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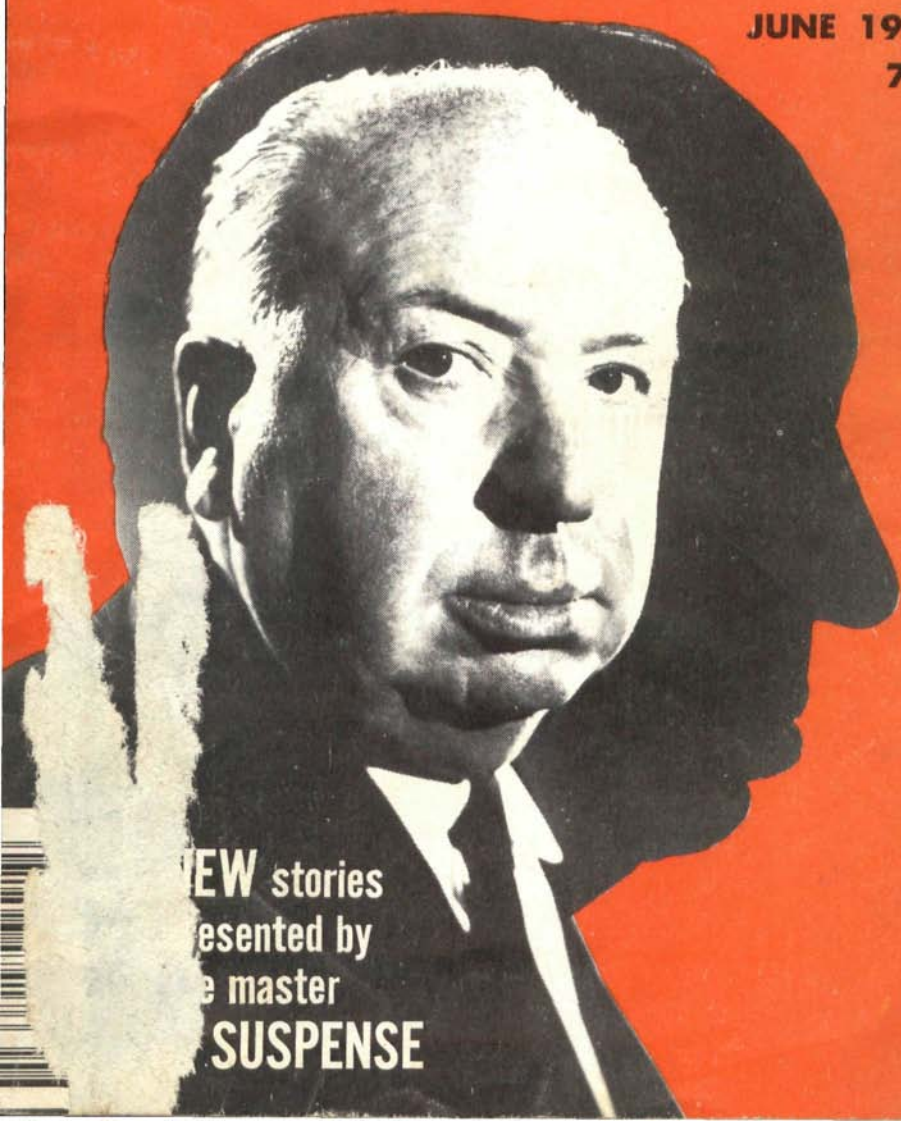
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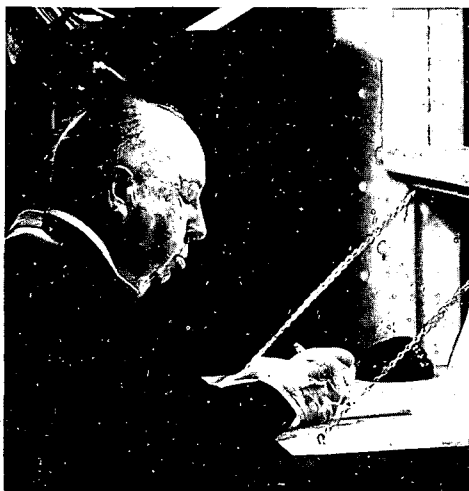
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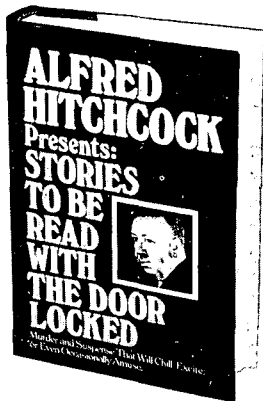
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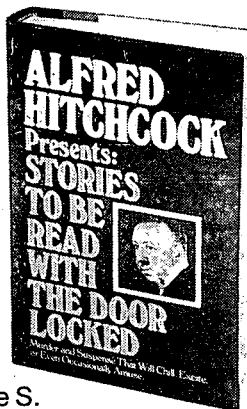
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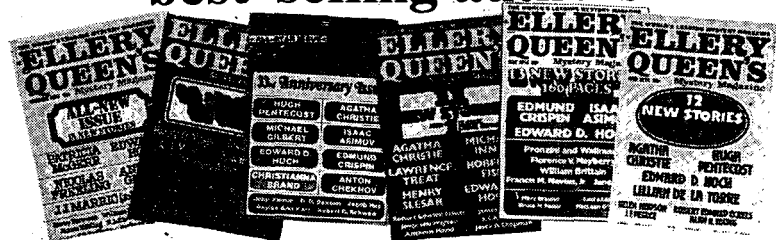
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June 1976



Dear Reader:

What is so rare as a day in June? Well, I'd say a really good time is pretty rare.

Some people like to fish. I used to, before. I read Lawrence Block's *Sometimes They Bite*; then I lost my appetite for that sport. There are those who like to travel, but *Albion*, *Perfidious Albion* by Everett Greenbaum persuades me that it's an error to leave one's own front yard. Some like just to sit on their front porch of a summer evening and watch life go by—but Pauline C. Smith's *The Triad* has convinced me that one risks seeing a little too much life.

Oh, well, it's nice to know that no matter what happens, help is only as far away as your telephone—but before you become complacent read *Police Calls* by Carroll Mayers.

I really think we're all better off in an inconspicuous corner with a yummy mystery story.

Good reading.

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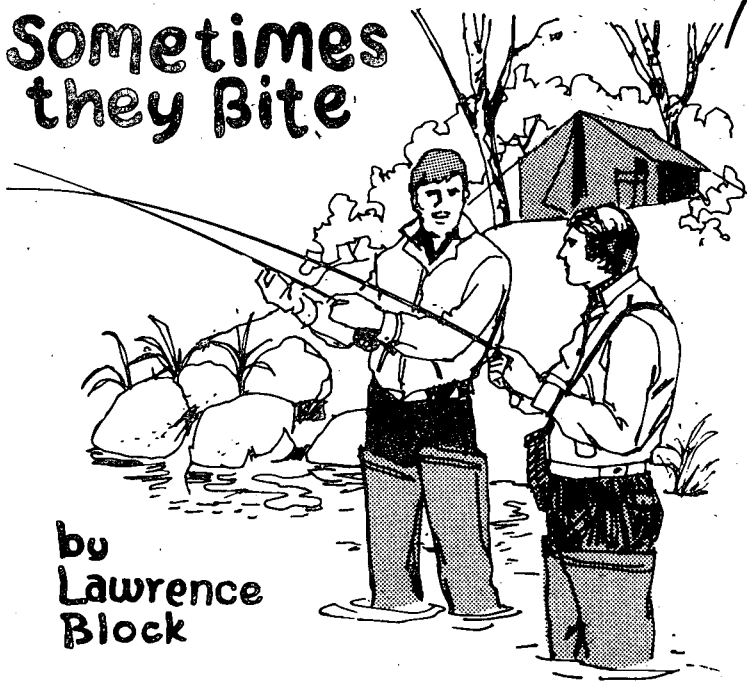
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Fishing is such a soothing pastime. However, it's better not to do it on an empty stomach. . .

Sometimes they Bite

by
**Lawrence
Block**



Mowbray had been fishing the lake for better than two hours before he encountered the heavyset man. The lake was supposed to be full of largemouth bass and that was what he was after. He was using spinning gear, working a variety of plugs and spoons and jigs and plastic worms in all of the spots where a lunker largemouth was likely to be biding his time. He was a good fisherman, adept at dropping his lure right where he wanted it, just alongside a weedbed or at the edge of sub-

surface structure. And the lures he was using were ideal for late fall bass. He had everything going for him, he thought, but a fish on the end of his line.

He would fish a particular spot for awhile, then move off to his right a little ways, as much for something to do as because he honestly expected the bass to be more cooperative in another location. He was gradually working his way around the western rim of the lake when he stepped from behind some brush into a clearing and saw the other man no more than a dozen yards away.

The man was tall, several inches taller than Mowbray, very broad in the shoulders and trim in the hips and at the waist. He wore a fairly new pair of blue jeans and a poplin windbreaker over a navy flannel shirt. His boots looked to be identical to Mowbray's, and Mowbray guessed they'd been purchased from the same mail order outfit in Maine. His gear was a baitcasting outfit, and Mowbray followed his line out with his eyes and saw a red bobber sitting on the water's surface some thirty yards out.

The man's chestnut hair was just barely touched with gray. He had a neatly trimmed mustache and the shadowy beard of someone who had arisen early in the morning. The skin on his hands and face suggested he spent much of his time out of doors. He was certainly around Mowbray's age, which was forty-four, but he was in much better shape than Mowbray was, in better shape, truth to tell, than Mowbray had ever been. Mowbray at once admired and envied him.

The man had nodded at Mowbray's approach, and Mowbray nodded in return, not speaking first because he was the invader. Then the man said, "Afternoon. Having any luck?"

"Not a nibble."

"Been fishing long?"

"A couple of hours," Mowbray said. "Must have worked my way halfway around the lake, as much to keep moving as anything else. If there's largemouth in the whole lake you couldn't prove it by me."

The man chuckled. "Oh, there's bass here, all right. It's a fine lake for bass, and a whole lot of other fish as well."

"Maybe I'm using the wrong lures."

The big man shook his head. "Doubtful. They'll bite anything when their dander is up. I think a largemouth would hit a shoelace if he was in the mood, and when he's sulky he wouldn't take your bait if you

threw it in the water with no hook or line attached to it. That's just the way they are. Sometimes they bite and sometimes they don't."

"That's the truth." Mowbray nodded in the direction of the floating red bobber. "I don't suppose you're after bass yourself?"

"Not rigged up like this. No, I've been trying to get myself a couple of crappies." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, indicating where a campfire was laid. "I've got the skillet and the oil, I've got the meal to roll 'em in, and I've got the fire all laid just waiting for the match. Now all I need is the fish."

"No luck?"

"No more than you're having."

"Which isn't a whole lot," Mowbray said. "You from around here?"

"No. Been through here a good many times, however. I've fished this lake now and again and had good luck more often than not."

"Well," Mowbray said. The man's company was invigorating, but there was a strict code of etiquette governing meetings of this nature. "I think I'll head on around the next bend. It's probably pointless but I'd like to get a plug in the water."

"You never can tell if it's pointless, can you? Any minute the wind can shift or the temperature can drop a few degrees and the fish can change their behavior completely. That's what keeps us coming out here year after year, I'd say. The wonderful unpredictability of the whole affair. Say, don't go and take a hike on my account."

"Are you sure?"

The big man nodded, hitched at his trousers. "You can wet a line here as good as further down the bank. Your casting for bass won't make a lot of difference as to whether or not a crappie or a sunnie takes to the shiner on my hook. And, to tell you the truth, I'd be just as glad for the company."

