanks again."

"Certainly."

It never hurt to ingratiate yourself a bit with the local gentry, to seem a bit hapless as a tradesman. The amusement the rich found in the disorganization of the working class always put them off their guard.

The driveway was overhung with willows. Exotic plants grew everywhere. Hunter killed the van's engine and came out with his tool kit. It contained extraordinary gear: a compact drill, cord and safe punches; a pair of thin, calfskin gloves; a jeweler's loupe; and for this particular job, a small square of chamois soaked in chloroform and safely contained in a zippered, waterproof bag.

The kitchen door was just off the driveway. Before he rang the bell, Hunter drew a woman's stocking down over his face.

The housekeeper didn't see nor feel a thing. At her first whiff of chloroform, the large woman struggled briefly as Hunter pushed her back into the kitchen. Then she sank into his arms in sleep. Hunter made her comfortable on the floor of the kitchen. Her sleep would last a half hour. Well within that time, Hunter would be packed up and gone.

In the Pifer house, there wasn't a television set to be found, but the neighbor with whom Hunter had spoken would have no way of knowing that. Hunter had expected to find several original paintings or some expensive oil prints by renowned masters, but again he was disappointed; but in a drawer of a French armoire he found the sterling flatware for which the greedy Sharpe hungered. It had the heft of good silver content. In a den off the livingroom he found a small wall safe which snapped open with just a few sharp blows from a hammer and punch. Inside there was a

brown envelope containing $2,000 in $100 bills, a batch of credit cards whose dates had expired but which could be successfully altered and sold. Hunter also found visa permits and passports to several foreign countries; marketable commodities indeed. In the master bedroom he found two diamond rings, a pearl necklace and a dozen books of rare coins. As a matter of course, he also checked the drawers of twin night stands. In one he found two men's wristwatches of considerable value, if a little aged and likely not worn in years; and in the other, a stone strung on a gold chain which the loupe revealed to be a ruby. Since he had entered the house and put the housekeeper to sleep, only a scant sixteen minutes had passed. An instinctive appraisal told him that worked out to about $1,000 a minute. It was by far the best job he'd done in months.

Hunter found a linen closet and a sheet, which he used to wrap his haul. He then moved swiftly back into the Pifer kitchen where he checked the housekeeper's pulse. It beat strong and true. Her left ankle was bent beneath its opposite number at a crazy angle and Hunter, before he left, gently straightened it to give the woman more comfort. His final act, after closing the kitchen door, would be to remove the calfskin gloves. Sharpe would never appreciate the beauty of a perfect daylight burglary, *could* never appreciate it. He was a boorish money changer, an office-bound thief; a man considerably smaller in skills than Hunter, but one who, ironically, seemed to accumulate wealth, while it drained through Hunter's fingers like grains of fine sand. The world was turned backward, it seemed to him now, as he stood with his gloved hand curled lightly around the doorknob. The ones who did all the hard, grueling work—the ones who took all the essential risks—were not the ones who profited by the greatest degree and to Rupe Hunter's way of toting there was something perversely cruel in that arrangement.

For the moment, he put the world's vagaries at his back to be pondered another time and turned the knob in his gloved hand, already feeling wrong, sensing something out of place, as though he had just walked into a room of his own possessions to sense one of them missing, but suffering from a blind spot.

Stepping through the door, finally, was like stepping out into the cold. Hunter felt the sheet sack snatched from his hand. Someone spun him about rudely and Hunter saw nothing but a

blur of blue uniforms. Handcuffs clamped down on his wrists.

He remembered Lt. Bednarik from previous encounters—some close calls; others, like this one, formal embarrassments.

The cherubic, barefaced Bednarik read Hunter his rights from a small card.

Since his star was once more about to fade away, it seemed fitting and just that Hunter put out someone else's light as well. "That typewriter theft from Vince Patricelli's warehouse down on the docks?" he mentioned to Bednarik when the detective had finished reading.

"I've heard it mentioned in my circles," he said to Hunter.

"That was my job. I laid the machines off on Milo Sharpe. The Hoag Building, on Spring Street. Room 505. He keeps a locked room called the Conference Room, except it's the office space for 503 next door. It's his warehouse. He hasn't had time to move the typewriters yet, because he's a little nervous that they might get into hands sympathetic to Vince Patricelli."

Hunter was beginning to feel better already.

"I don't mind telling you, Hunter, you've been running us a bit ragged these past two years," Lt. Bednarik admitted.

"A man can only do the best he can at what he's best," Hunter told him.

"And I suppose you want the usual postmortem. As I recall from our past meetings, you were always one to be interested in the dynamics of criminal detection."

"A period at the end of the sentence," said Hunter, eulogizing softly, "always makes the long ride back home easier to take."

"It all began with an unwitting complaint turned in to us by a good friend of yours," explained Lt. Bednarik, "an elderly woman named Edna Peabody, lives in one of those old Victorian houses over on State Avenue. Seems she has a double garage down below the house she rents to you for the storage of your van."

"Nicest old lady I ever met," Hunter said. "She's always baking me cookies and croissants, doing things like that. I sent her Mother's Day cards the last two years."

"And she speaks highly of *you*, Mr. Hunter. Although she's completely unaware of your lengthy affair with crime."

"What was Mrs. Peabody doing calling *you*?" Hunter asked.

"To report your van stolen from the garage. As I say, she became a little confused and thought the van had been stolen and so she called us. Auto Theft Division,

that is. You mustn't think all that unkindly of her. She had only your best interests at heart.

"Anyway, when Auto Theft asked for a description of the stolen van, a curious matter came up. It seems Mrs. Peabody really didn't know *what* sort of description to give. She was torn between such identifications as Acme Electrical Repairs, Aetna Roofing, Citywide Television Repairs and a host of others. Auto Theft then asked Mrs. Peabody for a license number and she replied that would be impossible because you, it seems, have quite a *batch* of license plates strung on a nail in the garage, which made it extremely difficult to tell *which one* you were using this week. That was when Auto Theft Division decided Robbery-Burglary Division might be the more appropriate department for this matter."

Hunter found some logic in what he'd just been told, but there was one small issue troubling him. "That puts you onto maybe nefarious activity, all right," he told Bednarik, "but it doesn't help you *find me,* because Mrs. Peabody is completely in the dark about my . . . far-flung employments."

"True, a city this size might have swallowed you up very nicely today, except for a suspicious eyewitness who contacted us by telephone about ten minutes ago. Man named Junius VanHorne. Lives just across the street from the Pifer place here."

"The man trimming his hedge when I drove up?"

Bednarik nodded politely.

"I spoke with him. I can't believe that. I put him off like a pro. He even gave me *directions.*"

"Hunter, Hunter, Hunter," said Bednarik, "you really should have done a little more checking on the Pifers before you decided to hit them."

"I checked on them like the C.I.A. on closet-commies. I know where they work, I know their daily routine down to the minute. A car-pool driver picks them up for work every morning, for instance."

"That's precisely what I mean, Hunter. The Pifers aren't car-pool members. The man you saw at the wheel of that car is in the employ of the Pifers as their permanent driver."

"Wha . . ."

". . . and once you were inside the Pifer house, you should have become disturbed that something didn't fit . . ."

The blind spot . . .

"OK, Bednarik. Enlighten me."

"An ironically apt turn of phrase, Hunter," Bednarik said. "Put these elements together and

tell me what they speak: no newspapers, no paintings, no magazine-strewn tables, no television set."

Hunter was having some difficulty putting these diverse elements together, and he was developing a stiff and stinging headache. "I don't follow any of this, Bednarik."

"I don't wonder. Had you put it all together, you'd have left the Pifer home immediately, thankful to save your skin. This bogus television business of yours was what put Mr. VanHorne on the phone to us. You see, Hunter, the Pifers—both of them—are sightless."

It was a dawn coming up a little too late for Rupe Hunter but he harbored no grudges against others or against himself. He was tired, his string had run itself out, and he wanted to go home and see once again the best friends he'd ever made outside of meeting Edna Peabody.

"That was your blind spot, Hunter," said Bednarik, as the detective helped him into the back seat of a patrol car. "If you'll excuse the atrocious pun."

Hunter smiled at him without malice. "You snatched the words right out of my mouth."

Then he was being whisked off for formal arraignment. Hunter leaned back in the patrol car and watched the lush neighborhood pass by the window. He would miss none of this life; nor would he miss the tensions these two free years had built in him. Milo Sharpe would be buying a little state time, and that represented a huge plus in a day replete with minus factors. He was very weary and he was cold and a few ticks now behind the rest of the world. It would do him good to get out of that world because it was beginning to confuse and beat him.

Then the kind face of Edna Peabody flashed upon the wall of his mind. He must remember to send her a Mother's Day card from prison. *Blindness*. He laughed as the word came back again to taunt his stupidity. Mother's Day . . . Whatever his several blindnesses, he would take note not to become blind to *that* day of the coming year.

It may be wise to weigh the eventual cost before giving out free advice.

Another Job

by James Michael Ullman

Peering out his bedroom window at the man lounging in the yard across the street, Bowles felt a mounting surge of anger.

"Look at him," he said, buttoning his shirt and shaking his head in disgust. "Just sitting on his patio. Doing nothing."

"Dear," his wife Clare replied, "Joe Quigley can't help it. These days, lots of people are out of work."

"Yeah." Bowles reached for a tie. He was fiftyish, burly and balding, with a potbelly that spilled over the midriff of his expensive trousers. "And like Quigley, there," he went on, "most of 'em won't stir a finger to help themselves. Where'd he work anyhow?"

Clare pulled a housecoat around her shoulders. Unlike Bowles, she'd kept her figure over the years despite his growing disinterest in her, but her features were lined and crow's-feet spewed from the corners of her eyes. "He told me once," she said, "that he was some kind of a mechanical engineer."

Bowles laughed. "No wonder they let him go. Nothing he's got over there works right. His car's always breaking down. His lawn mower's on the blink. Last year his boiler conked out because he forgot to oil the burner, and—"

"Don't make fun of the poor man."

"Well, something's wrong somewhere. Here *I* am, dressing for another hard day at the store. There *he* is, watching the sun rise. And that's not all. I run my own business. I gotta work when other people don't. Hell, tomorrow's Saturday. While other guys have the weekend off, I'll be in Chicago for another trade show. Sometimes I work seven days *every* week, just to pay taxes to help support lugs like Quigley. Boy, if *I* was unemployed . . ."

"Fat chance of that," Clare said sarcastically, "since you own the business. Which you inherited from your father, who inherited it from—"

"Oh, shut up."

"And is it *really* because Quigley's out of work that you don't like him? Or is it because he helped the candidate who beat you when you ran for the village board last year?"

"I've forgotten about that," Bowles replied.

"I wonder. Anyhow, when you see him at the Andersons' cookout tonight—"

"You've got to be kidding. You mean they invited *him*?"

"Yes. His wife and children are visiting his in-laws. The Andersons felt sorry for him, sitting alone in that big house all day. So when you see him, I want you to promise not to embarrass him."

"I'm not promising anything."

"Now, Bill . . ."

"Don't use that schoolmarm tone with me," he snapped, putting his jacket on and starting for the door. "I'm sick and tired of it."

He'd been looking for an excuse for another argument with Clare. The sooner she finally wised up and filed for a divorce, the better. Then he could stop concealing his relationship with Leona, a twenty-year-old girl he maintained in Chicago.

Clare didn't take the bait. On the verge of an angry reply, she hesitated and then said, "Of course. I'm sorry. I know how busy you are—I don't want to upset you . . ."

That night Bowles was one of the first and thirstiest customers at the Andersons' do-it-yourself bar. He mixed a martini for himself, settled in the yard with a group of men and began telling stories which always ended with his get-

ting the better of some character.

He was mixing another martini when Joe Quigley walked in. Short, sad-eyed and in his early forties, Quigley got a can of beer and stood on the fringe of the group.

Bowles went back and let the others carry the conversation for a while. Staring at Quigley, he sipped his drink and his anger grew. When he couldn't stand it anymore, he cleared his throat and asked, "Joe, how long you been out of work?"

"Oh—four months, I guess."

"Then tell me something. After all that time, why don't you look for another job?"

Conversation fell away.