"So would I," Mowbray said, gratefully. "If you're sure you don't mind."

"I wouldn't have said boo if I did."

Mowbray set his aluminum tackle box on the ground, knelt beside it, and rigged his line. He tied on a spoon plug, then got to his feet and dug out a pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his corduroy shirt. He said, "Smoke?"

"Gave 'em up a while back. But thanks all the same."

Mowbray smoked his cigarette about halfway down, then dropped

the butt and ground it underfoot. He stepped to the water's edge, took a minute or so to read the surface of the lake, then cast his plug a good distance out. For the next fifteen minutes or so the two men fished in companionable silence. Mowbray had no strikes but expected none and was resigned to it. He was enjoying himself just the same.

"Nibble," the big man announced. A minute or two went by and he began reeling in. "And a nibble's the extent of it," he said. "I'd better check and see if he left me anything."

The minnow had been bitten neatly in two. The big man had hooked him through the lips and now his tail was missing. His fingers very deft, the man slipped the shiner off the hook and substituted a live one from his bait pail. Seconds later the new minnow was in the water and the red bobber floated on the surface.

"I wonder what did that," Mowbray said.

"Hard to say. Crawdad, most likely. Something ornery."

"I was thinking that a nibble was a good sign, might mean the fish were going to start playing along with us. But if it's just a crawdad I don't suppose it means very much."

"I wouldn't think so."

"I was wondering," Mowbray said. "You'd think if there's bass in this lake you'd be after them instead of crappies."

"I suppose most people would figure that way."

"None of my business, of course."

"Oh, that's all right. Hardly a sensitive subject. Happens I like the taste of little panfish better than the larger fish. I'm not a sport fisherman at heart, I'm afraid. I get a kick out of catching 'em, but my main interest is how they're going to taste when I've fried 'em up in the pan. A meat fisherman is what they call my kind, and the sporting fraternity mostly says the phrase with a certain amount of contempt."

He exposed large white teeth in a sudden grin. "If they fished as often as I do, they'd probably lose some of their taste for the sporting aspect of it. I fish more days than I don't, you see. I retired ten years ago, had a retail business and sold it not too long after my wife died. We were never able to have any children so there was just myself and I wound up with enough capital to keep me without working if I didn't mind living simply. And I not only don't mind, I prefer it."

"You're young to be retired."

"I'm fifty-five. I was forty-five when I retired, which may be on the

young side, but I was ready for it."

"You look at least ten years younger than you are."

"If that's a fact, I guess retirement agrees with me. Anyway, all I really do is travel around and fish for my supper. And I'd rather catch small fish. I did the other kind of fishing and tired of it in no time at all. The way I see it, I never want to catch more fish than I intend to eat. If I kill something, it goes in that copper skillet over there. Or else I shouldn't have killed it in the first place."

Mowbray was silent for a moment, unsure what to say. Finally he said, "Well, I guess I just haven't evolved to that stage yet. I have to admit I still get a kick out of fishing, whether I eat what I catch or not. I usually eat them but that's not the most important part of it to me. But then I don't go out every other day like yourself. A couple times a year is as much as I can manage."

"Look at us talking," the man said, "and here you're not catching bass while I'm busy not catching crappie. We might as well announce that we're fishing for whales for all the difference it makes."

A little while later Mowbray retrieved his line and changed lures again, then lit another cigarette. The sun was almost gone. It had vanished behind the tree line and was probably close to the horizon by now. The air was definitely growing cooler. Another hour or so would be the extent of his fishing for the day. Then it would be time to head back to the motel and some cocktails and a steak and baked potato at the restaurant down the road. And then an evening of bourbon and water in front of the motel room's television set, lying on the bed with his feet up and the glass at his elbow and a cigarette burning in the ashtray.

The whole picture was so attractive that he was almost willing to skip the last hour's fishing. But the pleasure of the first sip of the first martini would lose nothing for being deferred an hour, and the pleasure of the big man's company was worth another hour of his time.

Then, a little while later, the big man said, "I have an unusual question to ask you."

"Ask away."

"Have you ever killed a man?"

It *was* an unusual question, and Mowbray took a few extra seconds to think it over. "Well," he said at length, "I guess I have. The odds are pretty good that I have."

"You killed someone without knowing it?"

"That must have sounded odd. You see, I was in the artillery in Korea. Heavy weapons. We never saw what we were shooting at and never knew just what our shells were doing. I was in action for better than a year, stuffing shells down the throat of one big mother of a gun, and I'd hate to think that in all that time we never hit what we aimed at. So I must have killed men, but I don't suppose that's what you're driving at."

"I mean up close. And not in the service, that's a different proposition entirely."

"Never."

"I was in the service myself. An earlier war than yours, and I was on a supply ship and never heard a shot fired in anger. But about four years ago I killed a man." His hand dropped briefly to the sheath knife at his belt. "With this."

Mowbray didn't know what to say. He busied himself taking up the slack in his line and waited for the man to continue.

"I was fishing," the big man said. "All by myself, which is my usual custom. Saltwater though, not fresh like this. I was over in North Carolina on the Outer Banks. Know the place?" Mowbray shook his head. "A chain of barrier islands a good distance out from the mainland. Very remote. Damn fine fishing and not much else. A lot of people fish off the piers or go out on boats, but I was surfcasting. You can do about as well that way as often as not, and that way I figured to build a fire right there on the beach and cook my catch and eat it on the spot. I'd gathered up the driftwood and laid the fire before I wet a line, same as I did today. That's my usual custom. I had done the same thing the day before and I caught myself half a dozen Norfolk spot in no time at all, almost before I could properly say I'd been out fishing. But this particular day I didn't have any luck at all in three hours, which shows that saltwater fish are as unpredictable as the freshwater kind. You done much saltwater fishing?"

"Hardly any."

"I enjoy it about as much as freshwater, and I enjoyed that day on the Banks even without getting a nibble. The sun was warm and there was a light breeze blowing off the ocean and you couldn't have asked for a better day. The next best thing to fishing and catching fish is fishing and not catching 'em, which is a thought we can both console our-

selves with after today's run of luck."

"I'll have to remember that one."

"Well, I was having a good enough time even if it looked as though I'd wind up buying my dinner, and then I sensed a fellow coming up behind me. He must have come over the dunes because he was never in my field of vision. I knew he was there, just an instinct I suppose, and I sent my eyes as far around as they'd go without moving my head, and he wasn't in sight." The big man paused, sighed. "You know," he said, "if the offer still holds, I believe I'll have one of those cigarettes of yours after all."

"You're welcome to one," Mowbray said, "but I hate to start you off on the habit again. Are you sure you want one?"

The wide grin came again. "I quit smoking about the same time I quit work. I may have had a dozen cigarettes since then, spaced over the ten year span. Not enough to call a habit."

"Then I can't feel guilty about it." Mowbray shook the pack until a cigarette popped up, then extended it to his companion. After the man had helped himself Mowbray took one as well, and lit them both with his lighter.

"Nothing like an interval of a year or so between cigarettes to improve their taste," the big man said. He inhaled a lungful of smoke, pursed his lips to expel it in a stream. "I'll tell you," he said, "I really want to tell you this story if you don't mind hearing it. It's one I don't tell often, but I feel a need to get it out from time to time. It may not leave you thinking very highly of me but we're strangers, never saw each other before and as likely will never see each other again. Do you mind listening?"

Mowbray was fascinated and admitted as much.

"Well, there I was knowing I had someone standing behind me. And certain he was up to no good, because no one comes up behind you quiet like that and stands there out of sight with the intention of doing you a favor. I was holding onto my rod, and before I turned around I propped it in the sand with the butt end down, the way people will do when they're fishing on a beach. Then I waited a minute, and then I turned around as if not expecting to find anyone there, and there he was, of course.

"He was a young fellow, probably no more than twenty-five. But he wasn't a hippie. No beard, and his hair was no longer than yours or

mine. It did look greasy, though, and he didn't look too clean in general. Wore a light blue t-shirt and a pair of white duck pants. Funny how I remember what he wore but I can see him clear as day in my mind. Thin lips, sort of a wedge shaped head, eyes that didn't line up quite right with each other, as though they had minds of their own. Some active pimples and the scars of old ones. He wasn't a prize.

"He had a gun in his hand. What you'd call a belly gun, a little .32-calibre Smith & Wesson with a two-inch barrel. Not good for a single damned thing but killing men at close range, which I'd say is all he ever wanted it for. Of course I didn't know the make or calibre at the time. I'm not much for guns myself.

"He must have been standing less than two yards away from me. I wouldn't say it took too much instinct to have known he was there, not as close as he was."

The man drew deeply on the cigarette. His eyes narrowed in recollection, and Mowbray saw a short vertical line appear running from the middle of his forehead almost to the bridge of his nose. Then he blew out smoke and his face relaxed and the line was gone.

"Well, we were all alone on that beach," the man continued. "No one within sight in either direction, no boats in close offshore, no one around to lend a helping hand. Just this young fellow with a gun in his hand and me with my own hands empty. I began to regret sticking the rod in the sand. I'd done it to have both hands free, but now I thought it might be useful to swing at him and try whipping the gun out of his hand.

"He said, 'All right, old man. Take your wallet out of your pocket nice and easy.' He was a Northerner, going by his accent, but the younger people don't have too much of an accent wherever they're from. Television, I suppose, is the cause of it. Makes the whole world smaller.

"Now I looked at those eyes, and at the way he was holding that gun, and I knew he wasn't going to take the wallet and wave bye-bye at me. He was going to kill me. In fact, if I hadn't turned around when I did he might well have shot me in the back. Unless he was the sort who liked to watch a person's face when he did it. There are people like that, I understand."

Mowbray felt a chill. The man's voice was so matter-of-fact, while his words were the stuff nightmares are made of.

"Well, I went into my pocket with my left hand. There was no wallet there. It was in the glove compartment of my car, parked off the road in back of the sand dunes. But I reached in my pocket to keep his eyes on my left hand, and then I brought the hand out empty and went for the gun with it, and at the same time I was bringing my knife out of the sheath with my right hand. I dropped my shoulder and came in low, and either I must have moved quick or all the drugs he'd taken over the years had slowed him some, because I swung that gun hand of his up and sent the gun sailing, and at the same time I got my knife into him and laid him wide open."

He drew the knife from its sheath. It was a filleting knife, with a natural wood handle and a thin slightly curved blade about seven inches long. "This was the knife," he said. "It's a Rapala, made in Finland, and you can't beat it for being stainless steel and yet taking and holding an edge. I use it for filleting and everything else connected with fishing. But you've probably got one just like it yourself."

Mowbray shook his head. "I use a folding knife," he said.

"You ought to get one of these. Can't beat 'em. And they're handy when company comes calling, believe me. I'll tell you, I opened this youngster up the way you open a fish to clean him. Came in low in the abdomen and swept up clear to the bottom of the rib cage, and you'd have thought you were cutting butter as easy as it was." He slid the knife easily back into its sheath.

Mowbray felt a chill. The other man had finished his cigarette, and Mowbray put out his own and immediately selected a fresh one from his pack. He started to return the pack to his pocket, then thought to offer it to the other man.

"Not just now. Try me in nine or ten months, though."

"I'll do that."

The man grinned his wide grin. Then his face went quickly serious. "Well, that young fellow fell down," he said. "Fell right on his back and lay there all opened up. He was moaning and bleeding and I don't know what else. I don't recall his words, his speech was disjointed, but what he wanted was for me to get him to a doctor.

"Now the nearest doctor was in Manteo. I happened to know this, and I was near Rodanthe which is a good twenty miles from Manteo if not more. I saw how he was cut and I couldn't imagine him living through a half hour ride in a car. In fact if there'd been a doctor six

feet away from us I seriously doubt he could have done the boy any good. I'm no doctor myself, but I have to say it was pretty clear to me that boy was dying.