Quigley shifted uncomfortably. "Well," he said slowly, "I'm hoping the company will call me back. They said they would, when business got better."

"How have you been getting by in the meantime? Just sitting around and collecting unemployment compensation?"

"That," Quigley said, "and living off my savings. Unemployment compensation in this state isn't much."

"Maybe to *you* it isn't. But to taxpayers like me, who have to foot the bill—"

"Lay off the guy," someone said. "It's not his fault if—"

"No, I'll say it all," Bowles went on. "The system's rotten, when some guys gotta support other guys almost indefinitely. Sure, anyone can get fired and be out of work for a *while*. But if it was *me*, instead of waiting around for the company to hire me back, I'd get off my duff and try to find work someplace else."

Quigley smiled. "At my age?" He shook his head. "Nobody'll touch me."

"How do you know unless you try?"

"I've talked to some people. It's always the same. I'm too old."

"Then why not start a business of your own? You're a mechanical engineer. That's a marketable skill. You said you've got savings. What's wrong? Afraid to risk your own dough on your own future?"

"It's not that. I—well, other things are involved. Sales, for instance. Sure, I've got marketable skills, but I'd be the world's worst salesman. I just don't have any aptitude for it. I'd get tongue-tied, and—"

"You're just trying to find an excuse. Hell, *anybody* can sell if he believes in what he's selling." Bowles shook his head. "But I guess some guys would rather just live off the public trough until doomsday . . ."

Clare walked over. "That's

enough," she said. "You're being unspeakably rude."

"I'm just saying what everyone's thinking."

"No you're not. You're just proving that you're one of the most loudmouthed, boorish, pigheaded—"

"Look," Quigley interrupted, "I don't want to cause trouble. Maybe I'd better go . . ." Turning, he hurried out.

Ignoring the cold stares of the other guests, Bowles raised his glass and gulped his martini. So much for Clare. So much for *all* of these suburban rubes. When he got to Chicago tomorrow . . .

It was a little after dark the next evening when Bowles walked down the narrow street leading to the building where he maintained Leona.

How nicely everything was turning out. Clare had been furious. After the party they'd had a wild shouting match, during which he maneuvered her into agreeing to seek a divorce.

That meant he could soon take Leona out of this dump. They could move together into a better building where nobody cared if you were married to your roommate or not.

Ahead, a man in a dark suit slipped out of an alley and blocked his path—Joe Quigley!

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" Bowles asked.

"Your wife sent me."

"She knows about—"

"The young dame you're keeping? Yeah. She told me she's known for months. And now I'll tell *you* something. On the company books I'm a mechanical engineer, all right. But that's just a fancy name for mechanic. And *I'm* the kind of mechanic the mob hires to kill people."

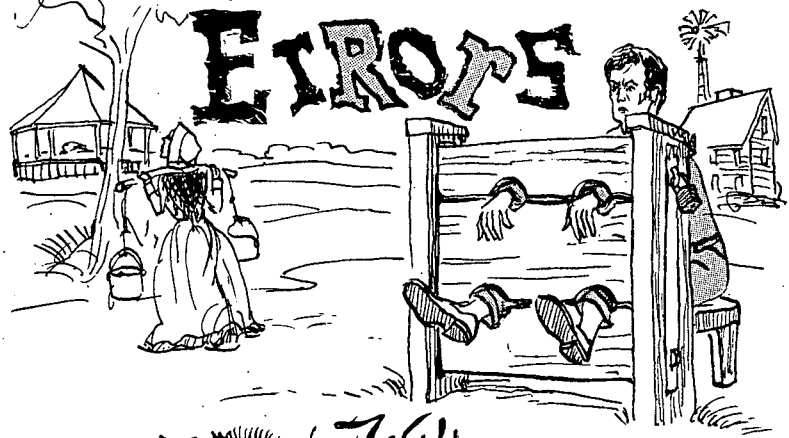
"Mob?"

"Right. The big company I work for. Business is still slow, so I'm taking your advice and going into business for myself. Even though I'm a lousy salesman I got a client first time out—your wife. When I told her I'd knock you off for ten grand, she thought that was great. She wouldn't have to wait for a divorce to be rid of you. And instead of some cheap property settlement, she'd inherit every dime you've got."

Bowles opened his mouth to reply, but whatever he started to say was drowned out by the muzzle blast of the pistol that had appeared in Quigley's right hand.

In addition to traffic hazards, it seems that one more risk has been added to tourists' woes.

Historical Errors



by William Brittain

Norman Kaner lifted his head from the pillow, slowly opened his eyes, and immediately regretted having done so. As the light reached his brain, the mining and blasting operation within his head began full tilt. He wet his lips with his tongue, vaguely considering whether a muskrat or some other furry creature had died inside his mouth sometime the previous night. A hangover of these sublime proportions should, he thought, be enshrined somewhere as an example and warning for future generations. He wondered if the Smithsonian Institution would be at all interested.

To drink so much, especially

when driving strange roads, was unforgivable. Nevertheless, Norman managed to forgive himself. There were, after all, mitigating circumstances. Just yesterday he'd taught his final class in the Pre-Revolutionary Colonial Period, and now he and Betty had the whole summer free for the tour of New England, for which they'd been planning and saving since he was a mere instructor at Hadley College. That in itself was cause for celebration.

The celebration had included four martinis at dinner in that tiny restaurant in southern Connecticut.

Furthermore, Betty's mother Vera had insisted on coming along on the vacation. No cause for rejoicing, this, but an excellent excuse for drowning one's sorrows.

Vera Blumenthal was a tiny old shrew of a woman with a mouth exceeded in size by nothing on earth except the Mississippi River and possibly the Amazon. From the time they'd left yesterday noon, she'd had a disapproving comment for each revolution of the station wagon's wheels. The back seat was too narrow, Norman was driving too fast, her arthritis was acting up, they should have taken another route to avoid traffic . . . Yakkety, yakkety, yak! Whenever Norman had attempted to talk to her, to calm her or at least shut her up, she'd resorted to her favorite catch phrase:

"A pox on you, Norman. And on all your brood, too."

A pox on you, Vera, thought Norman, pressing the heels of his hands against his eye sockets and tasting once again the dregs of the drinks he'd had. Somehow he'd reeled back to the car and managed to find the road. His memory from that point on wasn't too clear. He'd stopped for a traffic light out in the middle of nowhere, and then the car door had opened and a man said something about his being under arrest. Who'd expect a cop to be waiting right there . . .

Suddenly Norman sat bolt upright on the bed. He looked about at the stout oak walls of the room and the tiny window with the hand-wrought bars. The palms of his hands pressed against the mattress, feeling not springs but a crackling something that could have been wheat straw or corn shucks.

The man had been leading a horse. Not only that, but he'd been dressed in baggy pants, gathered at the knees. His shirt had been white, with full sleeves, and his hair had been pulled back and tied behind his head. The picture

was one Norman had seen hundreds of times in his own history books.

"What do you know about that?" he said wonderingly. "I've been busted by Paul Revere."

As if the words were a signal, there was the sound of a bolt being thrown outside the stout door. It creaked open ponderously. Bright sunlight streamed into the tiny cell, and Norman peeped through squinted eyes at the figure in the opening.

Ethan Allen, maybe? Or John Adams? The man was dressed in similar fashion to the policeman of the night before, with the addition of a wide-brimmed hat atop hair that hung almost to his shoulders. The 1700's? Norman shook his head. No, almost a century earlier. It was hard to believe that outside that door somewhere there was a land of jet planes and superhighways, smokestacks polluting the air and raw sewage turning clear water into poison—modern America.

The guard jangled a ring of heavy wrought-iron keys in his hand. "Come to your senses have you, neighbor?" he said. "Your brain was more than a little fuddled by strong spirits when Constable Wainright towed your strange machine into town last night."

"My wife . . . her mother," mumbled Norman thickly. "Where are they? Are they all right?"

The guard nodded. "Since our gaol makes no provision for women, Dame Pellow was kind enough to put them up for the night. Just now, I suspect, they're enjoying a bowl of her flummery to break their fast. But come, put yourself in order. It won't do to keep Justice Sawyer waiting."

"Justice . . . Oh, yeah. The drunk-driving charge." Norman patted his hip pocket. The thick wad of traveler's checks was still there.

He stood up, and his face turned white as the miners inside his skull let loose a three-megaton blast. With the palm of his hand he tried to smooth down his tousled hair.

"Tell me," he said, giving up the hair as a bad job and making ineffectual passes at the wrinkles in his pants, "what's this thing with the costumes? And the policeman on horseback? Do you folks always carry on like this, or is something special going on?"

"Illium—our little village—was one of the first settlements in New England. We have a long and proud heritage that we try to keep alive."

"Oh, yeah." Norman tapped his head with an index finger. "The

Bicentennial thing. Y'know, I clean forgot this was the year for it . . ."

The guard shook his head. "We predate the Revolution by more than a century. Some ten years ago the people of Illium decided we should not let the old ways and customs die. So for one month each year we do our best to relive the early days, exactly as they were, as a reminder of the stock from which we sprang."

Norman considered the oddly dressed figure. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Just one or two little things out of place, though."

"Out of place?" The guard looked as if he'd been slapped.

"Yeah. Historical errors from the wrong time. Anachronisms. Your shoes, for example."

"What about my shoes?"

"They're cut for right and left feet. Now, most of the shoes of the 1600's were made from a single last. The right and left ones were exactly the same."

"Interesting. I'll make a note of that for the village board. We try to keep everything as authentic as possible."

"Another thing. The cop last night—Wainright, I think you said his name was—he had clubbed hair."

"Clubbed?"

Norman nodded. "Tied at the back. Not really the style in Puritan days. It usually hung loose, like yours."

"Peter Wainright won't like to hear that. He's very proud of his hair. But I'm sure he'll go along in the interests of accuracy. How is it that you know all these things?"

"I'm a professor of American history. Did my doctorate on the Pilgrim and Puritan social systems."

"Ah, a man of learning. Be sure to mention it to Justice Sawyer. He puts great store by exact knowledge. Come now. We must not keep the good justice waiting."

As he marched across the village green accompanied by the key-jingling guard, Norman was amazed at how closely Illium resembled the woodcuts he'd seen of early New England villages. Windows, porches, and in some cases entire store fronts had been altered; here a home, seemingly constructed of hand-hewn timbers. Only the closest scrutiny showed they were really commercial products. There, the blacksmith shop, complete with spreading chestnut tree; the grease rack behind the facade was barely visible through the half-open door. The tiny church on the hillside, surrounded by maple trees, might actually

have been built decades before the American Revolution; amazing attention to detail.

Court was held in Justice Jonathan Sawyer's low-ceilinged livingroom. The furniture had been pulled back against the walls, and the justice's desk placed by the room's single window—a homey yet oddly formal setting for a trial.

Betty and Vera were waiting for him when he arrived. In his hungover condition, Norman was scarcely up to the combined onslaught of the two women.

"Norman!" chattered his wife. "This will put us at least a day behind schedule, if not more. I told you not to have so much to—"

"Sheer tomfoolery," chimed in Vera. "A pox on you, Norman. And on all your brood, too."

"We have no brood, Vera," Norman groaned. "There's just Betty and me, a condition I can hardly ignore since you—"

"Oyez, oyez!" intoned the guard. "The court of the village and town of Illium is now in session, Justice Jonathan Sawyer presiding. Those who have business before this court, approach and ye shall be heard. All rise, please."

When Justice Sawyer entered from the kitchen, it was all Norman could do to keep from laughing out loud. A short, fat man in a black cloak, he resembled nothing so much as a large globe draped for mourning, surmounted by a wig of indeterminate shape which insisted on drooping down over one eye.

"The charge?" chanted Sawyer in a sepulchral voice.

"Public drunk and disorderly," said the guard.

"He wasn't that at all," screeched Betty. "I—I mean he was drunk, all right. But he wasn't disorderly. Mother and I both—"

Justice Sawyer's hand slammed down on the desk. "You are here on my sufferance as observers. Nothing more. Now let's get on with it."

"But she was just trying to tell you there was nothing public about Norman's being drunk," Vera carped.

"Enough, madams." Justice Sawyer's face was livid. "By my faith, I'll have order in this court! This feminine caterwauling will cease immediately."