"And if I tried to get him to a doctor I'd be ruining the interior of my car for all practical purposes and making a lot of trouble for myself in the bargain. I didn't expect anybody would seriously try to pin a murder charge on me. It stood to reason that fellow had a criminal record that would reach clear to the mainland and back, and I've never had worse than a traffic ticket and few enough of those. And the gun had his prints on it and none of my own. But I'd have to answer a few million questions, and hang around for at least a week and doubtless longer for a coroner's inquest, and it all amounted to a lot of aggravation for no purpose, since he was dying anyway.

"And I'll tell you something else. It wouldn't have been worth the trouble even to save him, because what in the world was he but a robbing murdering snake? Why, if they stitched him up he'd be on the street again as soon as he was healthy and he'd kill someone else in no appreciable time at all. No, I didn't mind the idea of him dying." His eyes engaged Mowbray's. "What would you have done?"

Mowbray thought about it. "I don't know," he said. "I honestly can't say. Same as you, probably."

"He was in horrible pain. I saw him lying there, and I looked around again to assure myself we were alone, and we were. I thought that I could grab my pole and frying pan and my few other bits of gear and be in my car in two or three minutes, not leaving a thing behind that could be traced to me. I'd camped out the night before in a tent and sleeping bag and wasn't registered in any motel or campground. In other words, I could be away from the Outer Banks entirely in half an hour, with nothing to connect me to the area, much less to the man on the sand. I hadn't even bought gas with a credit card. I was free and clear if I just got up and left. All I had to do was leave this young fellow to a horribly slow and painful death." His eyes locked with Mowbray's again, with an intensity that was difficult to bear. "Or," he said, his voice lower and softer, "or I could make things easier for him."

"Oh."

"Yes. And that's just what I did. I took and slipped the knife right into his heart. He went instantly. The life slipped right out of his eyes

and the tension out of his face and he was gone. And that made it murder."

"Yes, of course."

"Of course," the man echoed. "It might have been an act of mercy, but legally it transformed an act of self defense into an unquestionable act of criminal homicide." He breathed deeply. "Think I was wrong to do it?"

"No," Mowbray said.

"Do the same thing yourself?"

"I honestly don't know. I hope I would, if the alternative was leaving him to suffer."

"Well, it's what I did. So I've not only killed a man, I've literally murdered a man. I left him under about a foot of sand at the edge of the dunes. I don't know when the body was discovered. I'm sure it didn't take too long. Those sands shift back and forth all the time. There was no identification on him, but the police could have labelled him from his prints, because an upstanding young man like him would surely have had his prints on file. Nothing on his person at all except for about fifty dollars in cash, which destroys the theory that he was robbing me in order to provide himself with that night's dinner." His face relaxed in a half smile. "I took the money," he said. "Didn't see as he had any need for it, and I doubted he had much of a real claim to it, as far as that goes."

"So you not only killed a man but made a profit on it."

"I did at that. Well, I left the Banks that evening. Drove on inland a good distance, put up for the night in a motel just outside of Fayetteville. I never did look back, never did find out if and when they found him. It'd be on the books as an unsolved homicide if they didn't. Oh, and I took his gun and flung it halfway to Bermuda. And he didn't have a car for me to worry about. I suppose he thumbed a ride, or came on foot, or else he parked too far away to matter." Another smile. "Now you know my secret," he said.

"Maybe you ought to leave out place names," Mowbray said.

"Why do that?"

"You don't want to give that much information to a stranger."

"You may be right, but I can only tell a story in my own way. I know what's going through your mind right now."

"You do?"

"Want me to tell you? You're wondering if what I told you is true or not. You figure if it happened I probably wouldn't tell you, and yet it sounds pretty believable in itself. And you halfway hope it's the truth and halfway hope it isn't. Am I close?"

"Very close," Mowbray admitted.

"Well, I'll tell you something that'll tip the balance. You'll really want to believe it's all a pack of lies." He lowered his eyes. "The fact of the matter is you'll lose any respect you may have had for me when you hear the next."

"Then why tell me?"

"Because I feel the need."

"I don't know if I want to hear this," Mowbray said.

"I want you to. No fish and it's getting dark and you're probably anxious to get back to wherever you're staying and have a drink and a meal. Well, this won't take long." He had been reeling in his line. Now the operation was concluded, and he set the rod deliberately on the grass at his feet. Straightening up, he said, "I told you before about my attitude toward fish. Not killing what I'm not going to eat. And there this young man was, all laid open, internal organs exposed—"

"Stop."

"I don't know what you'd call it, curiosity or compulsion or some primitive streak. I couldn't say. But what I did, I cut off a small piece of his liver before I buried him. Then after he was under the sand I lit my cookfire and—well, no need to go into detail."

Thank God for that, Mowbray thought. For small favors. He looked at his hands. The left one was trembling. The right, the one gripping his spinning rod, was white at the knuckles, and the tips of his fingers ached from gripping the butt of the rod so tightly.

"Murder, cannibalism, and robbing the dead. That's quite a string for a man who never got worse than a traffic ticket. And all three in considerably less than an hour."

"Please," Mowbray said. His voice was thin and high pitched. "Please don't tell me any more."

"Nothing more to tell."

Mowbray took a deep breath, held it. This man was either lying or telling the truth, Mowbray thought, and in either case he was quite obviously an extremely unusual person. At the very least.

"You shouldn't tell that story to strangers," he said after a moment.

"True or false, you shouldn't tell it."

"I now and then feel the need."

"Of course, it's all to the good that I *am* a stranger. After all, I don't know anything about you, not even your name."

"It's Tolliver."

"Or where you live, or—"

"Wallace P. Tolliver. I was in the retail hardware business in Oak Falls, Missouri. That's not far from Joplin."

"Don't tell me anything more," Mowbray said desperately. "I wish you hadn't told me what you did."

"I had to," the big man said. The smile flashed again. "I've told that story three times before today. You're the fourth man ever to hear it."

Mowbray said nothing.

"Three times. Always to strangers who happen to turn up while I'm fishing. Always on long lazy afternoons, those afternoons when the fish just don't bite no matter what you do."

Mowbray began to do several things. He began to step backward, and he began to release his tight hold on his fishing rod, and he began to extend his left arm protectively in front of him.

But the filleting knife had already cleared its sheath.



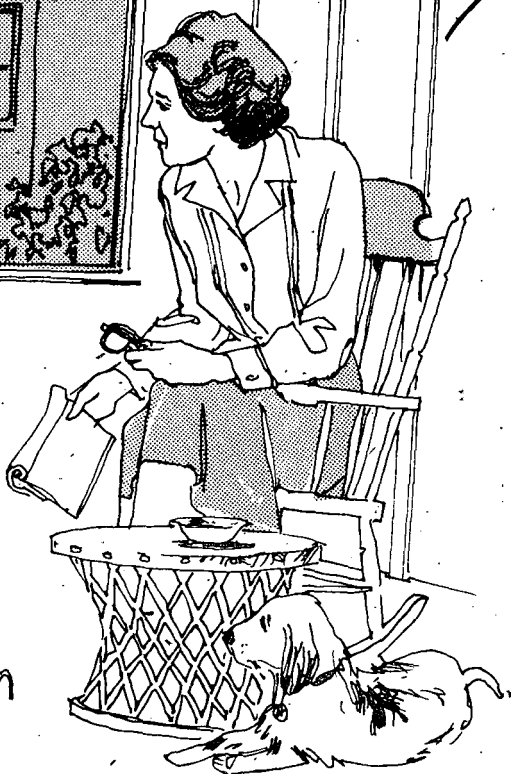
There's a new twist to the eternal triangle. . .



THE TRIAD

by

Pauline C. Smith



Richard was 27 when the accident occurred that took the lives of Dr. and Mrs. Morrison, so everyone was absolutely sure he'd go right out and marry Lydia Platt to give those young sisters of his a mother. It made sense—two girls to raise, Marie was then 14 and Anne 12; but no, Richard not only did not get married, he chopped off his regular Saturday night movie date with Lydia and took his sisters instead!

People said how well he'd taken hold and he was a regular father to

those girls, but they said it dubiously as if they thought taking hold like that and being a father was a little unnatural. Since I lived right next door and still do and saw more than anyone else and have been seeing it through the years, I say it was and still is downright unhealthy.

In the beginning, I did everything I could to help—took over casseroles and cakes and helped the girls with the washing and ironing and cleaning the house. But I got edged out, little by little, with Marie telling me kindly that her brother liked less seasonings than I used, plainer food and no sweets at all, and she was learning how to cook for him on her own. With Anne, it was the washing—Richard liked only so much starch in his collars and no more, his shirts were to be ironed a certain way and, now that he had instructed her, she felt sure she could get along just fine. Richard concurred. That is, he was grateful for my help, then smilingly suggested, without coming right out with it, that I get lost and leave them alone.

All right. So I did.

From then on, I did not step a foot on their property. Furthermore, I vowed never again to enter Dr. Morrison's office, where I'd always had my dental work done, now that Richard was practicing there by himself. Nor did I. When I needed that partial plate five years later, I went to Dr. Cleaver across town.

Our houses are quite close together with a low picket fence between, and I could see quite a bit that went on over there and hear some of it too. Apparently the girls were right, they could get along just fine without my nosing into their affairs and Richard was right too, they preferred being left alone together. As a matter of fact, they did everything together. They shopped together, watched television together, read together . . . *I wish to heaven*, I thought to myself, *that one of those girls would get herself a boyfriend and break up that triune*; but when she did, it being Marie of course, she of the right age, this boy carried her books home from school every day for a couple of weeks and then he made the mistake of showing up on a Sunday when Richard was home. Richard was nice—I could see that—just as he'd been nice to me, smiling and gentle and talking on the bias as he told him to get lost. Now I didn't hear anything, I only saw it on the front porch, like an old silent picture on UHF-TV . . . The boy didn't come back and Marie never got another—not until years later.

It would have all been so different had Richard gone out and mar-

ried Lydia as he should have done in the first place and given those girls a surrogate mother which they needed, instead of trying to be an all-encompassing father and ending up as an all-encompassing something else.

Marie graduated from high school without going to the graduation party afterward. Instead, the three of them came home and celebrated sedately with small glasses of sherry and togetherness. I wondered then what would happen if Marie went away to college the next year. But she didn't go, and since Richard was financially able to send her, either he didn't want her to go which I figured was probable, or she didn't want to go which I figured was possible.

She was eighteen then and pattered around the house all day—busy, busy, busy—if she wasn't making bread she was darning socks or sewing a fine seam or scrubbing the porches or cleaning cabinets; and Anne raced home from school each day and tore into it as if she were afraid Marie would get everything done before she could get her hand in, which Marie usually did so that many things were done twice. I bet that was the cleanest house with the best laid table in the county, maybe in the state . . . not that I ever saw the inside of it after I was told I wasn't needed—but Marie often bragged of her accomplishments, as did Anne. With Anne, it was the washing. I have seen her hang out six of Richard's shirts when I had just seen Marie hang out those same six the day before. As Anne said, "Marie simply cannot do Richard's shirts the way I can."

No boy ever carried Anne's school books home for her. She was probably too fast for them, out of that school on the run and home to get with it.

Her graduation was identical to Marie's. No prom. No party. A dollop of sherry and it was done.

I didn't wonder about the possibility of Anne going off to college as I had wondered about Marie. It was evident and had been for the past two years that she would stay right here at home while she tried to outdo her sister at doing for Richard.

Together; they sped him off to work in the morning, both standing on the front porch, overall aprons fresh as sunrise, waving as he drove down the street. Together, they greeted him each evening, standing on the front porch, no matter the weather, little ruffled tea aprons as bright as the sunset.

"Well now," I said to Horace, my dog of many years, "what do you think will happen next?"

He barked and I patted his unhandsome head and agreed with him. "You're right. Nothing. It will go on like this forever." I was wrong about that as are most people about forever, because what in the world goes on forever? Nothing.

Marie was twenty-five when the change occurred. And the change was a man. I am not one who thinks every woman should marry to be happy, but I am one who thinks every woman should try marriage to see what it's like. Anyway, the first time Marie went out alone she met this man, a salesman for optical supplies, and she met him at the Eye Clinic where she had gone for examination and the fitting of reading glasses.

He was probably waiting to talk to one of the doctors, sample case on his knees, while she was waiting for her examination appointment . . . Marie was pretty—prettier than Anne—and the salesman, Roger Slocum his name was, looked somewhat like Richard, which caused Marie to unfold a little and say: Here-is-my-address-yes-I-am-single-and-would-love-to-go-to-a-movie . . . you know the usual dialogue when stranger meets stranger and the vibes are right.

The house next door did not explode. Richard didn't even walk out on the front porch to cast off this interloper with a smile and non sequitur. After all, the tactics for a woman of twenty-five were different from those for a girl of fifteen. So off Marie went in that racy little car with the optical goods salesman, to a movie. And I was refreshed. "Hey," I said to Horace, "maybe she'll split and get out of this thing she's in," said Horace barked in what I considered to be a cynical tone. "You don't think so," I said. Horace did not and neither did I.

I mean, it had gone on for too many years. You get a thing going and it makes a groove and the groove wears deep. Roger Slocum, the optical goods salesman, had the inside run since he looked a bit like Richard. But he was not Richard and that was the problem when the chips were down, and the chips came down.

Oh, Marie was falling for him. Absolutely. They went places. Out to the Inn for dinner, the movies of course. They took in all this town has to offer, which isn't much, but it was a lot to Marie since she hadn't seen any of it.

I heard the end of Marie's little fling on a summer night shortly after

it began. I was sitting on my dark, screened-in side porch and heard them as they came up the path. He said: "You know I've got to leave. I can't delay it any longer. Are you going to marry me and leave too. . . ?"

Just then old Horace gave his wheezing aged bark at the back door. "Damn," I said under my breath and left the side porch to go through the house. I opened the back door and whispered, "Keep it soft," to Horace. I reached the side porch again just as Marie said, "I'm sorry, Roger, I've thought about it. I meant to go . . . I wanted to go . . . " and that was that. With those words, she closed the gate on freedom.

Roger turned on his heel and I sighed with regret.

It was two or three days later that I saw the girls scurrying out to Richard's car with Richard's bags so I supposed he was going off to the dental convention and I supposed he had been apprised of Marie's decision to stay at home, the dutiful spinster sister, while her love went off into the future, or he never would have left—you'd better believe it—he would have stayed and protected his own. So there they were, the two girls in overall aprons, for it was morning, carrying out their brother's bags and stowing them in the back seat of the car. Then, together, they stood on the front porch waving him off.

Richard would be gone for two days, for that was the period of time the convention always lasted, I knew from past conventions. But before he returned things would have happened and I would have heard some of it—not all, but some—enough to piece things together after Marie had been gone for two years and a year after Horace died.

So off went Richard, King of the Hill, to his dental convention, and the girls scoured and scrubbed and kneaded and polished and swept and washed and ironed—all in one day!

It was that night I heard a sound I was not to understand for two whole years. It was late and hot and I was on the dark side porch drinking iced tea, just sitting there with the radio music soft in the living room so that it blended with the buzzing of the mosquitoes and the hot breeze that moved the leaves like a brush against a drum . . . I heard something, not a sound that was identifiable, but one that alerted me to my feet. Was that Horace? He snuffled when a bark became too much for him . . . I jumped up and ran through the house to the back door and opened it up on nothing . . . It was later, after the sound was gone and only the breeze and the mosquitoes and the radio

beat remained, that I found Horace lying under the coffee table, sound asleep in the dark living room, dreaming aged dog dreams, and knew that the sound I had heard outdoors had not been his.

I didn't think too much about it that night. A woman alone tends to hear things that are not there. She imagines, fabricates, sometimes hallucinates, which is why I have not said anything nor done anything since that summer night when Horace was still alive, and Marie was too—but now I think it is time.

The next evening, when Richard drove into the driveway, only Anne greeted him with waving hand and ruffled apron and some very surprising words. "Marie left with that man," she said, stopping Richard in his tracks and jerking my head up.

"He came in the night and she left with him." The words had the sound of gothic drama, causing me to envision a caped and hooded figure fleeing over the moors to be swallowed by fog. By the time my mind picture had faded into the swirling heath, Richard and Anne were both inside the house with the door firmly closed, and I began to think.

. . . . I had heard the sounds, unidentifiable, from the back somewhere, because I thought it was Horace at the kitchen door . . . but if I could not identify sounds when fresh, I certainly could not once they became stale.

Anne dropped off a casual aside while shaking out and hanging up Richard's shirts—almost a throw-away line—about Marie phoning Roger that night to inform him of her change of mind and how his car zoomed up . . . Now I never heard a car. I heard only those strange sounds, but maybe the car came later, after I was in bed and asleep. "Horace," I said, "I only hope it's the truth—that Roger Slocum came in the night and Marie left with him," but Horace no longer responded. He had become quite deaf.

He died a year later, at the age of nineteen. . . . just lay down on the kitchen linoleum and expired. I wept and wrapped him in his blanket and got a shovel and dug a grave at the very back of my lot under the alders. I dug it deep and put him in it and covered him up and paced in desolation. It was then I saw the hollow in the tall grass on the Morrison side beyond the low picket fence, here in the outreaches where we do not garden, because the soil is sour and marshy. I put a rock at Horace's head and took my shovel and went back to the house.

I did not visit his grave until the anniversary of his death—then I picked some flowers and took them back . . . It was sunset—the alders cast their shadows, pointing out with their branches the depression that was Horace's sunken grave—his size. I looked across the picket fence and saw the other—a deeper shadow, a year older . . . longer, wider, the size of Marie two years into death.

Then I knew what those sounds had been on that summer night—they were Marie-sounds, the end of her life—a blow, a cry, a groan and a sigh.

Now I know. I think I always did.

I look at the Morrison house. Anne is inside—scrubbing, polishing, cleaning, kneading . . . Does she think of her sister? Does she think of what she did to her sister? I doubt it.

It is Richard's fault. And when I phone, asking that someone come out here and dig up Marie, I shall explain to them how it was . . . Anne wanted Marie to marry Roger Slocum so she would get away . . . get out of *her* way and leave her with Richard, their brother, who had made himself too important . . . What an awful thing to do, to make himself that important . . . father, mother, brother, lover, husband, saint, so that one sister gives up what she wants and the other never wants it.

I dial the phone, and I say, "Look, would you come out and dig up a grave, please?"

They ask me how I know it's a grave.

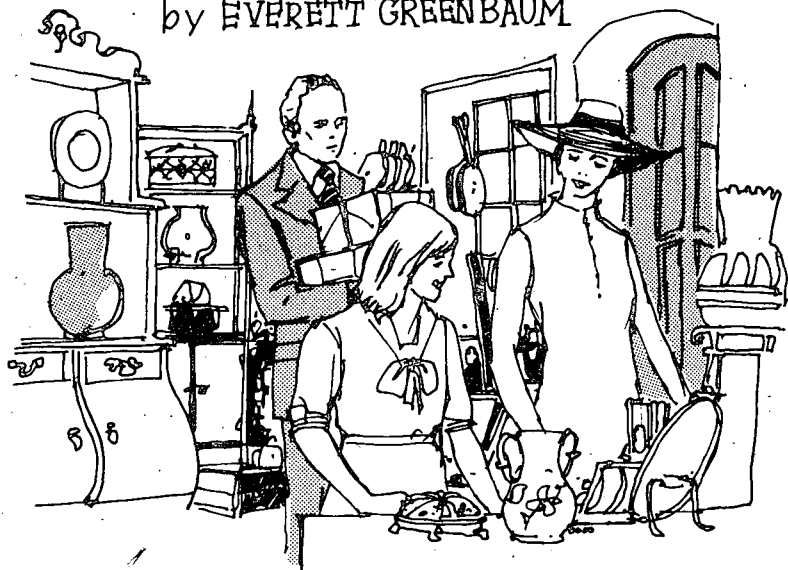
I tell them I know because it looks exactly like Horace's—a year older, a lot longer, a little bit wider. "Oh, I know," I tell them. "I know all about it."



Mr. Mendelbright silently cursed the shopping instinct. . .

ALBION, PERFIDIOUS ALBION

by EVERETT GREENBAUM



In the summer of 1967, Mr. Mendelbright, the Beverly Hills advertising man, took his wife and young daughter on a flight from California over the pole to England. As they flew above Greenland on a rare cloudless day, they looked down upon vast stretches of snow, crossed by rivers of solid ice which broke up the dark sea into icebergs, glistening white above the water, bottle green below. The experience seemed to augur a time of bright adventure and discovery.

A few hours later they landed in England.

Mr. Mendelbright hadn't been out of the States since his bachelor days ten years before. His wife was a soft-spoken Southern girl with an unsatisfied longing to visit foreign parts . . . especially those places where antiques were offered to the public at reasonable prices.

She was delighted with the English. "Aren't they nice?" she said. "Such nice manners. So anxious to help. So kind!"

"I told you, didn't I?" Mr. Mendelbright said. Since he had praised his old friends the British over the years, he was anxious for them to make a good impression on his family.

For several days they went from one traditional place to another. From the changing of the guards to Parliament. From the Tower of London to Old Bailey. From the British Museum to the London Museum.

Mr. Mendelbright felt that they were really absorbing culture, that his daughter was really soaking up enough history to enrich her whole life. How swiftly the cabs swept them past old gray buildings, through damp green parks from one soaking to another! The cabbies were delightful. Eager to share their London, nay, their England, with you.

As a successful author of direct-mail advertising copy, Mr. Mendelbright was, of course, anxious to visit the homes of Dr. Johnson and Charles Dickens. He almost fainted with emotion when he reached out to touch the desk where *Nicholas Nickleby* had been written. Everywhere were letters, manuscripts and mementoes in glass display cases of polished wood.

"Such nice antiques!" Mrs. Mendelbright murmured.

Evenings at the hotel, after their daughter had fallen asleep, his wife studied the currency, sorting out the florins from the half-crowns, the ten-shilling notes from the ten-pound notes.

She studied maps of London and mimeographed rules about export and import allowances.

"I'm ready to begin my shopping," she announced one night.

During the days following, Mr. Mendelbright found himself doing an unpleasant thing which he had managed to avoid after the first couple of years of marriage . . . waiting while women shopped. He found himself waiting at outdoor stands in the Portobello Road Market while little beaded things were fondled. He waited in the Camden Passage while leather and silver things were appraised. On Bond Streets, Old

and New, he waited while lace was caressed and garnets were held up to the light.

Finally the absolute limit of his patience was reached. He was furious!

"I don't want to wait outside of any more shopping going on!" he said.

After ten years, Mrs. Mendelbright knew how to handle these little moods which frequently seize creative people.

"Aren't you going to buy something nice for yourself?" she asked.

What a little darling she is, Mr. Mendelbright thought, feeling like a swine for having lost his temper.

"There's a place near Cadogan Square where they sell steam engines," he said.

"Steam engines are duty free," his wife said. "Why don't you go have a look and be back in an hour?"