Momentarily cowed, the two women sank back onto their chairs.

"Now then, sir," Sawyer continued, looking at Norman, "how do you plead?"

"Guilty . . . your Honor . . . sir," mumbled Norman. "But I would like to offer an ex-

planation of why it happened."

Sawyer conferred with the guard in a hushed voice. "The court will deign to hear you out," he said finally.

"Well, it was the first day of our vacation. A half day, really, because I'd had my classes at the college all morning. There's, well, a letdown at the end of the school year, your Honor. You know how it is. I felt the need of a pick-me-up and . . . well, I guess I picked myself up too far."

"You are aware, neighbor, that under the present laws of this state I could revoke your license."

"Yes, but—"

"In addition, I could sentence you to up to sixty days in gaol and a whacking good fine?"

"Please, your Honor, it's our vacation. It won't happen again, I promise."

"However," Sawyer went on, "this court is inclined to be lenient. You seem to have enough troubles of your own without my adding to them unnecessarily." The withering glance he directed at Betty and Vera could have etched glass.

"Therefore, in keeping with the . . . eh . . . changed character of our village during this month, I sentence you to one day of confinement in the stocks."

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"The stocks. You know." Sawyer was suddenly like a child with a new toy. He swiveled about in his chair, extending hands and feet outward rigidly. "We have the stocks out there on the green, but so far nobody's been in them. It would add a great deal to the realism of our annual celebration. Otherwise . . ." Sawyer's bushy eyebrows drooped across his eyes like half-drawn blinds. ". . . the full extent of the law."

"No!" cried Betty. "I forbid it. Sitting out there with your hands and feet clamped in those boards. I'd be embarrassed to—"

"Betty, shut up!" roared Norman. "This way, we'll only be a day behind schedule." He turned back to Sawyer. "Okay, I'll go along with your sentence. Purely in the interest of historical accuracy, of course."

"Not fair." Vera again. "You could have fined him ten dollars or so, and we could have been out of this madhouse by now."

The guard took Norman by the arm and led him toward the door. Behind him, Vera and Betty were both expostulating with Justice Sawyer. As he left, Vera's inevitable rejoinder rang out in the small room:

"A pox on you, Sawyer! And on all your brood, too!"

The three boards that made up

the stocks were fitted into slotted timbers set deep in the clay soil. As Norman sat down on the hard wooden bench, the guard slid the two top planks upward, leaving a gap of about nine inches. Norman extended his legs and laid his ankles in the two worn semicircles cut into the wood. The guard lowered the center board, pinning the ankles in place.

"Now the wrists, neighbor."

Norman had to stretch forward, like an oarsman at the beginning of his stroke. The top section was lowered, clamping his wrists securely. From his pocket the guard took a pair of padlocks, clicking them into hasps at the top of the stocks.

Finally he stepped back. "There we are, sir. How do you feel?"

"Completely ridiculous," replied Norman. "Absolutely helpless. And slightly uncomfortable."

"The discomfort will get worse, I'm afraid. Still, it's not like it used to be. In the old days the townspeople would sometimes throw offal at a man in the stocks. I don't think any of the present villagers would try that."

"I imagine Justice Sawyer would be delighted if they would," said Norman. "Just to make things completely authentic. Say, how long have I got to stay in this thing?"

"Just until sundown. And I feel you should know, you've made Justice Sawyer very happy. He's always wanted to sentence someone to the stocks. For realism, you know. But none of the local people would agree to it."

"Speaking of realism, those padlocks are modern. In colonial days, wooden pins were used to hold the boards in place."

"Thank you. I'll mention that to Justice Sawyer. He's interested in keeping everything as accurate as possible. Oh, there is one other thing. I hope you won't mind."

From his pocket the guard drew a large sheet of foolscap paper and unfolded it. On it was printed in ornate letters a single word: *DRUNKARD.* The guard set it in place on the far side of the stocks.

"Thumbtacks," chided Norman. "No fair."

"Yes, I'll have to find some other way."

The guard strode off.

Norman sighed and wriggled unseen fingers. He glanced up at the sun and estimated it to be about ten o'clock—and the sun wouldn't set until nearly eight. It was going to be a long day, he decided. He hoped that not too many of the townspeople would laugh at him.

Within the hour there was a de-

cided crick in Norman's back, and the sun was beating down fiercely on his bare head. A single bead of sweat dribbled down to his chin and hung there. At the same time his nose began to itch.

A second hour passed. Norman made ineffectual passes at his shoulder with his nose, but the itching spot was just out of reach. He'd often spoken about the stocks to his classes, but until now he'd never realized the exquisite torture of actually being confined in them.

About him, the village had stirred to life. A clanging was coming from the blacksmith shop, and a girl passed by with a yoke on her shoulders from which hung two water buckets. Seeing Norman in the stocks, she tittered gleefully and then offered him a drink. At his request, she even scratched his nose. He accepted gratefully, too thirsty to be embarrassed at his helpless condition.

It was shortly after one o'clock, and fiery lances of pain were darting up Norman's back when he heard the voice behind him. "Hurts, doesn't it? Maybe this'll make you feel better."

Then hands started kneading at the aching muscles. Norman wriggled under the pressure of the fingers, moaning his pleasure at the wonderful relief.

The massage stopped, and the man walked around the stocks to face Norman. He was dressed much like the others but wore a belted greatcoat, odd for such a warm day. On the opposite side of the village green, two young men were carrying a huge timber at least ten feet long in the direction of the church.

"I'm Reverend Dabney," said the man. "Thomas Dabney. Hope I made you feel better. That's my job, and there's my factory." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the church.

"Oh, yes. You are truly a lifesaver, Mr. Dabney. When I get out of here, I'm going to buy you the biggest drink—"

"Better not. I understand that's what started this whole thing. Besides, the grog they serve at the inn tastes like dishwater. I can't wait until this month is over and I can mix myself a decent cocktail."

"You mean you can't even—"

Dabney shook his head. "'The colonial ways are our ways,' as Jonathan Sawyer's fond of saying. That's how we live for a month out of each year."

"But isn't it kind of silly to carry it too far?"

"No, I think it's worthwhile to live as our ancestors did and accept their values. And I must say, it ups attendance at church when

the law says everybody has to attend."

"But to go to such extremes seems . . ."

"You mean the stocks? It seems to me that Sawyer could have been a lot harsher. Sixty days in jail would about ruin your vacation, wouldn't it? And I daresay when you get out of there you'll think twice about drinking and driving at the same time."

"I only meant that—"

"Look, if a thing like this colonial business is worth doing, it's worth going all the way. The clothing and these stocks are only a small part of it. It's the traditions that count. Living exactly as our forebears did for a full month makes us appreciate the other eleven months even more. But you've got to do it right, everything just as it was. It's a little like climbing a mountain. What challenge would there be to that if the climber knew he had a safety net under him all the time? The experience has got to be totally real to have any meaning."

"I must say, you do try hard. I pointed out a few errors to the guard, and he acted as if I were proclaiming Holy Writ."

"Yes, I heard about that. Justice Sawyer will have them corrected by next year, never fear. Maybe you'd like to come back and visit us then, and see the improvement."

"I don't know if I'll be able to stand up in a year when I get released from this thing."

Dabney chuckled and turn to watch three men pass by. They had crude racks on their backs, piled high with pieces of firewood.

They greeted Dabney cheerfully and paid no attention at all to Norman.

Then, from behind Norman, there came a sound like a stifled scream of pain and outrage. Vainly he turned his head. Finally he caught sight of a figure running toward him, a woman in a bright pink dress of modern styling—Betty.

Yet not the Betty he knew. The figure seemed to be grasping and clawing at something on her head and at the same time emitting strange, muffled groans and cries.

She rounded the stocks and looked grotesquely down at Norman. Her head was encased in a tight cage of rigid flat strips of iron. To the base of these strips was riveted a metal collar, now closed and padlocked securely around her neck, making it impossible to remove the apparatus. From one of the strips which ran down across her lips, a knobby tang of metal extended deep into her mouth, preventing coherent

speech. With bloodied hands, Betty Kaner tore in vain at the thing which caged her skull.

"Gunhh . . . Og . . . Hurrr . . . Og . . ."

"That's a brank!" Norman yanked to free his hands but only succeeded in rubbing his wrists raw in the stocks.

Dabney nodded. "Gossip's bridle, they called it in the colonies. I understand Justice Sawyer warned her several times about shouting out in his courtroom before having it put on her."

"But it—it's inhuman."

"Fiddlesticks. If she'd just calm down, she'd be fine. She can breathe well enough. It's just talking that's impossible. And she has the run of the town. It's not as if she'd been shut up somewhere."

"But that—that thing on her head!"

"Og hurrr! Og hurrr!"

"Of course it hurts," said Dabney. "Stop pulling at it, and you'll be fine."

"Dabney, can't you see she's almost out of her mind with fright and shock?"

"All the better for you, old man. I guarantee when that comes off, she won't be nearly the shrew she was when it was put on."

With a moan of pure misery, Betty sank onto the dusty earth, wrapping her arms tightly about Norman's extended leg in pleading.

"Dabney, I've had enough of this. To blazes with our vacation. I intend to see the authorities about these . . . these outrages."

"Nonsense. Look at it this way. Think of the added value to your history classes. Now you can speak to them from firsthand experience about colonial punishments." Dabney rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You know, that brank's been in our museum for about two hundred years. I didn't think we'd ever actually get to use it."

"It's monstrous!"

"No, Mr. Kaner, it's not. It's simply the way we were, more than two hundred years ago. Oh, we're not perfect in our re-creation of the past. But we're getting there."

Dabney turned to look across the village green, where a group of villagers were heading for the church, uttering loud shouts.

"I must go," he said. "I have other business."

"How can you see two fellow humans being tortured and then tell me you have other business? Don't you find that odd for a man in your line of work?"

"Not torture, Mr. Kaner. Punishment. Punishment for acts against the general welfare of the commonwealth. Punishment that

is just. The punishment of our forefathers."

Something nakedly evil gleamed behind Dabney's eyes, like a snake lying in wait.

"It may interest you to know," he said, "that just before noon our local physician visited the Sawyer household. The justice had begun feeling poorly, as did his wife and both sons."

"So?"

"Measles. The doctor said he'd never before seen the disease take a whole family so suddenly."

"What's that got to do with my wife and me?"

"Not you, Mr. Kaner. And not your wife."

"Then who . . ."

"Think on it, Mr. Kaner. Think on it."

Dabney shouted at the crowd of villagers and then trotted off to join them.

Madness; the whole village was mad with their lust for historic accuracy. Betty looked up at him, her eyes pleading behind the iron cage. A slight moan came from her throat.

Moments later, from the churchyard behind the maple trees, a faint cheering came to their ears. A pall of black, greasy smoke streaked the blue sky, and then, hanging in the air like a palpable thing, was heard a single shrill scream, torn from the throat of someone tortured beyond endurance.

Norman knew then who had screamed, and in his mind the same voice came to him, snapping harshly at a little fat man in a black robe and an oversized wig:

"A pox on you, Sawyer! And on all your brood, too!"

Measles!

Even as his stomach heaved at the thought of what was happening up there on the hill, a single irrelevant thought came to Norman's mind—another historical error.

In the colonies, hanging or pressing to death with great rocks were the punishments.

In the entire history of New England, there was not a single recorded case of a witch being executed by burning.

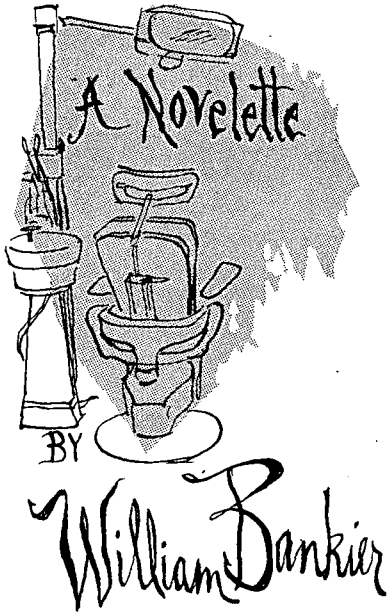
It is possible that nothing ever happens in life unless one makes it happen—in one way or another.