Mr. Mendelbright had a wonderful time at the steam engine place. These beautiful brass and steel working models had been made in an age when machinists worked long hours for little money. They couldn't possibly be duplicated in modern times.

The steam man liked Mr. Mendelbright. He invited him upstairs to see his lathe and a private collection of small pumps. Before leaving, Mr. Mendelbright bought a steam engine, not one of first quality, but one which had plenty of brass parts to be polished on Sunday afternoons during the Beverly Hills rainy season. He would put a bunch of Rodgers and Hart records on the hi-fi and polish his steam engine. That engine was the kind of thing a person would want to keep forever.

As he was returning to the world of females, there was a screech of brakes, the stench of rubber smearing along cobblestones and the crunch of steel. In a minor bumper-to-bumper collision, Mr. Mendelbright slid onto the floor of the cab, landing on his steam engine. Quickly he untied the bundle for a look. Nothing was broken.

"I'm most sorry," the cabby said. "You all right, sir?"

"Fine," Mr. Mendelbright said.

"The reason you fell on the floor and I didn't, sir, is because I had the steering wheel to hold onto."

"I suppose so," Mr. Mendelbright said.

"If you can just brace yourself against something, you'll keep yourself

from sliding on the floor," the man said.

"I see."

"It's the momentum, you see, sir. It's the momentum of your body that carries you on after the cab itself is stopped."

"I suppose so."

"What d'ya weigh, sir, about twelve stone?"

"I imagine."

"Well, there it is then, sir. You have quite a lot of momentum going for you and no wheel to hold onto."

"No wheel back here." Mr. Mendelbright forced a social chuckle, hoping that the wheel and floor talk was over.

"But I've got this wheel up here and I just took a good hold on it when I saw that bugger hit the car ahead."

Mr. Mendelbright didn't answer this time. He rubbed his leg, which hurt a little. Back at the hotel he related the incident to his family.

"I hope the driver wasn't too upset," his wife said. "They're so conscientious."

The next day he got them off to a good start at the Royal Academy. On the way to lunch, however, his wife spotted some cut glass in a store window.

"I'm only going in for one minute," she said.

At the end of an hour and a half, she had added a small cut-glass sugar bowl and a tiny silver tongs to their list of imports.

Mr. Mendelbright silently cursed the shopping instinct. Women just couldn't pass by bits of cloth, silver or glinting glass. They were magpies. And once attracted to an object, it took them forever to find out from their minds whether or not they really wanted it.

This indecision extended to food. Thirty seconds after a menu was placed in his hands, Mr. Mendelbright knew exactly what he wanted. They never knew. It broke his heart to have to send a waiter away until his ladies could decide what they wanted to eat.

Then there was the problem of getting out evenings. Either they took their daughter with them to something like Ken Dodds and his Doddikins at the Palladium or they went to the theater and arranged for a baby sitter.

He couldn't help recalling his single traveling days. Footloose and quick, he covered more museums, theaters and historical points of interest in a day than the Mendelbrights en famille did in a week. He

felt tethered. He felt restless.

One evening was set aside for the washing of hair. This was always a depressing event for Mr. Mendelbright even in their large house in California. For some reason there always had to be a feeling of emergency about it.

It was "Tell me later, we're rinsing."

Or "I can't talk to you now, we're setting!"

Hair washing was going on all around him in their crowded, hot hotel room in Green Park. Mr. Mendelbright could hardly breathe through the tension.

"I think I'd like to go out for a while," he blurted.

"Well, all right," his wife said, "but don't go looking at anything we might want to see together."

Outside the air was cool. Ten years seemed to slip away from Mr. Mendelbright. The streets were full of couples walking close together, whispering and laughing. He began to walk on the balls of his feet the way he had when his waist measured thirty-two inches and his hair was bright red.

The sounds and smells of the night were delicious. Ragged measures of music threaded through the air. Sometimes the fragrance of flowers swept over him, sometimes perfume. Miniskirts were everywhere.

I'm beginning to feel irresponsible, Mr. Mendelbright thought.

The character of the neighborhood changed as he wandered. One whole street was staffed by doormen announcing that the non-stop striptease show inside was just about to start.

If it's non-stop, how did it stop in order for it to be about to start? Mr. Mendelbright mused.

Good! As long as he was capable of cold logic there was no danger that he could be foolish enough to enter one of these enticing Soho doorways.

Anyway, how would it be if he'd gone in? Stripteasers! What would the two innocents back at the hotel think if their captain in this strange land had gone in to see stripteasers?

Once he had gotten past these sirens in safety, the streets became narrower. There was more perfume, a tinkling of abandoned laughter. Miniskirts were shorter than ever.

Mr. Mendelbright felt that he had entered a whole neighborhood of Julie Christies.

Instead of walking around a large puddle, he leaped over it, landing neatly and silently on his sponge-rubber walking solés.

I bet I've lost ten pounds here, he considered. Maybe we'd better come here every summer.

A young Scotsman with a lock of blond hair over his forehead was talking to him.

"Rude movies, sir," he was saying. "Most unusual collection in the world. Two hours. Show begins in ten minutes."

"No, thank you," Mr. Mendelbright said.

"You'd surely enjoy it, sir. A rare collection, to be sure."

How friendly the fellow was! So naive, open and eager for the visitor to have a good time! More music trickled over the rooftops. He could smell sleeping roses in a nearby park.

For a forty-year-old man living in history's most corrupt century, Mr. Mendelbright had seen few rude movies. Only one, in fact—in New York at Junior Fingerhood's bachelor smoker just before he married Elaine.

This hardly counted. In the first place the picture had been blurry. Sidney Blake, who pretended to be such a great expert on cameras, didn't even know how to get a large ball of fuzz out of the lens. Once the picture started, it was the leading man's costume which provided distraction. He wore garters, black silk hose with white clocks up the sides and perforated black-and-white shoes throughout the entire performance. Mr. Mendelbright and Junior Fingerhood laughed till they cried. They missed the whole thing.

And here he was, thousands of miles from home where no one knew him, in a place where a man weighed ten pounds less and should have some kind of a wild adventure and not just shop all day . . .

The fellow's description was becoming more colorful. "Now there's one with two chaps. Then two chaps and bird. Then two birds. Then bird and mastiff in Kodachrome color."

"Is it far from here?" Mr. Mendelbright asked.

"Just a skip around the corner," the young man said quickly. "We've had nothing but good comments, sir. I'm sure you'll find it well worthwhile."

They moved together down the block and took a left turn.

The street they turned into was narrow, dark, close . . . Mr. Mendelbright stopped. A shadow of doubt. He held back for a moment.

"Ahhh, don't blame you, sir. Don't think I'd like to come in here with a stranger myself. But please keep in mind, sir, that we can't provide this kind of entertainment on Hyde Park corner. If you get my meaning." The warm laugh of his cicerone encouraged Mr. Mendelbright along to the top of a steep stairway.

After all, it's *telling* about these experiences that counts, he thought. He could see himself having lunch at Frascati's in Beverly Hills with Junior Fingerhood and Leo from the downtown office. He would hold them spellbound with his revue of bird and mastiff in Kodachrome color. Then, as casually as possible, he'd order café au lait.

He would thereafter be marked in the advertising business as a man who has seen it all.

The stairway led down into a shabby brick-and-stucco structure which seemed to have several levels underneath the ground. On every landing there were crude signs reading TO THE SHOW.

Finally they came to the bottom. The Scotsman disappeared. He was replaced by a very tall young man in a crumpled brown suit. Suspicion would have returned to Mr. Mendelbright then, except for one thing: in an adjacent room, he could make out a few people on folding chairs, a projector whirring, and flickering images on a screen.

Starting into the room, he hoped to catch "bird and mastiff" from the beginning. He hated coming into the middle of a picture.

A heavy hand stopped him. It was tall brownsuit.

"You'll have to join," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's a film society! Private club. You can't provide this kind of entertainment in Hyde Park corner!"

All right. The fee was three pounds. Cheap enough when you considered that it provided a lifetime of luncheon conversation.

There was a place for your signature. Without a second's hesitation, Mr. Mendelbright wrote, "Vladimir Von Fleet, Chicago." Pretty neat, he thought. Most fellows would put down John Doe or John Smith or something trite.

Brownsuit offered him a chair. Vladimir Von Fleet, Chicago, lit the last of his American cigarettes and turned his attention to the screen.

Strange. The picture seemed to be a silent version of *Dracula*.

Clever, he thought. Any minute that bat would turn into Count Dracula and ravish the girl in the white nightgown. He was impressed

by the artistic effort that had gone into the production. So much care for what could only be, at best, a limited audience. The advertising business could pick up a couple of pointers from these people!

Ten minutes of *Dracula* proved to be just *Dracula*! All the old nonsense about Transylvania, wolfbane, et cetera. Other members of the audience began to slip out of the room one by one. He could hardly blame them.

It was during the scene where Dr. Seward tells the others that he has seen Lucy sleepwalking in the garden with two strange marks on her throat when someone touched him. A thin dirty girl sitting to his right was unbuttoning his shirt.

"Want to come along with me?" she said.

Vladimir Von Fleet, Chicago, became Earl Mendelbright whose wife and daughter were washing their hair back at the hotel.

"Uh. Uh . . . no, thank you," he said.

A stocky man in the seat ahead of Mr. Mendelbright whirled around.

"What's the matter with her?" he growled. "Ain't good enough for you?"

"I'm just not interested, that's all." Mr. Mendelbright got to his feet. "I'll be running along. I'm afraid I've seen this picture be—"

The man grabbed the front of Mr. Mendelbright's J. Press summer-weight jacket. Someone pinned his arms from behind. He began to struggle as the thin girl's hands began exploring his pockets.

The jacket grabber began to shout. His remarks were loud and stagey, like bad acting. They didn't seem to fit the action, past or present.

"Filthy bloody American!" he yelled. "Bloody cheek! Coming into a private club! Mauling my bird!"

The thin girl was trying desperately to get Mr. Mendelbright's wrist watch. It was a two-hundred-dollar self-winding gold watch which changed the date every midnight. It didn't understand about February or the months with thirty days in them, so several times a year he had to pull its stem on the first of the month.

He loved that watch and fought for it. He worked one arm loose, managing to clutch the watch in his fist. The girl pulled with both hands until the metal band ripped. She tried again. This time the razor-sharp torn metal cut the underside of her wrist. He still had his watch. Maddened by the sight of her own blood, the girl began to beat

his head. Someone kicked his shin. The room became light purple as he lost track of things for a moment.

When he returned to the action, the girl had his watch. She was shrieking "Bloody American!" and a lot of other rotten things in a flat mean voice. She had become an ugly, wild animal.

Mr. Mendelbright had been in several fights in his lifetime. It wasn't that he always lost that bothered him. It was the way his mind would pretend it was happening to someone else; that all he had to do in the fight was to watch it.

This time, however, he was able to concentrate on trying to escape. With three people hanging onto him, he managed to reach the second landing. He could see the doorway and the lone light in the close outside.

"Help!" he yelled. "Police!"

A form darkened the narrow stairway above him. By God, someone was coming to help!

Disappointment . . . His rescuer proved to be tall brownsuit. He was holding a large cold knife, which he pressed against Mr. Mendelbright's throat.

"Your bloody armies aren't here, American," he said. "I wouldn't half mind cutting you up. Don't think I wouldn't!"

Mr. Mendelbright went limp. He thought with heart-wrenching regret about the pair back at the hotel. Now they would be sleeping softly, their sweet faces and bare arms expecting him back.

He would never see them again. Somehow, with the help of official strangers, they would return to Beverly Hills. The gentle young widow and the beautiful little girl would forget him in time . . .

"Let me go," he said.

His spectator mind heard a note of pleading in his voice. Don't give them the satisfaction, he thought.