The dental building was in a respectable part of Montreal, but it was old. The antique elevator was a mahogany coffin standing on end. Years ago when Gerry Lunsford took his first ride in it, the door closed and the box remained motionless for seconds before it began lurching upward a few inches at a time. He almost panicked. Lunsford's claustrophobia could drive him off a crowded bus or even out of his company's board room if he allowed himself to think about the closed door.

His appointment today was going to be an ordeal but not because of the scheduled root-canal

work. He could bear pain. It was the feeling of being trapped in the chair with his mouth jammed full of appliances, unable to move while the animal inside him insisted on moving *now*; that was the torment he would have to live with for the next hour.

He ignored the waiting elevator and started climbing the first of six flights of stairs, taking them lightly, the change bouncing in the pockets of his suit. He was in shape, he exercised every morning before breakfast. Bernice had walked in once and reeled back in genuine fright, seeing him spread-eagled on the carpet, thinking he had passed out. When he tightened his stomach muscles and raised his legs, they both laughed. That was years ago when they were still laughing.



Lunsford slowed his pace. He could thank his lucky stars for the considerate Dr. Telling. It had only been necessary to mention the panicky feeling to him once.

"I feel very stupid, Michael. But I get this urge to climb out of the chair. It's claustrophobia; I have to move, I have to run."

Michael Telling's ruddy face had looked down at him with an expression of simple interest in the small blue eyes. "That's OK. You just tell me and you can get up any time you want. No problem."

Then, as he fitted a rubber dam across Lunsford's mouth, he fixed it so that it covered only a part of the opening. "I'm leaving you a hole you can climb out of," he said, grinning.

What an understanding man! Bernice had found a beauty when she came up with Michael Telling.

Lunsford's heart was pounding and his shirt was sticking to his chest when he reached the sixth-floor landing. He stood for a minute outside the door, running a comb through his closely-trimmed gray hair. He wanted to look his best because Margo Man-

tro would be there and he intended to ask her to come with him and have a drink.

This chance of socializing with the dental assistant was the reason why Lunsford would accept appointments only at the end of the afternoon. Bernice said he was crazy; Michael got tired like anybody else and would not be as efficient late in the day. But Lunsford liked being the last patient, then hanging around for a few minutes and latching onto Margo as she came out of the building.

One time, Telling came out on Margo's heels and saw Lunsford holding her arm and flagging a taxi. "I'm going to squeal on you two," he said.

"You can't talk," Margo said, "the way you and Mrs. Lunsford carry on."

Lunsford remembered this remark later and spent some time wondering if there was anything in it. There had been a time when his feelings of jealousy were as strong as any man's. When Colleen was a baby and Bernice was home looking after her, Lunsford, away at the office all day and sometimes into the evening, would torture himself with suspicion. Not anymore, however. He must be getting old.

He opened the waiting room door and stepped into an area of white walls with magazines scattered over a number of low tables. FM radio played through a concealed speaker. The room was empty. Usually there would be a mother waiting for a child, or a couple of patients would be ahead of him, but not today. He had the place to himself.

Before he could sit down, Margo Mantro stepped out of the inner office. "Good afternoon."

Lunsford had long ago ceased trying to figure out why Miss Mantro was so appealing to him. Almost all of her features could be faulted; almond-shaped eyes slightly heavy in the lid, teeth protruding behind full lips, her smooth black hair cut short with no particular styling—but she had a vibrancy about her, a sense of supreme confidence in her femininity.

"Hello, Margo. This place is a tomb today."

"There was some confusion. Michael got his calendar mixed up so he put off some people he shouldn't have."

"Bloody morgue around here."

Michael Telling appeared in the doorway of his surgery. He filled it, stooping his shoulders, carrying the bristling red head forward. "I could set my watch by you, Gerry. Come on in."

The dentist went into the small

office beside the surgery leaving Lunsford and Margo alone in the reception room.

"Can we have our drink afterward?" Lunsford asked her.

"You won't feel like it. He has a lot of work to do on you this afternoon."

"I'll feel like it. Meet me at the Empire?"

"I should go home. I have things to do before the weekend."

"What things?"

"Washing my hair. Packing some things. I'm going up to the Laurentians."

"Oh, come on and have a drink."

"Just more talk, Gerry?"

"I have to talk. These are bad days for me, Margo. Something has to happen."

Telling's voice issued from the office. "Margo, honey, you've got to stop hiding that X-ray file."

"Coming!" She looked straight into Lunsford's eyes. Rising on her toes, she slipped an arm around his neck and kissed him on the mouth. She smelled of cinnamon.

Margo hurried into the office and Lunsford walked into the surgery. He stood by the open window and looked past the billowing curtains to the courtyard, six floors below. The backs of deserted buildings, broken windowpanes, a fractured rain barrel met his eyes. Faintly, from the office, the busy voices of Margo and Dr. Telling.

With the excitement of his contact with the girl diminishing, Lunsford found himself slipping back into the cold, gray pool of depression he had been struggling through these past weeks. How quickly one kiss from her had lifted him out of it. He remembered how Bernice had been able to do this to him twenty years ago with her boldly erotic behavior in the park, on a crowded bus, anywhere.

Nothing was happening these days. If their feet touched before they went to sleep, they excused themselves. How very courteous they were in bed—but nowhere else in the apartment.

"The agent says houses are going to go up. Now is the time to buy." He saw her sitting wedged in at the end of the kitchen table, coffee mug poised below her upturned chin, the place mat littered with crumbs from the slice of toast she had destroyed before eating part of it.

"Fifty-five thousand dollars," Lunsford said.

"We have fifteen in cash to put down. Without touching the mutual funds."

"A forty-thousand-dollar mortgage loan. That's forever."

"Pay it off sooner. Use your bonuses at Christmas."

"That's vacation money. Don't you want to go back to England? We said we'd make it a month next time. See Dover again, maybe go on to France."

"We can do that and buy a house, too."

Lunsford tried to explain how he felt. "For me, being locked into a mortgage would be like being buried alive."

"It's called security. A place of our own instead of always paying rent to a landlord. Dammit, Gerry, we're the only people I know who make what you make and still live in an apartment."

"I didn't think you'd understand."

He heard the sound of water running in the sink. Dr. Telling was washing his hands. Lunsford turned from the window and forced himself to sit in the chair. He leaned back and raised his feet.

Telling stood over him, drying his hands on a towel. A slight frown creased his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"You know me, Mike. The old anxiety."

"Listen, I'm going to make this as easy on you as I can." Telling handed Lunsford a couple of capsules and swished some water into a plastic cup. "Swallow these. As we go along, you'll start to feel out of it. But I guarantee you won't feel anxious."

"What are they?"

"Very powerful tranquilizers. Drink 'em down and we'll start with the easy part."

Lunsford swallowed the capsules.

Margo came into the room and stood at Telling's shoulder. Her presence helped Lunsford relax. He lay back and stared into the reflecting light above his face. He read the manufacturer's name over and over. He read it backwards. He counted the ripples in the corrugated glass reflector. The dentist's hands were busy with the needle, but they were deft and gentle. He barely felt the pressure as the local anesthetic was applied. While it took effect, they left him alone for a few minutes.

He lay there waiting for the panic of claustrophobia to overtake him. It was early for that, of course. It usually began when his mouth was full of metal and the dentist was engaged in the trickiest part of the work—but maybe not this time. The capsules were taking effect; he felt a warm sensation of tranquillity.

Telling returned, said something reassuring and went to work. Margo handed him the in-

struments he needed, opened drawers, closed them, left the room. Did she come back? Lunsford could not tell. He heard sounds only faintly, as from a great distance.

The session which he had dreaded so much for days was, in fact, anticlimactic. It was all over while he was still waiting for it to begin. Telling said something to him which he barely grasped, grinned cheerfully and left the room. Margo cranked him up in the chair, unfastened the bib from around his neck, lowered the upholstered arm and set him free.

"That was a piece of cake," he said to Telling, sticking his head inside the office where the dentist was turning the pages of his calendar.

"Watch yourself," the dentist said, "you're still a little high."

"Can I have a drink?"

Telling winked at Margo over Lunsford's shoulder. "As long as you have a qualified nurse in attendance."

Lunsford left the old building delighted at how well he was feeling. His jaw was stiff on the right side, but apart from that he felt no ill effects. He walked three blocks to the Empire Hotel. The Candlelight Bar was busy on Friday afternoon, the happy hour about to begin, but their table, the small one behind the piano, was unoccupied. He slipped into a deep leather chair and ordered a double Scotch and water and a gin and tonic for Margo.

She showed up as soon as the drinks did.

"That was fast," he said.

"You're under heavy medication," she said. "I'm not supposed to leave the patient on his own."

"Bless your heart, Margo." They raised their glasses and drank. Then he said, "No, not bless your heart. I'm through saying trivial things to you."

"Not bless my heart? What, then?"

"I love you, Margo. That's what."

She laughed, but when he extended a hand toward her cheek, she brushed her lips across his fingers. "What was in those capsules?" she asked.

"Truth, maybe. Come away with me. Let's go somewhere and not come back."

"Be careful, Gerry."

"It's so simple, I should have suggested it before. Let's go to England and find a place in London. We'll spend years walking down different streets."

"You've got a wife, Gerry. And a daughter."

"Colleen is twenty-one. And she's got the right idea; she's

hardly ever home. Spends all her time with her friend Steve. They're not talking about mortgages and pensions and getting the furniture recovered in gold thread."

"And Bernice?"

"We ran out of our relationship years ago. She'll fall down on her knees and thank me."

Margo smiled into her drink. "I'll believe that when it happens."

"Never mind her. This is between you and me." He put the back of his hand under her chin and raised her eyes to his. "I'm dying," he said. He saw her blink. "I mean nothing else is going to happen in my life unless I make it happen."

"I want to come with you, but it isn't that easy."

"What's the problem?"

"My job."

"Mike? He's a pussycat. Tell him what we're doing. If anybody would understand people wanting to get away, Michael Telling will."

"You, maybe, but not me. He doesn't like anybody interfering with what is his."

"You don't belong to him, you only work for him."

"You don't know him as well as I do." She finished her drink and Lunsford caught the waiter's eye. "Two years ago," she continued, I was working for another dentist, a very nice old man named Willibroad. Dr. Telling came to have some work done; haven't you ever wondered what dentists do when they have a toothache? Anyway, from that one meeting, Michael decided he wanted me to work for him. He took me to lunch and made me a very flattering offer, a lot more money and extra holidays. When I told Dr. Willibroad, he raised my salary because he wanted to keep me."

"That's what I would have done."

"So I got back to Michael and he sounded kind of cold on the telephone. Then the next thing I knew, Dr. Willibroad came in one morning and told me I'd better accept Telling's offer. Told me never to mind working out my notice, just to go. I couldn't get him to level with me. But a few weeks later, when I was working for Michael, he took me to lunch again. Do you know what he'd done?"

"Tell me."

"He hired two hoodlums and sent them around to Dr. Willibroad's house to talk to him. They said they were from my family and they wanted me to take this other job. I don't know what else they said but they must have

scared the blazes out of him."

Lunsford was appalled. "I wouldn't have believed it."

"To tell the truth, I was pleased that Michael wanted me so badly he'd go to those ends to have me. But I've begun to understand him. He's that way about anything he sets his mind on." She tried her new drink, pouring into it the dregs of the first one. "So I don't think he'll be wild about my taking off with you."

Lunsford said, "OK. That's a problem to be solved. Will you let me talk to him?"

"With pleasure."

"I'll call him at home." He looked at his watch. "Would he be there by seven?"

She laughed. His enthusiasm was getting to her. "Eager beaver," she said.

"If we delay, it will never happen. All I needed was your approval, and I think I have that."

"What will we live on?"

"Sweetie, money is the least of our problems. I have all we'll need for the foreseeable future. I'm talking about the next three years. Anybody who plans beyond that these days is an idiot. The days of the peaceful retirement and comfortable old age are gone forever, if they ever existed. We live now. Right?"

They squeezed hands. Her face was radiant. "Right, I suppose. Why not?"