"Listen, you people," he said, "just don't go too far. I'm an officer in the Naval Reserve." The increased pressure of the knife against his throat told him he was on a wrong tack . . .

His right leg felt oddly large. It touched the front of his trousers as though it were two legs. He knew he was hurt.

Suddenly he wailed, "I want my watch! I want my watch!" Shameful! He hated himself for that.

"Tell you what," the stocky fellow said, "give us all your ready, you

can have your watch back."

Was that all they wanted! He had only ten or fifteen pounds in his wallet. Why hadn't they said so in the first place?

"All right," he said. They let him reach for his wallet. It was nice not to have a knife pressing against his windpipe.

They gave him his watch and ten shillings for cab fare. Strange. Maybe he was dying and didn't know it.

"We'll be behind you," brownsuit said. "Go to the police and we'll kill you."

Good! That meant he wasn't dying.

He could hardly believe he was free. In the close he expected hands to clutch at him again, but they didn't. Then he was in the narrow street and then a large street.

He stopped. He couldn't recognize landmarks. Where was he? What street? Someone should be told about this. Where was the opening to the close? What time was it?

He opened his fist to look at his watch. It tinkled. It had become nothing but a little gold case full of loose parts. Rage filled him. Ahead, on the street, there was a bobby.

"I've been had!" Mr. Mendelbright said, looking quickly behind.

The bobby showed some interest. He wasn't like the big, strong, handsome daytime bobbies one saw in famous public places. He was rather a nighttime bad-neighborhood bobby, even smaller than Mr. Mendelbright, with an acne condition which would surely distract from the serious study of crime control.

"Take me to them and identify them, sir," he said.

Mr. Mendelbright thought about himself and this little bobby against the stalwart staff of the rude movie management.

"We'd better get some help."

"Not at all, sir. I've got this." The bobby raised the lapel of his jacket. There was a small microphone pinned there. It resembled a rusty root-beer bottlecap with holes in it.

In a country where every telephone call is shouted against a background of loud static, Mr. Mendelbright refused to trust the ability of the bobby's root-beer cap to get through stone walls three stories underground to a wandering police car.

"Now come along, sir. We'll collar them, make the arrest and, if you'll just come along to court, the case will come up presently."

Mr. Mendelbright thought about his family waking up at dawn to view his terrifyingly empty bed.

He thought about waiting in a dingy courtroom until five in the morning and he thought about reporters and newspapers.

AMERICAN ADVERTISING SOLON IN RUDE FILM SCANDAL.

His right leg had decided not to be numb any more and throb instead. He raised his trouser leg to see a large blue knot on his shinbone.

"My God!" he said, grabbing the bobby's elbow for support.

The bobby stepped away as though he'd been clutched by a leper. On his face was an unmistakable sneer of contempt. Some sort of custom had been violated.

"The hell with you," Mr. Mendelbright said. He got into a cab.

The cabby and the hotel porter were understanding and discreet. They knew he'd been in some kind of trouble. That sort of thing is difficult to hide when your shirt is soaked with blood from a girl's wrist.

His family was asleep. Very quietly, he removed his shirt and took it to a wastebasket in the maid's hall closet. Then he bathed noiselessly, pausing from time to time to prod the three-inch blue leg bump.

He couldn't sleep for the racing, remorseful thoughts . . .

How could he keep his shame from his loved ones? It would kill them if they knew what a depraved idiot they had for husband and father. Just knowing what had happened would frighten them badly. They mustn't know, they mustn't ever . . .

It must have been just after six he dozed off.

Around seven he was suddenly awakened.

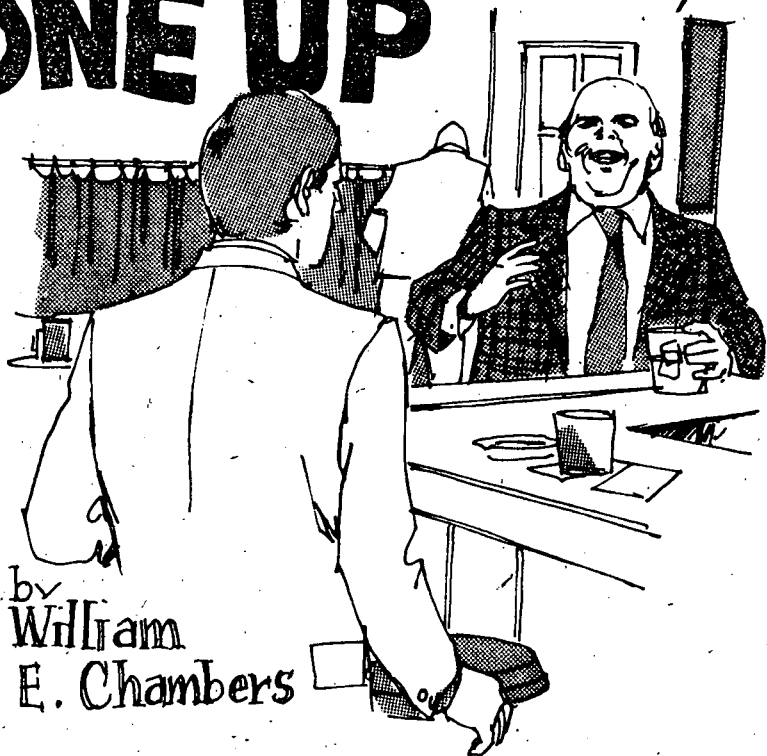
"Oh, no!" his wife gasped. "Oh, no!"

He had kicked off his covers. His pajama pants were, as usual, hiked above the knees. She was staring at the leg bump, now reddish green.

"Just *look* at that poor little leg," she said. "That darn taxi driver should have been more careful!"

Then she began to arrange the day's activities so that they included the gourmet departments at Fortnum and Mason's as well as the Burlington Arcade, where she hoped to find a really good hairbrush.

ONE UP



"Yes?" The man arched his eyebrows. "Ben Dermott! Well, I'll be

damned!"

You don't know what you're saying, Dermott thought. He said, "When I knew you, the name was Mattino."

"Changed it after Korea. Damn!" He pumped Dermott's hand. "You look as young now as the day I dragged you out of that ambush."

"Thanks."

"What're you doing in these parts? Say—" The smile slowly faded from Matthews's face. "How did you know my name was changed?"

"I know a lot about you, Tom."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Let's sit at a table. More privacy."

When they were settled, Dermott said, "You gambled with some money that wasn't yours, Tom."

"Who told you that?" Matthews's eyes narrowed.

"We work for the same people."

"You're—you're with us?"

"Enforcement division."

"Enforce—"

"They sent me to hit you."

Matthews paled. Dermott said, "Your name and description didn't ring a bell with me. You were just another contract until I saw you."

"But—but Mr. Corelli said everything was O.K. That I could pay the five grand back gradually. That—"

"He was putting you off guard, Tom. Corelli imported me from California because you knew all the New York soldiers. What the hell ever made you take a chance with syndicate money?"

"The jockey told me the fix was in. A twenty to one longshot. I—I'd've been set for life."

"What happened?"

"The horse broke his leg right after the bell."

"And your numbers receipts died with him."

"Yeah. When—when I told the boss—he made me go to Mr. Corelli himself. I told him I had a good record—I promised to pay it all back. He—he said it was O.K."

"Corelli has to make an example of you."

"But why? I'll make things even."

"Even doesn't count in our business. Respect comes from being one up on syndicate offenders."

"Ben—please—I once saved your life—"

"Let's go, Tom."

Ben Dermott read the morning paper with satisfaction. The story told of an anonymous phone call to police headquarters concerning a shooting on one of the piers in lower Manhattan during the night. A search uncovered part of a man's jacket that had caught on a jagged piling. A driver's license in the pocket revealed the owner as Tom Matthews, a small-time hood.

Dermott left his hotel room and dialed a number from a pay phone in the street. One ring later, a voice said, "Yes?"

"Job completed."

"Be at the house. Seven sharp."

Vito Corelli, lean, hard and middle aged, sat unsmiling behind his vast desk. Dermott explained he was unarmed but stood still as the ape-like butler frisked him anyway. Corelli said, "Routine precaution. Sit down."

"Thank you."

"Sloppy job you did last night."

"Sloppy?" Dermott looked surprised. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"I wanted a body found. An example."

"I got him drunk and brought him down to the pier. When he saw the gun, he panicked. Ran toward the river. I fired and he fell in."

"Who called the police?"

"A car passed by. Maybe the driver heard the shot."

"This is what-passes for professionalism in L.A.?"

Dermott shrugged. Corelli said, "I'd issue a negative report to your superiors if your story were true."

"If? Look—"

"You look. Behind you."

Dermott turned slowly, then froze. Matthews said, "Sorry, Ben."

Beads of sweat formed on Dermott's face. He said, "How did—what—"

"Your loyalty to your ex-army pal is commendable," Corelli said. "But it shouldn't have overcome your loyalty to the syndicate. Matthews told me how you set it up, leaving the jacket on the pier, calling the police, and so on."

Dermott eyed Matthews coldly. He said, "How could you?"

"I had to, Ben. The five grand you staked me wouldn't last forever. Sooner or later I'd have to find work. The syndicate's far flung. Eventually, I'd be spotted."

"What about your folks in Canada? The farm—"

"I made that up. Just so you wouldn't change your mind."

Corelli said, "Matthews did right. By coming to us and paying his bill in full—"

"With my money!"

"With your money. He showed loyalty. So we're giving him a chance to really prove himself."

Matthews took a coil of piano wire out of his jacket pocket. Dermott started to rise but the butler slammed a thick fist into his stomach and he slumped, paralyzed, back in his chair.

Slipping the piano wire over Dermott's head, Matthews said, "You evened the score for Korea, Ben. Now I'm one up on you."

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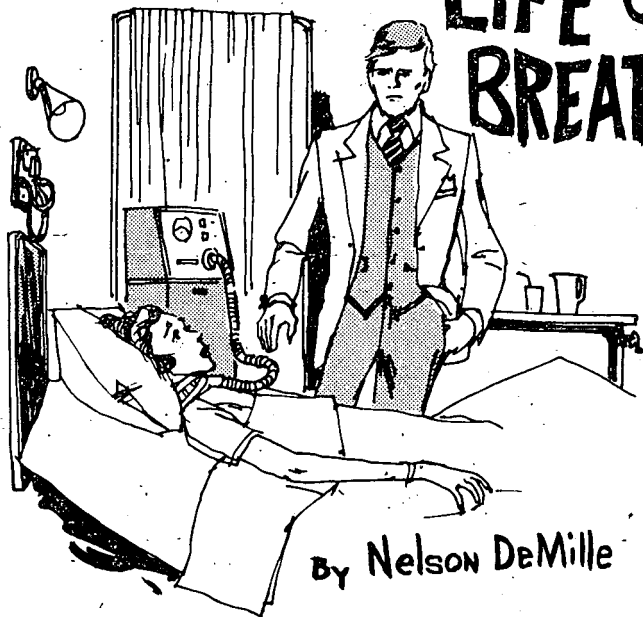
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One of life's nastiest ironies is to allow us to succeed in our schemes.

LIFE OR BREATH



By Nelson DeMille

Martin Wallace stood in a modified parade rest position and gazed out of the twenty-third-floor hospital window. Across the thirty miles of flat suburban sprawl he could see the blazing skyscrapers of Manhattan.

They blinked, twinkled and beckoned to him.

He looked at his watch. Fifteen minutes to nine. Fifteen minutes before he could leave this oppressive room and head for the lights of that

chanted island. He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. His nerves were broken by a sound behind him.