There was a flight to London leaving at 11:15 that night. Lunsford called from the bar, using his clout with the travel agency that handled all his company's business. When they were confirmed, he delivered Margo home and told her he would pick her up at 8:30. Then he powered his car aggressively through rush-hour traffic to his apartment building. Telling's capsules were still affecting him. He felt light-headed and bursting with euphoria.

Bernice met him at the door and followed him into the bedroom. She said, "You're under a full head of steam tonight."

"Feeling very fine."

"I telephoned Michael. He said it went well."

"One of the world's great dentists, and a gentleman through and through." He fished his two suitcases from under the bed. "That reminds me, I have to call Michael in a few minutes. Do we have his home number?"

"Yes. It's in my book." She paused. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just have to tell him something."

He was opening bureau drawers and transferring neatly-folded garments into the suitcases. Bernice was sitting on the corner of her

bed. From time to time he glanced at her. Her sturdy legs were crossed, her back straight as a board.

"Why two bags?" she asked. "You ordinarily make do with one."

"It isn't a business trip, love. I'm going away."

She did not speak for quite a while. A lot of useless dialogue was being edited in her sensible mind. "Is somebody going with you?"

"Margo."

She laughed abruptly. "Michael's Margo? That little tartar!"

"I wouldn't expect you to see what I see in her."

"On the contrary. If one enjoys making love to animals, I should imagine she'd do very well."

"It'll be a refreshing change from making love to a statue."

"I've never been called that before."

"It's what you've become."

"It's what you've turned me into."

Lunsford stopped and stood erect, feeling a loss of breath. The freezing was coming out of his jaw; a thin sliver of pain worked its way between his clenched teeth. This was crazy. He was leaving this woman forever; why argue with her? "Would you get Michael's home number for me? I'm in a hurry." He snapped shut the first bag.

She arose, opened a drawer in the bedside table and took out a small blue leather book. She found a page and laid the book down faceup. "There it is."

"Thank you."

"Have you told poor Margo what a baby you are?"

"If I'm a baby, she'll find out."

"I pity her."

"Don't. When I left her a little while ago, she looked remarkably happy."

"I pity both of you. You've got a life here, Gerry. You're established, you've got status and position. And you're about to throw it all away."

"I've got nothing. My life is over if I stay here. Everything is all taken care of. Fifteen more laps around the track at the agency and then retirement, if I'm still alive. With a pension that won't be worth anything when I get it."

"Nothing to worry about, then," she said.

He turned to her, absorbing the dangerous effect of her withering smile. "The money won't stop because I'm gone. I'll see that you have plenty." He went to her and took her hand. The fingers were clenched in a hard fist. He put an arm around her and drew her to

him, kissing her cool forehead, but her folded arms were between them, preventing his body from touching hers. He felt he had attended to a formality.

He returned to his packing. "I won't need any supper," he said.

"You never do when you've been drinking." She went back to her perch on the end of the bed. "What about Colleen? This isn't just you and me."

"If Colleen were still a child, there might be something to consider."

"She's coming over later with Steve. What shall I tell her?"

Lunsford went to his bureau and wrote swiftly on a pad of paper.

"Colleen the Queen," he wrote, using their latest intimate salutation, "now hear this. The old man is up, up and away like Supermensch as of tonight. Much to explain and would have words with you face to face. Or face to face to face if that lout Steve is with you. Am departing for London on Air Canada at 11:15. Please come out to Dorval and see me off. Will explain all then. Luv, Daddyo."

He tore the sheet from the pad and placed it on the table near the bedroom door. "There," he said, "you don't have to tell her anything." He went back to his packing and completed it quickly. Then he went to the telephone and dialed Michael Telling's home number. Bernice absorbed each twist of the dial.

"Hello?" The familiar, hearty voice.

"Michael, this is Gerry Lunsford."

"Uh-oh. How are the teeth?"

"Nothing wrong there at all, Mike. Your usual super job. No, this is something else. Have you got a minute?"

"Shoot."

"Well, I'm getting set to go away, to London as a matter of fact. Flying out tonight."

"Lucky dog. You advertising guys have all the fun."

"It isn't business. Actually, I'm going away for good."

"Sounds like a sudden decision. Did you know this afternoon?"

"It was in the back of my mind, and then it all came together. Anyway, Bernice is staying here; she can explain more to you next time you see her, but right now there's a particular thing I have to tell you."

"Yes?"

"I'm taking Margo with me."

"My Margo?"

"She wants to come, but she told me you might be a little upset at losing her. I hope it doesn't hang you up too much."

Telling's reply came without hesitation. "It hangs me up a hell of a lot. You can't just pull her out like that."

"I know it's sudden, but that's how these things are. The feeling takes you and you have to do it. Now or never."

"I don't know what the hell's come over you, Gerry. But you'd better think again."

"I don't have to. I've done my thinking."

"And it's all wrong. Don't do it, my friend. I'm not kidding."

"I *am* doing it. We're getting on that plane tonight and we'll be in London in the morning. We didn't even have to tell you. This is a courtesy call. If you don't appreciate it, I'm sorry."

"I don't appreciate it at all. I went to a lot of trouble to get that girl in my office."

"Yes, I heard about that."

"Then you'd better believe I don't want her stolen from me."

"Nobody's stealing anybody. She's a free woman and she's decided to come away with me."

"You won't get away with this, Lunsford."

"You can't stop me." Lunsford slammed down the telephone and turned to close the second bag. His hands were trembling. Bernice was smiling at him. He said, "Michael Telling is out of his mind."

"You're the one who's out of his mind. I've been watching you. You've been coming apart for the past six months."

"Maybe I have. But now I'm back together."

"Like hell. You're just transporting the disaster. You're going to fall apart in London. Alone, with nobody to support you."

"I won't be alone," he said. "I'll have Margo with me."

"Michael isn't going to like that." She got up and took one of the bags, helping him to the front door.

"Michael will have to live with it."

"You don't know Michael."

Lunsford turned, with the vague idea that he would kiss his wife of twenty-five years for the last time, but she was on the other side of the luggage and there seemed to be no expectation of affection in her. He opened the door, stooped over and hefted the bags. "Goodbye, Bernice."

There was a thoughtful look on her face. "What is it you're really after, Gerry? Adventure?"

"I suppose that's what it is. I want to put in a few events between me and the end of my life."

"Well, in that case, good luck."

There was an elevator waiting. He stepped into it and the door

closed, cutting him off forever from his old life. He fell sixteen floors to whatever was waiting for him.

It was too early to pick up Margo; she needed time to pack, so Lunsford drove around, then selected a bar at random. He liked walking into a place where he was a stranger. The bartender and customers knew nothing of his weaknesses and past failures. That meant Lunsford was able to pretend for a while that he was a success.

Back at his old hangout, the Rainbow, this was not the case. Dallas had poured him many a whisky, noting his glazed eyes, picking up on the continuing saga of his failed existence.

"You all right, Mr. Lunsford?"

"I should be. I make $35,000 a year."

"Dallas, with a sheepish grin, said, "That's a lot more than I make."

"I have a beautiful daughter who's almost twenty-one, and she's not pregnant."

"A lot of guys would like to be able to say that."

"My wife is forty-three, almost as old as I am. She looks fifteen years younger."

"I've seen her. Mrs. Lunsford is a great-looking lady."

"Apart from the flu once a year and a couple of bad teeth, I've never been sick a day in my life."

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Lunsford."

"Then tell me, Dallas. Why do I feel as if a car just hit me?"

Dallas never had a proper answer to this question. What was more important, the bartender Lunsford was now approaching would not even have to be asked. Lunsford was up. He was sky-high.

"Rye," he said, "with some plain water and a little ice. Make it a double."

The anxiety he had felt in saying good-bye to Bernice was gone. In the manner of a man dragging himself free of a bog, he felt light-footed, capable of great speed and distance.

Michael Telling's anger on the phone, disturbing at the time because it came as a surprise, now seemed like the petulant discontent of a child not able to have his own way. Well, let him find himself a new nurse.

Lunsford's drink came and he swallowed almost half of it at the first draft. Was he being a rat in this affair, serving himself at the expense of those around him? If so, he wasn't the only one. The people he worked with showed him all kinds of imperfections every day. They were prepared,

most of them, to live and let live.

As he went outside and got back into his car, the idea of live and let live echoed in his mind, bouncing off the stern image of Dr. Michael Telling. Would the dentist be prepared to forgive and forget? What could he do, call in the Mounties? Or give Bernice substandard dental care? Fat chance of that with the way those two got on.

Lunsford parked outside Margo's place. He entered the vestibule, gave the bell labeled Mantro two long rings. Almost immediately the inner door lock buzzed and he went in.

A door opened at the end of the ground-floor corridor. He entered and closed the door behind him. Margo was in the livingroom, sitting on the edge of the chesterfield, her back turned to him, her hands over her face.

"What is it?"

"He was here. He just left."

"Who?"

"Michael. He said you called him." Her voice was crushed.

Lunsford went to Margo and lifted her up. She was trembling. He drew her hands away from her face and saw the residue of terror in her eyes. Her cheeks were wet. She was wearing a nylon gown. The drawstring neckline was torn. She drew it together with one hand, staring at him apprehensively.

"Did he do that?"

"He didn't hurt me. He just tore my robe."

"I'll kill him."

"No, Gerry. Don't do anything. He's gone."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm not hurt." He was turning toward the door and she held his shoulders, bringing him back. "He sounded crazy. If you get involved with him now, we'll never get away."

"He put his hands on you. I'll kill him."

"I'm not hurt, Gerry. Stay with me." The damaged robe slipped down over her shoulders. "If you go after him, we'll miss the plane, we'll never get away."

His rage caused his hands to tremble as he lifted the torn material. "There's a mark on your shoulder."

"It's nothing." She closed her eyes.

He drew her to him, kissing her lips, lifting her in his arms so that she hung heavily against him. He carried her back to the sofa and sat down—she was laughing now, not crying.

"You're going to be something of a delight to live with."

"I think we'll manage."

He helped her finish packing.

They had to hurry to make the check-in at Dorval. She was sure she was forgetting a million things and she made frantic tours of the apartment, opening and closing drawers, writing a note for her girlfriend who was going to move in and use up the last three months of her lease.

She was dressed in a gray traveling suit with chunky wine-colored shoes on her feet and she looked unbearably cute, her movements alive with the energy of a child. As he opened her front door and she stood beside him, her hand on the light switch, she said, "Did you feel a pang saying goodbye?"

"Very minor."

"I don't feel a thing. I suppose I'll feel sad later."

They drove swiftly to the airport, past the low shapes of manufacturing plants, some of them Lunsford's clients at the agency. What would they say when the word got around that he had bailed out? They would have to envy him, those who were honest with themselves. They'd have to wish they had the guts to try something similar.

The radio was on and Mancini strings and piano made the glowing interior of the car into their own corner of the world. Margo's hand was on his thigh, resting gently. He was running away from what he had assumed were his permanent responsibilities. Where were the problems? Why was he feeling no guilt?

They checked in at the airline counter to find their flight delayed. There was time for a drink or two before takeoff. He was guiding Margo into the lounge when he heard his daughter's voice.

"Dad!"

There she was, a tall figure in jeans and khaki jacket, breaking away from her escort, Steve. She ran across the concourse and stopped in front of him, her face stern and mischievous at the same time. She was excited. "What's this I hear about your cracking up?"

"Am I acting crazy? What's your opinion?"

"Well, I guess you only live once." Colleen glanced over his shoulder at Margo waiting in the doorway of the lounge.

Lunsford called Steve over. Past the black beard and the heavy glasses, he could make out an interested face. "Steve, that's Miss Mantro over there. Go into the lounge and find a table for four. We'll be right with you."

He took Colleen's hand and they walked slowly down the marble corridor. She was almost

as tall as he, and her pace matched his in easy strides.

The best part of his earlier days, the part he remembered now, used to be the hour after supper when he took his daughter for a walk and bought her an ice-cream cone. He would hold her on one arm outside the apartment building as the sky darkened and the air turned cool, their faces side by side.

Now, this tall young woman strolling beside him said, "Is she the reason, Dad?"

"Margo? I'm happy she's coming with me. It means I won't be lonely. But it didn't start with her."

"Is it Mom?"

"Not really. Your mother and I were good for each other for a long time. Mom is OK, you're OK, Steve is OK. I'm the one who needs a change."