He turned and looked down at the form on the bed. The limp arm was tapping the night table to get his attention. He made a slightly annoyed face as their eyes met. Who else but Myra could get herself to a fix like this? But, then, he supposed that the hospital was full of red suburban housewives who didn't know their capacity for Valium.

He stepped up to the bed. A small green plastic box sat on its stand next to the bed. A clear accordion-type plastic hose led from the box to her throat. The box made a faint, but annoying, pneumatic sound. "Myra. I have to leave, dear. Visiting hours are over. What can I bring you?" He smiled.

She looked petulant. That was her favorite expression. Petulant. In twenty years of marriage, he had labelled every one of her expressions and voice tones.

She made small grunting sounds. She wanted to speak, but nothing came out.

"You just get a good night's rest, Myra. Rest. A nice long rest." He smiled and pulled the respirator hose out of the tracheal adaptor embedded in her throat.

Air rushed into the adaptor and made a wheezing sound. At the same time air blew out of the disconnected hose in a continuous stream. He squeezed the open end of the hose, but it was too late. The alarm went off.

Almost immediately, a big, buxom nurse charged into the room like an enraged mother hen. "Mr. Wallace! Please. I explained to you how to disconnect that. You must squeeze the hose first, before you pull it out, so that the alarm doesn't sound."

"Sorry."

She threw him a look that medical people reserve for naughty lay people. "It's like screaming wolf. You know?"

"Sorry, nurse." He looked her full figure over. Long tresses of chestnut brown hair fell onto her shoulders and framed her pretty German-Irish face. The name tag on her breast read Maureen Hesse.

She made a huff and a puff and turned around. She called back over her shoulder as she left. "Visiting hours are almost over."

"Yes, nurse." He looked down at his wife. She had placed her hand over the gaping rubber tracheal adaptor. With the hole sealed off she

was able to speak in weak, aspirating sounds. Martin Wallace preferred this to the high-pitched screech he was used to.

Myra spoke. "Don't forget my magazines." She paused as air rushed into the hole. "And get them to put a different TV in here." She wheezed. "We're paying for it." She opened her mouth and tried to gulp some air. "I want one that works. Call my mother tonight." She tried taking air in through her nose. "And talk to that doctor. I want to know *exactly* how long—"

Martin Wallace gently took his wife's hand away from the tracheal adaptor. Her words faded like a slowing record. The tracheal adaptor wheezed. He began to plug the respirator hose back into her throat.

"Martin! I have more to tell you—you—" Her words were lost as the machine began pumping air back into her lungs.

"You're getting yourself excited, Myra. Now, rest. Rest. Good night." He walked around the bed and left the room.

At the nurses' station, he spotted Dr. Wasserman, the resident physician. He walked over to him. "Excuse me, Doctor."

The young resident looked up from his charts. "Oh, yes. Mr. Wallace. How is your wife doing?"

"Well, that's what I want to ask *you*, Doctor."

"Of course." Dr. Wasserman put on a look of professional concern. "Well, Mr. Wallace, it could have been worse. She could have been dead."

Martin Wallace did not consider that to be worse. "What's the—how do you call it—prognosis?"

"Well, it's too early to tell, really. You see, Mr. Wallace, when you take a tranquillizer, like Valium, for instance, for extended periods of time, you begin to think you're building up a resistance to it. It seems to have no clout anymore. So instead of taking, let's say, five milligrams at a time, you take maybe twenty, as your wife did. Plus the martini—"

"Manhattan."

"Yes. Whatever. So what happened is that she had a period of anoxic cardiac arrest. In other words, her breathing and heart stopped. Maybe for as long as two minutes. This may lead to residual neurologic sequelae—permanent, but partial damage to the nervous system."

"Meaning?"

Dr. Wasserman stroked his chin. "It's too early to tell, really."

"Come on, Doctor. What's the *worst* it can be?"

He shrugged. "She can be an invalid for the rest of her life. She may need a home respirator for awhile. She may even need occasional renal dialysis. Frequent cardiac tests. There could be partial muscular paralysis. When you're dealing with the nervous system, you never know. It may take weeks to see what works and what doesn't work anymore. I mean, she was technically dead for a few minutes. How many functions come back is anybody's guess. You understand?"

"Yes." Martin Wallace glanced back toward his wife's room. He turned back toward the doctor. "How long would she live without the respirator? I mean—you know—when she wants to speak—I'm afraid to keep the hose out too long. I don't want to—"

The doctor moved his hand in a calming gesture. "That shouldn't be a concern. When she has difficulty breathing she signals to you, doesn't she? Or she tells you."

"Yes. Yes, of course. But I was just wondering. You know. If the hose came out in her sleep, maybe."

"That's why the alarm is there, Mr. Wallace. In the event the hose comes out by accident and she can't replace it." He gave him a smile and changed his voice to a paternal scolding tone, even though he was much younger than Mr. Wallace. "You, by the way, must be more careful when you disconnect it. You can't be setting off the alarm every time. It gives the nurses a good workout, but they have enough of that anyway in the Intensive Care Unit." He smiled again. "As long as there is someone in the room or as long as the alarm system is working, there can't be any accident."

Martin Wallace smiled back, although this good news did not make him at all happy. He was asking questions with one thing in mind and the good doctor was answering him with another thing in mind. He'd have to be blunt. "Look, Doctor," he smiled again, "just out of morbid curiosity—O.K.? How long can she live without that respirator?"

Dr. Wasserman shrugged again. "Half an hour, I guess. Probably less. Hard to say. Sometimes a patient can get the voluntary muscles to work hard enough to breathe for hours and hours. But as soon as the patient gets fatigued or sleeps, the involuntary muscles, which should normally control unconscious breathing, can't do the job. I really can't give you a definite answer. But the question is academic, anyway, isn't it? The respirator breathes for her, Mr. Wallace."

"Yes. Of course. But—" He tried to put on an abashed smile. "Just one more question. I worry about these things. I'm an accountant and I have that kind of mind. You know?" He smiled a smile that tried to bespeak professional parallelism. Neurotic complicity between great minds. "I think too much, I suppose. But I was wondering, is—is there any way the alarm system can fail? You know?"

Dr. Wasserman tapped him lightly on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Mr. Wallace. As soon as that hose comes out of the tracheal adaptor and the pumped air meets no resistance, the alarm goes off here in the nurses' station. Now, I know what you're thinking. What if Mrs. Wallace pulls it loose during the night and rolls over on it." He smiled.

That's exactly what Martin Wallace was thinking. He waited, literally breathless.

"Well, it's almost impossible to pull it loose by accident, to begin with. Secondly, she'd have to roll over on it very, very quickly. Otherwise, the alarm would go off. Then she'd have to stay in that position for some time. But you see, as soon as she had difficulty breathing, she'd move or thrash. It's a normal reaction. She's not comatose. The hose, then, would be free of her body and the alarm would sound. But anyway, in Intensive Care, we check the patients regularly. Besides, you have hired private nurses around the clock, as I understand."

Martin Wallace tried not to look glum. He nodded. Those nurses were costing him a fortune. Another one of Myra's extravagances. But there was one last glimmer of hope. Dr. Wasserman, however, had anticipated the next question and began answering it.

"And the other thing you're wondering about is the respirator itself. Well, any malfunction in the machine also triggers an alarm. There are several alarms, actually. At least three back up alarms in that model." The doctor folded his arms and glanced at his watch. "We have a dozen spare respirators standing by. Haven't lost a patient through accident, yet." He smiled reassuringly.

"Power failure?" It came out with the wrong intonation. It came out as though he were begging for one.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Power failure. Power failure. You know. Blackout."

"Oh." He laughed. "You *are* a worrier, Mr. Wallace." The doctor's smile faded and his voice became impatient. "We have auxiliary

generators, of course. It's the law." He looked pointedly at his watch. "I have to make my rounds. Excuse me."

"Of course." Martin Wallace stood rooted at the nurses' station for several minutes staring straight ahead.

He walked slowly to the elevator bank. A few overstayed visitors stared wordlessly at the floor indicator. The elevator came and he, stepped in. The lights blinked—22—21—20—19—

He walked out of the hospital and into the acres of parking lot. A gentle spring breeze blew the scent of newly born flowers across the dark macadam. He walked slowly through the balmy night air as though in a trance. Invalid. Partial paralysis. Home respirator. Renal dialysis.

He had come so close to losing her for good. And now this. What a monumental mess. Myra was hard enough to take when she was well—which was almost never. Twenty years of hypochondria, and never one really good fatal illness. And now this. An invalid.

He walked up to his car and got in. He lit a cigarette and looked out the side window. Three very pretty young girls walked by. They wore jeans and T-shirts. Their long hair fell over their shoulders. Their lithe bodies and lilting voices made his chest heave. He bit his lip in suppressed desire.

Myra. Painted toenails. Painted eyes. Dyed hair. Enough jewelry to drown her in the event she ever decided to jump into the swimming pool she had insisted on having built. Myra. Ridiculous fan magazines and trashy tabloids. Does Jackie O. keep a secret picture of Jack in her snuff box? Is Robert Redford in love with Princess Grace? Who *cares*? Myra. Sitting in front of the idiot box in a crocodilian stupor. Shrieking over a game of Mah Jong with her bitchy friends. Sitting for hours baking her skimpy brains under a hair dryer. Myra. Barren of children. Barren of a single original thought in twenty years. Myra and Poopsie. Poopsie and Myra. Of all the dogs on God's earth, he hated poodles more than any other. Myra. Professional shopper. Myra. The last novel she read was *Love Story*. The one before that was *Valley of the Dolls*. The only time she had stirred herself in years was to join a local chapter of the women's liberation movement. The Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore Chapter. Liberation. What a laugh. Who was freer than that lazy cow? Myra. What a dud. He laughed and slumped over the steering wheel. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Divorce. Divorce would cost him a fortune. Her death, on the other hand, would put a hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy in his pocket.

Martin Wallace pulled the rear view mirror down and looked at himself in the dim light. Not bad for thirty-nine. A few weeks at a health spa. A little sun tan. New clothes. A new hair style. A new life.

He slumped back into the seat of his big, Myra inspired Cadillac. He pictured the interior of a Porsche or a Jaguar.

He looked up at the tall, bulky, illuminated hospital. Even with his medical insurance, she was costing him two hundred a day. Even flat on her back she was draining him. Her whole life was a study in conspicuous consumption. The quintessential consumer of goods and services. She even consumed more hospital goods and services than the average patient. And she never produced one single thing in her whole life. Not even the thing she was built to produce—a child. Barren. Frigid. Worthless. In his accounting firm she would be called a continuing liability. But a liability, which if liquidated, would become an asset. Liquidated.

He started the car and wheeled out of the parking lot. Within the hour he had parked his car in a midtown garage.

He began walking up Third Avenue. It was a week night, but the streets were alive with people on this first nice spring evening. He walked into P.J. Moriarty's. At the bar were three bachelors from his office—his subordinates of sorts.

They drank there for an hour, then took taxis to each other's favorite East-Side pubs. They took taxis all over town. They walked and sang and drank.

They wound up on the West Side and had a late supper at the Act I, overlooking Times Square. Down in the street the Great White Way blazed through their alcoholic haze.

They left the restaurant. To Martin Wallace, there was pure magic in the night air and in the streets of New York, as he gazed out through his clouded eyes at the lights and people swirling around him.

He separated from his friends and walked east on Central Park South and stood in front of the Plaza Hotel, overlooking the park. He finger-combed his hair and straightened his tie. Then he entered the hotel and fulfilled a long-standing recurring dream of checking in.

The marble lobby was an enchanted forest of columns and thick pile rugs. Subdued lights showed little knots of well-dressed people seated in the plush chairs and sofas. An attractive woman seemed to smile at him as the bellboy led him to the elevators.