"You think Steve is OK?"

"Why, don't you?"

"He's all right to drink beer with, but I wouldn't want to wake up beside him for the rest of my life."

They stopped walking and faced each other. Lunsford said, "If you have any doubts, kiss him off. Don't make a mistake you'll regret for the rest of your life."

Colleen grinned. "My generation doesn't do that. That was your generation." She kept smiling at him. "I was hoping I could get on that plane with you tonight."

Lunsford felt embarrassed. "Three's a crowd, honey."

"I didn't mean to buy another ticket. You said you were only taking her so you wouldn't be lonely. If I came instead, you wouldn't be lonely."

"There's more to it than that."

"Well, at last you've admitted it." Her hands were fists in her pockets. "You're getting old and you want to try convincing yourself you're still young by going to bed with that fat nurse."

"Is this what you came here to tell me?"

"No. And I'm sorry I said it."

"Don't be sorry. The truth sets us free." Lunsford strolled on and she followed him. "And your old Dad is now free as a bird."

When they went into the lounge, Colleen refused to sit down. She took Steve's hand and drew him to his feet. With her other hand, she patted Margo's shoulder. "Good luck, young lovers," she said. "Keep looking over your shoulder in London. If you see somebody following you, it could be me and Steverino."

Lunsford took out some money and pushed it at the boy. "Let me get these drinks," he said.

"Not on your life, Mr. Luns-

ford. Drink all four of them and have a great trip."

The drinks Steve had ordered proved to be doubles. When their flight was called, they were feeling quite high and the mood of exhilaration was back. In the lineup at the boarding gate, Lunsford was standing close against Margo's back when he felt her body stiffen.

"What?"

She half-turned and frowned toward a news agent's booth. "He's here."

"Who he?"

"Michael. He was watching us."

Lunsford felt a cold steel spring compress inside his stomach. The warming effects of the alcohol vanished instantly and left him with a grainy feeling in his eyes. He craned his neck to scan the concourse but saw no sign of the dentist.

"Are you sure it was him?"

She moved so unsteadily that he took her arm and guided her toward the airplane.

"God help us," she said. "If you could have seen the look on his face."

"What time is your appointment?" Margo called from the bedroom.

"Ten-thirty." Lunsford was still getting used to the dim lighting in the mews house bathroom. It had low-wattage fluorescent tubes concealed behind either edge of the huge, gloomy mirror. To shave the left side of his face, he had to walk from the sink to the other side of the mirror and lean part way over the black bathtub.

The macabre tub had some value; Margo looked good in it.

He finished shaving, splashed on some of the new lotion she had bought him the day they arrived, and went into the bedroom to finish dressing.

"You are one strange man," Margo said. She was propped up against two pillows with a sheet across her bare body. At nine-thirty, in July, the room was pleasantly cool. Through the open window came sounds of industry from the auto repair shops down the lane. The stone walls and cobbled paving of the mews acted as an echo chamber, making sleep impossible when the pub closed or when one particularly throaty set of neighbors drove home and bayed behind their open windows.

"How am I strange?" he asked. He leaned against her, letting her massage his scalp. The inflated, floating feeling was back. Every once in a while he tuned out, lost track of what was happening. If it kept up, he would have to call somebody.

"I'm talking about the interview. Before we left Montreal, you said there was lots of money."

"There is."

"All right. We're two weeks in England and here you are, about to lock yourself into another job."

"Because I want to, not because I have to. There's a difference."

"If you say so."

"And the money won't hurt. Sooner or later we'll need it."

She saw him close his eyes. "Are you all right? Are those teeth bothering you again?"

"A little bit." The throbbing in his jaw was just enough to bear. It came and it went. He said nothing about the light-headedness. He didn't want anything to spoil the precious mood they had achieved.

Margo stroked his jaw. "If it doesn't stop soon, I'm going to find a dentist for you."

"OK. But let's give it a day or two."

She saw him away at the front door, her kiss tasting of toothpaste. "Tell me again where we're meeting," she said, pretending to be scatterbrained.

"The National Portrait Gallery. In front of Robert Louis Stevenson. At 2:30."

He looked back and she was standing in the doorway with one hand raised, a yellow-flowered figurine framed in white woodwork. The garage mechanics raised their heads from the workings of MG's and Porsches, looked at her, looked at him.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said and they responded with perfunctory good cheer as he whistled down the lane.

It was a fifteen-minute walk to Oakley's Advertising and he was in no hurry, so he stopped at a greengrocer's to buy an apple which he ate along the way, chewing carefully on the good side of his jaw.

Sternthal, the creative director at Oakley's, had been very positive during the first interview earlier in the week. He was a New Yorker and was happy to see an experienced "American" after having to tolerate a staff of low-pressure Englishmen who didn't understand selling. Lunsford did not bother pointing out that he was a Canadian. He knew what Sternthal was getting at.

"Sell," Sternthal had crowed, "they don't even like to use the word." He was a short, compact man with wiry white hair and a Will Rogers squint. He was in his shirt sleeves. "Tell you what I mean. Went into a food store the other day and asked for kitty litter. Girl said, 'We don't do kitty litter.' She meant they didn't *sell* it, but she couldn't say the dirty

word. Nobody does around here."

Today's discussion was to be a formality as Lunsford understood it. They would probably dicker over money, but he was in good shape. He could accept whatever Oakley's wanted to offer.

The first indication that all was not well came from Sternthal's secretary. The other day she had been effusively courteous. This morning she seemed preoccupied. She showed him into the inner office with a minimum of fanfare and then got the hell out.

Sternthal was busy with papers on his desk. "Sit down, Gerry," he said. He used the mandatory North American first-name salutation, but he did not look up. Bad news.

Lunsford sat down and tried to relax. So what if the verdict was no? His life did not hang on the outcome of this meeting. Finally the grizzly head tipped back and Lunsford was allowed to see one of Sternthal's wrinkled grins. "OK, Gerry, how's it going?"

It was a funny opener. The man could not really expect to hear a news report. "It's going fine, Len. How are things at Oakley's?" That was about as quickly as he could return the ball to Sternthal's side of the net.

"Not so good on this end. I wish you'd have given me the full story the other day, Gerry. I went to my managing director in good faith."

"What full story?"

"I told him I'd found the guy we were looking for, and now I learn what happened with you. I wish you'd have leveled with me. This is no way to start a relationship."

The ache from Lunsford's jaw flowed up into his forehead. He wanted not to close his eyes in Sternthal's face, but he had to do it. "I'm not with you, Len. What have you heard?"

"About the way you left Montreal. A wife abandoned. The company left in the lurch without any notice at all. This is not the way I like to see a man operate. I've never operated that way."

"Neither have I."

"You mean it isn't true?"

"It's a corruption of the truth. Not the whole picture."

Sternthal picked up a piece of paper, frowned at it, set it down again. "Well . . ."

Lunsford said quietly, "How did you get hold of this information, Len?"

"We were told. I hoped you'd be able to say it was false info, Gerry."

"Who told you?"

"If it's true, I don't see that it makes any difference."

"I'd like to know. If somebody is making defamatory phone calls about me . . ."

"I'd never listen to a phone call. Man came in and sat right where you're sitting."

Lunsford looked down at the arms of the chair, seemed to sense them moving up to take hold of him, to make him a prisoner. He sat forward and the arms relaxed. "What was his name?"

"Said his name was Templeton."

"I don't know any Templeton." Lunsford got up. He looked out Sternthal's window at a sea of roofs and chimney pots.

"I'm sorry about this, Gerry. I suggest you level with the next person you see. Get it right out on the table."

"What did Templeton look like?"

Sternthal had a good eye and a writer's command of words. As Lunsford listened with mounting anguish, the American adman gave an exact description of Michael Telling.

Back on the pavement, Lunsford walked along Praed Street, passing several pubs until he came to one that seemed right. He went in and paid for a pint of bitter and took it to a table in the corner. The idea that Telling would cross three thousand miles of ocean to pursue him and spoil his life was shocking. It was such a vindictive thing to do, the sort of evil performance one would expect from a madman.

Somewhere along the line Margo would have to be told, but Lunsford decided to say nothing until after the fact. First he would find some way to deal with Michael, to get him out of here and back to Montreal.

Lunsford bought another pint of bitter at the bar and brought it back to the table. His jaw was beginning to ache again, and the feeling of light-headedness was back with a vengeance. A conviction arose in his mind suddenly: Michael Telling was poisoning him. The dentist had planted a slow-working but ultimately fatal substance in the root canal, covering it with a filling. The poison was seeping into Lunsford's system, causing the heady feelings of the past weeks. Eventually it would kill him, either in his sleep or by causing him to black out at the wheel of a car or while crossing a busy street.

Then he thought, *I'm becoming paranoid. If I go on like this, I'll be as mad as Michael.*

By leaning back in his chair, Lunsford was able to touch the back of his head against the wall. Closing his eyes, he achieved a

slight relief from the inflated feeling inside his head. If it continued, he would have somebody lift the fillings and test the packing underneath. Hell, he had not quit his job and left his family and traveled all this distance to die in England.

Somebody had Lunsford by the shoulders. He had trouble opening his eyes. He did at last and saw strong, bare forearms. He was confused—he imagined Michael Telling had hold of him and his heart lurched inside his chest. Then he saw the pub surroundings, almost empty now. The barman was standing over him. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Wow." He managed to sit up. They had cleared away his table.

"Thought you were going to drop out of the chair."

"No. I'm OK. I guess I fell asleep."

He was lucky to find a taxi outside the pub. As they entered Leicester Square, Lunsford saw a small center of activity on the sidewalk; somebody was shining shoes. This was a rarity in London and Lunsford liked to have his shoes shined. The National Portrait Gallery was only a couple of blocks away so he asked the driver to let him out on the corner.

The shoeshine experience turned into a major embarrassment. He began to lose his balance, standing with one foot raised on the metal pedestal. It wasn't the ale, it was just this shattered head of his, but how could he explain that to the people looking on? As Lunsford's shoe slipped off the pedestal for the third time, the man wielding the brush asked, "You all right, gov?"

It was all anybody said to him anymore. Two young boys left the watching crowd and held him in place, one on either side.

He was fine once he started walking again, and he made his way quickly to the main entrance of the Portrait Gallery. Years ago, vacationing with Bernice, Lunsford's feeling had been that he could take art galleries or leave them, but once inside and standing before the portraits, those giant windows into the past, he was won over completely. The portrait that had moved them most deeply was a head and shoulders of Robert Louis Stevenson. He was young and handsome and, according to the dates beneath the painting, dead at forty-two. This discovery shook Lunsford. He was already three years past Stevenson's age. It gave him an uneasy feeling of being on borrowed time.

The guards inside the main entrance looked him over as he drifted by. They were stationed there to search handbags for bombs, but a drunk among those priceless works might be just as dangerous. He made a strong effort to move under control and they turned away.

Lunsford went to Stevenson's portrait on the second floor and found the area deserted. He looked at his watch; he was ten minutes late, but he had shiny shoes.

Margo, always punctual, had probably gone off on a circuit of one of the other rooms. His best bet was to stay put until she returned. He stared at the poet's benign face, the moustache, the long hair, the gentle smile. A fragment of the poet's work came into Lunsford's mind: "Bright is the ring of words/ When the right man rings them,/ Fair the fall of songs/ When the singer sings them . . ."

He must have spoken aloud because a voice behind him carried on: "Still they are carolled and said—/ On wings they are carried—/ After the singer is dead/ And the maker buried."

He turned around and there was Michael Telling. The dentist was smiling. "I took Stevenson in school, too," he said.

"Where's Margo?"

"I imagine she's almost packed by now. I told her to be ready to leave in an hour."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You've caused me a lot of trouble and expense, Gerry. I really should fix you for that, but I think you've fixed yourself enough."

"Margo is staying with me."

"No, she's not. She's coming back to Montreal. I wish I could tell you she took a lot of persuading, but I'm afraid it was easy."

"I won't let you take her."

"There's nothing you can do about it. Wake up, Gerry, you're such a terrible loser. Don't you see that? I'm not taking Margo. I'm just providing the opportunity for her to get back to where she was. She's been a bad girl but she regrets her mistake. No hard feelings."

"Hard feelings? I'll kill you, you arrogant—"

Telling loomed over Lunsford. The big, bristly head was like a malignant balloon. "You're some threat, Gerry. Look at you, you're on your last legs."

Lunsford balanced himself against the wall with one hand. His head was pounding. "You've poisoned me. You've done something to me."

"Go prove it." The dentist had a pleased grin on his face. He was talking in whispers. "You're a dead man, Lunsford. Fall down."

In the vaulted room, crowded with framed portraits, Lunsford was losing his sense of perspective. He was having trouble distinguishing his enemy among a crowd of shapes from the past. "I'm going to get you, Michael. If I have to kill you to get some peace, I'll do it, you can believe it."

The answer came from a distance. "Some chance."

When he opened his eyes, people were looking at him across their shoulders. There was no sign of Michael Telling; had he been there in the first place?

Lunsford went outside and found another taxi. He gave his address and fell into the back seat. As the taxi turned onto Charing

Cross Road and stopped in traffic, he saw Michael unlocking the door of a blue sedan parked at the curb. The dentist stepped to the side of the taxi and spoke through the open window.

"Attaboy, Gerry," he said. "If you hurry, you'll have time to apologize to Margo before she leaves."

Lunsford left the taxi at the end of the mews and ran down the sloping alleyway, his shoes slipping on the oily cobbles.

One of the mechanics he had greeted so blithely that morning was sitting on the running board of an antique sedan with a packet of sandwiches open on his lap and a pint of milk in his hand. "Don't break a leg," he said. "She wouldn't appreciate that."

The parking space in front of the house was empty. Had Telling been and gone? Lunsford doubted it. He let himself in and found Margo sitting at the rosewood table in the dining area. Her suitcases were on the floor at her side. She was drinking a cup of tea.

"Then it's true." He closed the door.

"He showed up just after you left." She looked into her teacup. "He made me tell him where I was meeting you."

"Did he twist your arm while you packed both of those bags?"

"I should never have come with you. It was a mistake."

"The only mistake we're making is letting him push us around. How can he do that? He's only one person." Lunsford took one of the bags to the foot of the stairs. "You're not going with him."

"Yes I am. He'll hurt you. He'll hurt me."

"How can he hurt us? There are policemen out in the street. We can dial 999 and have cops here in a minute. We're free to do what we want."

"Not with somebody like Michael. He's a psychopath. He doesn't care what he does."

"I'm beginning not to care either." Lunsford came back, pushed the swinging door and walked into the tiny kitchen. He found a heavy iron rod used for sharpening knives. He brought it back with him. "When he shows up, I'm going to persuade him to go home and leave us alone."

She got up and took the iron bar from Lunsford's hand. Like everything else about him today, his grip was weak. "That's no good, Gerry. Even if you got rid of him now, he'd just follow us around."

The room had grown dark. A spattering of rain swept across the front windows. One of the win-

dows was cranked open and the white curtain billowed in as drops of rain hit the parquet floor. A car was approaching along the lane, throttling down.

"I'm going to stop him," Lunsford said.

"How? You'd have to be as wicked as he is."

"I don't understand you, Margo. If the man is so evil, how can you pack up and go with him?"

She got up and went to the foot of the stairs where she picked up her suitcase and brought it back to its place beside the other one. "I'm doing what's best in the long run."

A car door slammed outside.

Lunsford took Margo by the shoulders. Her face looked different; she had touched her cheeks and eyelids with makeup. "This morning we were so close," he said.

"This morning he wasn't here."

A heavy knock sounded at the door. Margo broke away, went to the door and opened it. Michael Telling stepped inside, brushing rain from the shoulders of his black coat. It was buttoned to the neck, the collar turned up, his head a bulging orange gourd above it.

"Change in the weather," he said. "I hope it won't spoil our drive down to Dover." He glanced around the room and grinned at the packed suitcases. "I've decided to give Margo a little treat. We're driving down to Dover, getting on a channel boat and catching a train at Calais. We'll be in Paris tonight."

Margo was looking at Lunsford. "Will you be all right?"

"Not if you walk out on me."

"Go back home. Call Bernice and tell her you're coming home."

"Margo, I'm sick. He did something to me in the chair when he filled those teeth. He poisoned me, I think."

She turned to Telling, who raised his shoulders and made the little blue eyes wide. "The poor guy is delirious."

"If I'm delirious, I need my nurse." Lunsford extended his hand. Margo took it, but her fingers were cold and stiff.

"I have to go with him, Gerry. If I don't, this will just go on and on."

Telling picked up the suitcases and carried them into the lane. Margo followed him, standing in the open doorway to keep clear of the rain. When Telling had the trunk of the car open and was stowing the bags inside, Lunsford pushed past Margo, grabbed the back of the black raincoat and pulled the big dentist erect. He swung hard and caught Telling

with a right-hand punch on the side of the head. Telling slipped and went to one knee in a puddle of oily rainwater. Over his shoulder, Lunsford could see the mechanic standing in his garage doorway, milk bottle poised halfway to his lips, watching the action.

Margo yelled from the doorway, "Michael, don't hurt him. I'm coming with you." She stepped out and opened the front door of the car. She was getting in.

Telling said, "I really think I should break your head, Gerry." He got up and came on fast, bulling Lunsford back through the open doorway of the house. Their momentum carried them across the room so that Lunsford was bent across the table with Telling leaning over him. The dentist's huge hands were clamped about his throat. Lunsford tried to break the grip. He seized Telling's wrists, clawing at them, feeling his fingernails digging in, breaking the skin.

The grip tightened. His focus of vision was narrowing as though he were looking down a tunnel at Telling's twisted mouth and squinting blue eyes. The man was in the process of killing him. He was seconds away from death.

Lunsford must have blacked out because he opened his eyes to find himself sitting on the floor with the garage mechanic kneeling beside him.

"Bloody strong one," the mechanic said. "Took me and the lady to pull him off of you."

A car engine was retreating down the lane. Lunsford tried to struggle to his feet.

"You'd better lie still and try to collect yourself. That's the way."

He lay back flat on the carpet and looked at the ceiling. The rain showers had been brief. Now the sun was out again and an elongated rectangle of light approximated the shape of the window on the white plaster above him.

The mechanic brought a glass of water and stood over him with it. Sunlight concentrated in the bottom of the glass so that it glared in Lunsford's eyes, reminding him vaguely of the light above Telling's dental chair. He drank the water and then said he was all right. He wanted to be left alone. The mechanic combed his hair in front of the glass in the bookcase and went away.

Lunsford kept his place on the floor, half-asleep. He was not sure how much time had passed when he heard a car approach down the lane, stopping outside his front door. He struggled to his knees, hoping Margo had changed her

mind but not really believing it. Before he could get to his feet he heard his daughter's voice.

"Daddy, are you all right?"

He felt strong hands under his arms as Steve steadied him and guided him onto a chair beside the rosewood table. Colleen was a blur before his eyes; they were both indistinct images.

"I'm OK. Listen, I have to tell you something."

He must have blacked out again because he was next aware of hot tea being spooned past his lips.

"He needs a shot of brandy," Steve said.

"Not if he's bombed already." Colleen's tone was a mixture of anxiety and irritation.

"I'm not drunk. Thank God you're here. You can help me."

"That's why we came. Mom is worried. You wrote just once giving us this address and then you never answered her letter. She had a terrible feeling something had happened to you."

"Good old Bernice. Bless her heart. She knows me, she's right here inside of me." He was crying but he couldn't help it. "You can't rule out twenty-five years."

"So Steve and I hopped on a plane. We planned to visit you soon anyway, but Mom insisted we come now."

"I can use you. If ever the old man needed help, this is the time. You've got wheels?"

"A rental," Steve said.

"OK. We're going for a drive."

Between sips of unwanted tea, Lunsford told his story. The suspected poisoning, Telling's interference with the job interview, his abduction of Margo, the fight in the lane, their departure for Dover.

"And that's where we're going," Lunsford said. "He's not going to get away with it."

Colleen seemed unconvinced. "Dad, are you sure? I mean she's a grown-up woman. If she went with him . . ."

Lunsford stood up and reeled toward the front door. "Where's the car?"

He heard Steve's subdued mutter, "Let's go along with him, Colly."

The drive took place without much awareness on Lunsford's part. He must have slept, slumped half over in the back seat. When he opened his eyes and sat up, he saw they were near the top of a hill. The Channel was below them, the harbor filled with ships, and the hazy roofs of Dover. Ahead, on a grassy plateau in the middle distance, was a large castle, a mass of stone walls, turrets and streaming flags. The declining rays of the sun in early

evening painted the castle gold on one face, deep blue on the others. In Lunsford's eyes, it appeared as a ghost castle, the misty frontispiece from an adventure book he had read in his childhood.

"You feeling OK?" Colleen asked, turning her worried face over the front seat.

"Must have slept," Lunsford said. "That'll put me on my feet." But he felt as bad as before; throbbing jaw, light, airy head.

"What do we do now?" Steve asked. He was crouched behind the wheel, wild-haired, bearded, a Canadian bear driving a small British car. "How do we find them?"

"We keep our eyes open and hope we get lucky. I'm due for some luck."

A blue sedan was parked on the grass a hundred yards ahead beside an ice-cream truck. Two familiar figures stood at the counter accepting cones from the vendor.

"And how about that?" Lunsford said.

"Is that her?" Steve asked.

"And him."

"Daddy, don't get in any more trouble."

"Don't worry, I'm only going to talk to him," Lunsford assured her, but he knew what he was going to do and where he would do it. "Park here, Steve."

The dentist and Margo seemed hardly surprised to see him.

"Well, you're here with reinforcements," Michael said. "Hi there, Colleen. Everybody have an ice on me." He gave more money to the vendor.

Margo raised a hand. "Hello, Steve. Colleen, honey, take care of your father."

Colleen did not look at Margo. "Somebody has to," she said.

"No ice cream for me, thanks," Lunsford said. He made his voice cheerful and was surprised to hear it working better than it had in days. "You know something, Mike? You and I have to get sensible. We have to straighten this thing out. Will you come and talk?"

"Sure, Gerry. That's all I wanted to do in the first place. But you said everything was settled."

"Then was then and now is now." He took Michael's arm and led him up the slope.

Colleen called after her father. "Where are you going?"

"A little stroll. Enjoy your ice cream. Watch the channel boats. See you soon."

He found himself able to chat easily with Michael as they climbed the grassy slope and emerged finally on the crest above the chalk cliffs. Here they sat

with their backs to the sun, their eyes squinting into the wind off the water, looking down at a squat car ferry slowing down and bouncing in the chop as it approached the breakwater.

"OK," Lunsford said, "getting right to the point, I have been a middle-aged damn fool."

"Don't be hard on yourself, Gerry."

"It's true. I must have gone out of my mind. There was a lot of pressure at the office these past few months. I talked myself into believing I could run away and start over." Lunsford pried a lump of chalk from the edge of the grass, stood up and threw it far out into the air. It spun away fast, disappearing against the mottled backdrop of the water. "Anyway, I'm going to pack it in and go home. If Bernice will take me back."

Telling stood up, too. "She'll take you back. With open arms."

"Sorry I made all this upset."

"Don't apologize. Hell, Margo and I are going to make a holiday of it." He turned. They were out of sight of the cars and the ice-cream truck. "That's how you should think of it, too."

"I suppose I will one day. Wow, look at those arms. Did my fingernails do that?"

Telling looked at the deep scratches. "Who could blame you? With what I was doing to you."

They walked toward the path leading back down the slope. Lunsford pointed to a rusty aperture in the face of an outcropping of chalk. "Look," he said, "an old World War II gun emplacement. Ever been inside one?"

Telling's eyes lit up. "No. That's where they sat waiting for the Nazis. Only they never came."

"Come on. Bernice and I were here a few years ago. It's fascinating, once you get used to the smell."

There was a strong latrine odor inside the gloomy cave. Their footsteps echoed on the rocky floor. Steel bulkheads were scrawled in rough chalk with hundreds of names and dates. "Don't trip over those rails," Lunsford said. "They used to run the ammo up in trucks."

Michael Telling stood in the actual gun turret, staring out through a rectangular slot in the rusted metal. Lunsford stood behind him.

"Hey," the dentist said, "this is just like all those war films," and Lunsford swung hard with the sharp rock in his right hand, crushing the back of Telling's red-thatched skull.

Colleen and Steve and Margo

had finished eating their ice cream. They were leaning on the side of the blue sedan, staring up at the walls of Dover Castle, shrouded now in near darkness. The sky was cobalt blue, pricked with a few silver stars in the east. Lunsford walked up behind them.

"Ladies and gentleman," he said, "we are free to go."

Margo looked past him, frowning. "Where's Michael?"

"Michael has listened to reason. I knew he was a good guy underneath."

"Where is he?"

"He took the shortcut down the cliff to get to the city. He's catching a train back to London and a plane back home."

"Without saying good-bye?" Margo said.

Colleen asked, "Is this true, Dad?"

"Of course it is. He sent you all his love, and he even gave me the keys to his car. With all sorts of apologies for making a pest of himself."

Lunsford opened the door of the blue sedan and held it for Margo. "Climb in, love," he said. "And as for you two kids, have a nice vacation. And when you get home, tell your mother I'll write soon."

He drove away with Colleen's puzzled face centered in the rear-view mirror till it dwindled away.

For some time Margo was silent. Then she said, "You killed him."

"Don't be silly."

"I know Michael. There's no way he'd walk out of this scene."

Lunsford was driving into a small village. There was an ancient church at a curve in the road. The walls were of flint, the square Norman tower decorated with a frieze of bizarre faces.

"You *thought* you knew Michael. You *think* you know me." He slowed down and drove the car onto the grassy verge below the churchyard. He turned the key and the engine died. "I thought I knew you. Nobody knows anybody anymore." His light-headedness, gone during the action in the gun turret, was back now, worse than ever.

Margo got out of the car. He climbed out after her. She was walking away. "I'm not driving any farther with you."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To the police. How did I let myself get into this mess? You're worse now than Michael ever was."

"Come and talk, Margo. Don't walk off. It's getting dark, there's nothing open around here."

"I'll find a phone."

"Margo, don't leave me. I need you now more than ever." He sat down on a fallen gravestone. "Margo," he called, and his voice broke.

She came back and stood beside him. "What is it?"

"The poison. My head feels full of it. I can hardly think."

"That's crazy. Nobody's poisoned you, Gerry. You're out of your mind."

She turned and he caught her by the ankle, tripping her. Her head struck a stone sarcophagus as she fell, leaving a white scuff mark in the dark green moss. She lay still. He crouched over her listening for a heartbeat. There seemed to be none, but he lifted a heavy slab of granite and dropped it on her anyway.

Then he staggered to the car and drove for some distance along winding roads until a passing car veered, flashed its lights and sounded its horn. Then he switched on his own lights and drove more slowly.

He was a long time finding his way back to London although he had driven these roads with Bernice two years ago. Throughout the long drive, he was consumed with panic; he was alone now. Without Margo, he would never have had the nerve to leave his wife. Now Margo was dead, and where was he to go from here?

He parked the car at the head of the mews and went into the Rose and Crown. There was half an hour of pub time left and he could not face the empty house without something to drink.

He ordered two double whiskies and took them to his favorite table. The red plush chair opposite him where Bernice had sat two years ago and, more recently, Margo, was empty now, angled accusingly into the room. He drank the first double at a draft and held the second one close to his pounding heart.

What was left for him now? A month ago life was solid and secure, apart from his struggle with job boredom and a running argument with his wife. Didn't all of that make him the average North American man?

Well, he had changed his situation in a few short weeks. He was average no longer.

The publican's voice rang out, calling for final orders. Lunsford drank his second double whisky and went back for a refill. The carpet undulated beneath his feet.

He was back on his bench when he saw a black raincoat and an orange head disappearing through the door to the men's room. He knocked the small table over getting up. Inside the men's room

was another door leading to the alley. He opened it and saw the familiar figure dart around the corner into the mews. There was a patch of white bandage on the orange head.

"Are you all right, sir?" The publican was at his shoulder.

Lunsford would have to reassure yet another stranger. "Yes. I'm all right."

Outside in the mews, he was not the least bit surprised to find the blue sedan missing. Naturally, Telling had a spare set of keys—but how had he survived the blow on the head? And how had he made it back to London so quickly?

Of course he himself had stopped off in the churchyard with Margo.

Blindly, Lunsford skidded down the slippery cobbled lane toward the house. The repair shops were all bolted shut, the mews echoed with emptiness. He unlocked his front door and let himself into the silent house. He turned on the kitchen light and sat on a stool beside the counter, wondering what to do. Michael had him where he wanted him now. Assault with a deadly weapon. Attempted murder. All he had to do was show up with a police officer to win the game once and for all. They'd ask about Margo's absence and sooner or later they would find her.

How had the whole thing turned around on him? It was a nightmare.

He decided to call Bernice. There was nothing else he could do. He checked his watch; it would be around 6:15 p.m. in Montreal. He dialed the call direct and was lucky with the circuits. The phone buzzed twice in the house on the other side of the ocean, and there was Bernice.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

"Gerry, where are you?"

"Still in England. But I'm in trouble."

"Then come home if you're in trouble."

"I was afraid you wouldn't have me."

"Oh, sweetie, we help each other when we need it. Don't ever be afraid to come to me." Her voice was warm. Lunsford felt tears of relief in his eyes.

"I should never have left. Everything has fallen apart, just like you said."

"Never mind what I said. You just get on a plane and come home and it'll be all right. Everything will be just like it was."

"No, never again. I've done terrible things over here."

"What things?"

"There's been violence. Killing. The police will be coming for me."

Bernice's voice barely hesitated. "Whatever it is, the thing is for you to get home. Once you're home, everything will be all right."

"OK, love. I'm coming home."

He took a taxi to the airport. He drank in the lounge until his departure was called. The time passed in hazy, disjointed segments and so did the flight itself. Before Lunsford knew it, he was getting off the plane in Dorval, blinking in the sunlight, his head throbbing, the pressure in his aching jaw increasing by the minute.

Then he found himself in a taxi outside the front door of his house and Bernice was coming down the walk to help him with his bags.

"Are you all right?" the taxi driver inquired.

Inside the house, he stood with his hands on her shoulders, looking into her face, trying to begin telling his wife what had happened to him.

"I don't want to hear. Not now. You're going to sleep and then, when you wake up, we'll decide what to do."

She helped him upstairs and into their bedroom where the spread was turned down. He collapsed on the bed and she moved about, straightening his legs, adjusting the pillow under his head, drawing the drapes to darken the room. He closed his eyes.

Sometime later he heard a voice outside the door, a male voice, talking on the telephone.

". . . not a thing to worry about. I told you, it can't go wrong. He's helpless." It was Michael Telling's voice. The maniac had followed him across the ocean! He was in the house. He must have killed Bernice and now he was coming in to finish him off!

"Don't call me here again." The dentist sounded tense. "Just sit tight. I'll get rid of him and I'll call you later."

Who was he talking to? Margo? But Margo was dead in an English churchyard.

Lunsford tried to open his eyes; the room was bright, the light dazzled him. Hadn't Bernice drawn the drapes? He had to get up and get to the window. Telling was in the hallway outside the bedroom. If he could get through the window onto the balcony, he could escape into Colleen's room. He had to get through the window.

"OK, Gerry." Michael's voice was right beside his ear. Strong hands were fastened on Lunsford's arms. He opened his eyes and saw

the stark white walls of the dental surgery, the green leather chair from which he had just been lifted, the billowing white curtains at the wide-open window.

Lunsford tried to cry out but his mouth was stiff with anesthetic, his brain numb with heavy sedation.

"As we say in the trade," Telling grunted, forcing Lunsford's legs up over the window frame, "this will only hurt for a second."

Then Lunsford was through the window, in the air, half-turning as he fell six floors to the empty courtyard.

The police inspector was satisfied. He thanked Mrs. Lunsford for coming down to say what she could about her husband's recent depression. Then he told the shattered dentist not to blame himself. It could have happened to anybody.

"I shouldn't have left him alone." Dr. Telling drove his fist into his palm, stood up and walked to the window. He reached up and slammed the frame down so hard the glass rattled. Too late; the horse was gone. "I knew how anxious he was. Hell," the dentist turned to the inspector, his eyes wide with agony, "I probably shouldn't have given him those tranquilizers. They must have depressed him even further."

"You were trying to help the man."

Bernice Lunsford agreed. She took a deep breath. "He's right, Dr. Telling. The claustrophobia . . . Gerry used to go wild in the chair. We both know that."

The dentist nodded slowly, but he was not convinced. On the way out of the building, the inspector said to the ambulance driver, about to leave for the morgue, "We should board up that window or you may have another customer. That dentist up there is inconsolable."

The driver was a cynic. "He's upset because he won't be able to send the widow his bill."

Bernice Lunsford, wild with elation, tried to kiss Michael Telling. He shrugged her off, rolling his eyes toward the adjoining office where Margo Mantro was sitting behind the desk, her face turned to the wall. Telling mouthed, "Call you tonight." Then he saw Bernice to the door and let her out with a mumbled apology.

"Please," Bernice said in a clear voice, "don't blame yourself." She winked and blew a kiss.

Dr. Telling stood in the office doorway. He stared at Margo for a few minutes and she stared back at him, a slight frown between her eyes.

"Something troubling you, Margo?"

The nurse shook her head. "No," she said. "I was just thinking, if you hadn't sent me across the road to the lab with those inlays, I might have been able to grab poor Gerry before he jumped."

"That's wishful thinking," Telling said. "It doesn't help. Now you go on home and try to get over this. It'll be hard, but we'll both have to try."

He went to the sink and ran the water to wash his hands. Margo stared at the livid scratches on his forearms as the water sluiced over them.

"Harder for you than for me," Margo said.

She telephoned the police inspector the next morning after a nearly sleepless night. She said she had been thinking about Lunsford's death and it just didn't seem right to her. The inspector said a few doubts had crossed his mind, too, but did she have anything specific?

"Yes. There were long, bloody scratches on Dr. Telling's forearms yesterday afternoon which were not there earlier. Suppose you check under Mr. Lunsford's fingernails. If you find tissue there, and it compares with Dr. Telling's scratches, would that be something to go on?"

The inspector told her it would, indeed, be something to go on. He thanked her and said he would be talking again at much greater length to her and to Dr. Michael Telling.

Margo put down the phone and went into her kitchen to put on the kettle. Usually on Saturday mornings she had tea instead of coffee, but today she set the kettle aside unfilled and poured herself a whisky instead. It was Gerry's drink, and she drank it to him. He was a nice, harmless guy who was too shy ever to do more than invite her once in a while to the Empire on a Friday afternoon. Until yesterday, when he acted as if he was about to open up with her.

Now she'd never know what was on his mind.

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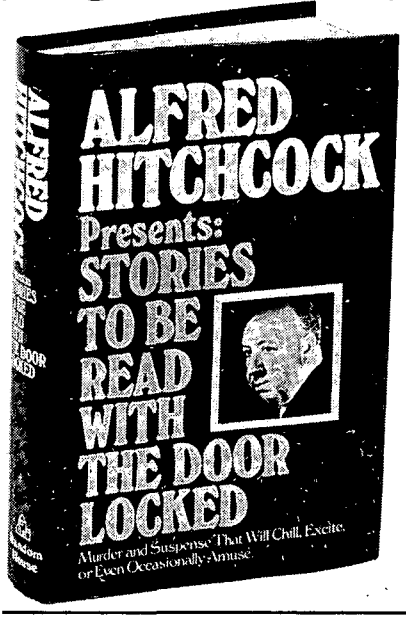

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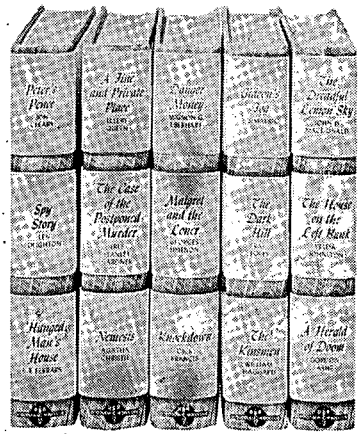

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