He awoke and lay, bathed in glorious late morning sunlight. He picked up the phone and ordered coffee and mixed rolls and pastry. As an afterthought—he had seen it in a movie—he ordered a pitcher of Bloody Marys.

He put his hands behind his neck and stared at the rich cream-colored ceiling. His mind wandered. On his salary, with no dependents—that is, no Myra—and with no money-sucking house in the suburbs, he reckoned that he could well afford a life style like this. A nice apartment in town. A few wild nights a week like last night. An opera or a little ballet on his easy nights. A Broadway show once in awhile. Sunday brunch at the Oyster Bar downstairs. Maybe he would rent a car on weekends and get out to the hinterlands once in awhile. Maybe take the train from Pennsylvania Station to the Hamptons or to Belmont Racetrack. Maybe the train from Grand Central Station to the resort hotels in the Catskills or a football game at West Point. Sunday afternoon in Central Park. Saturday in Greenwich Village. A different little restaurant every night. He would have to patronize at least one bar and one restaurant enough to become one of the regulars, though, he reminded himself. He pictured scenes he had seen in movies. The possibilities for life were unlimited in this city. No house, no car, no television, no fan magazines, no Myra. He smiled.

If he had a nice windfall of, say, a hundred thousand dollars to start with, it would be even better. And all this was only a heartbeat away. Just a single heartbeat. But it kept beating, that heart. Thump. Thump. Thump. He could hear his own heart beat heavily in his chest.

He stretched and yawned. He cleared his husky, dry throat and placed a phone call.

A woman answered. "East Park Community Hospital."

"Yes. Intensive Care Unit, please." The phone clicked.

"ICU."

"Yes. Is it still beating?"

"Sir?"

"This is Mr. Wallace. How is my darling wife, please?" He felt reck-

less this morning.

"Just a moment."

There was a long pause. Martin Wallace prayed.

The voice came back. "Fine, sir. Mrs. Wallace spent a comfortable night. Your private nurse is just bathing her now."

"Swell. Terrific. Thank you." He slammed the phone down and covered his face with the pillow.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

The bus boy entered with a rolling cart. The cart was heaped with all manner of hotel luxury. There was even a complimentary copy of *The New York Times*. Just like in the movies. But the scene paled next to the reality of the telephone call.

He signed for the breakfast and sat down heavily on the bed. He poured a Bloody Mary into a tall glass with a coating of salt on its rim. He downed it in one long gulp.

He opened the paper as he sipped his coffee and scanned it idly. The problems of the world were miniscule compared to his own, but he had developed the defensive habit of eating breakfast behind a newspaper and it was hard to break bad habits. He read, but nothing registered. His mind was elsewhere. Myra. Thump. Thump. Thump. Her heart still beat at the rate of a couple of hundred dollars a day. Thump. Thump. It had been silent for two minutes once, but thanks to the marvels of medical science, it was thumping again. Thump. Thump. Thump. It would thump for how many more years? Twenty? Forty? Sixty?

How do you divorce an invalid, even if you are willing to pay most of your salary for the rest of your life? Why not just disappear, then? That was becoming one of the most popular track sports among men these days. The 100 yard dash into obscurity. But it was a tremendous price to pay. Loss of identity. Loss of friends. Loss of professional credentials. Why should *he* disappear? Why couldn't *she* disappear? "Die! Die, damn you! Die!" The sound of his own voice scared him.

He tossed the paper on the bed. He stared at the open pages for a long second, then picked it up again. There was a lengthy article on the question of medical life-support systems. He read it intently and discovered that he was not alone in wishing that medical science would let the dying die.

He read of cases of brain dead patients kept alive for months and even years by artificial means. He read of cases similar to Myra's. Overdoses. Strokes. Partially destroyed nervous systems. Human beings snatched from the slashing scythe of the Grim Reaper, but not before suffering permanent life wrecking infirmities. He read of the burdens of families left with slack-jawed loved ones to care for. Left with staggering medical bills rendered by smiling doctors and hospitals as the price for returning these loved ones to them as vegetables.

But what interested him more was not the horror stories of misguided humanitarianism, but rather the names of individuals and organizations who opposed these extraordinary measures taken to prolong life at any cost.

He nibbled at a big cheese Danish and a smile played across his moving lips.

He took the pass from the girl at the desk and stood in front of the elevator bank. The night was warm, but he wore a tan trench coat buttoned to the neck.

Swarms of visitors waited as the elevators came to collect them and carry them up into the great hospital. Martin Wallace crowded into one of the cars. He held his brown paper bag at chest level to keep it from being crushed in the press of the crowd.

In the Intensive Care Unit, he stopped at the nurses' station and exchanged a few smiling words with Miss Hesse, then walked into Myra's private room. He nodded to the attractive private nurse he was paying for. "How's she doing, Ellen?" He smiled. She, plus the other two nurses, were costing him a fortune, he reminded himself. He also reminded himself that they were not needed, but Myra had insisted.

The petite young girl smiled at him. "Fine, Mr. Wallace. Getting better every day." She rose. "I'll just leave you two alone." She smiled at both of them and left.

Myra made a weak gesture toward her throat.

Martin Wallace nodded tiredly and reached down and grabbed the hose. He pinched before he pulled and the alarm did not sound. He placed his hand over the tracheal adaptor in her throat and the wheezing stopped.

Myra sucked in a big gulp of air. "I had Ellen call you all last night."

Her voice sounded stronger today, he noticed. It had some of its

old screechiness back in it. "Is that so? I must have slept through the phone. Sorry."

She looked at him with expression number three. Suspicion. "I needed my nail polish and manicure kit."

The tone was accusatory. It was supposed to provoke guilt in him, even though it was barely audible and her tonal quality was hard to control. He recognized it, anyway. "Sorry."

What an incredible woman, he thought. Three days ago she was leaning heavily against death's door and today she wants her manicure kit. He stared at her for several seconds. He had an impulse to pour her bottle of skin lotion into the tracheal adaptor and watch her drown. "Sorry, Myra."

"Well, at least I see you remembered something." She pointed to the bag that he had placed on the bed. "Did you—"

He took his hand off the adaptor and air rushed in. Her words faded. "Can't have you off it too long, dear." He plugged the pinched-off hose back in with his other hand and released it. The machine changed pitch and began pumping in air. It was so easy to shut her up that it was almost comical. He could see that she was furious at being cut off. She moved her hand to the hose to pull it out, but he grabbed her wrist. "Really, Myra. That's enough talking for awhile."

She tried to pull her wrist free, but he held it easily. Her other hand reached out and she pushed the nurse's call buzzer.

Martin Wallace had enough for one night. He reached inside the paper bag and took out two magazines and threw them on the night table. "I could only find two."

She looked inquisitively at the still bulging bag.

He didn't acknowledge her questioning eyes.

—The private nurse, Ellen, walked in. "Yes?"

Martin Wallace smiled. "I think Mrs. Wallace wants something." He looked down at her. "I really have to go, dear. I can't stay tonight." He looked at his watch. It was only eight-ten. "I'm sorry, Myra, darling. I have an appointment." He looked at Ellen. "Take care of my sweetheart, will you? I'll try to get over tomorrow afternoon. Otherwise I'll see you both tomorrow night." He walked to the door. "Good-bye."

Ellen smiled. "Good-bye, Mr. Wallace."

Myra shot him look number one. Pure malice with a touch of hatred

nd contempt.

He waved and went into the corridor.

At the elevator bank a chime sounded and a light lit up. He walked over to the open car and stepped in. There were three other early departing visitors and one orderly. Only the lobby button was lit. Non-halantly, he pushed *B* for basement.

The elevator stopped in the lobby and the doors slid open. He moved closer to the control panel and out of sight of the guards and reception desks. He frantically hit the *Door Close* button.

The elevator descended to the basement. The elevator doors opened. He stepped into a long, empty corridor. Some of the kitchens were down here and he could smell cooking. He looked around; then walked quickly up to a canvas laundry cart and shucked off his trench coat. He threw it in the cart and buried it with dirty linen. Under the trench coat he wore a white lab jacket.

Still clutching his paper bag, he paced up and down the deserted corridors, examining doors and signs.

At the end of a long, dimly lit corridor he saw it. It was marked *Subbasement. Electrical*. He opened the steel door and descended the narrow metal staircase.

The stairwell emptied into a long, narrow corridor. He walked past the grey painted concrete walls under the harsh glow of evenly spaced naked bulbs that ran the length of the ceiling. He stopped at each of several metal doors, opening each and looking inside.

Finally, he came to a door whose stencilled sign was the announcement of the end of his search: *Electrics Room. Danger. High Voltage*. He went inside and closed the door behind him.

The dimly lit room was medium-sized and crowded with the life stuff of modern buildings. Endless tubes of wire and conduit ran across the ceiling and tracked down the grey walls. On the far side lay two huge diesel generators on raised platforms. Each had a hooded exhaust over it. To the left of the generators sat a rectangular box labelled: *Batteries—Caution: Acid*.

It would take a barrel of dynamite to completely sabotage this room. It would be necessary to blow up both generators, the storage batteries and the external city electricity source.

Every system, however, has its Achilles' heel and he did not have to be an electrical engineer to know what the soft spot in this system

was. He had to find it first, though.

He walked slowly around the room. On the rear wall were about thirty black and grey painted metal panels. Plastic label tags hung from each of them. He ran his eyes over each tag.

He smiled when he found what looked like the proper one. Mounted waist high on the wall, it was the size of a deep orange-crate. It was painted a shiny, crackling black. The long switch handle on the side of the box was capable of being set in three positions: *Automatic*, *External* and *Diesel*. The switch was in the *Automatic* position.

He opened the cabinet door and it made a metallic squeak. Inside the door was a sign that said, *Power Sensing and Relay Control Panel. Disconnect Diesel Junction Connector D-3 Before Servicing*. He would disconnect more than that before he was through. This was it for sure. This was the central distribution point for the sources of the hospital's power. This box decided whether or not the city's power was normal and if not, it would then activate the diesel generators, drawing on the storage batteries, if necessary. It all came together right here in this box. The Achilles' heel. Remove the box and you removed the whole hospital's energy supply.

From his paper bag, he removed a large number ten fruit can. The top of the can was covered with aluminum foil. He removed the foil and shoved it into his pants pocket. Inside the can was packed the gunpowder from a box of fifty 12-gauge shotgun shells. It was a small charge by the standards of most bomb makers, but then he did not need much and it had the advantage of using an easily procured and non-traceable explosive.

Also inside the can was a simple wind up alarm clock and two flashlight batteries attached to a switch. A cluster of the nitroglycerine primers from the shotgun shells was the detonator. The whole thing looked innocuous enough, especially in the foil covered fruit can. It looked like a container that a doting husband would use to carry homemade cookies to his ailing loved one. Even one of the rare cursory inspections by the hospital guards would have aroused no suspicion.

He put his hand into the can and set the alarm for ten o'clock. He connected the wires with alligator clips. The loud ticking seemed to fill the cryptlike room. He placed the whole thing gently inside the cabinet. He wiped it carefully for prints with a handkerchief and closed

the steel door. He wiped the door, also. His face was covered with sweat as he turned from the wall of control panels.

He crossed the room and walked up to the door. From the paper bag he removed a piece of shirt cardboard and taped it to the door. He had wanted to letter the sign ahead of time, but it would be incriminating if by some rare happenstance a guard had wanted to look in the bag. He wrote in large block letters with a marking pen. *God Does Not Want People Kept Alive by Artificial Means. Let the Dying Die with Dignity.* (Signed) *The Committee To End Human Suffering.*

He heard voices outside the door. He stood motionless and breathless as the voices, two males, came abreast of the door. They walked by and he could hear their footsteps retreating down the corridor. He waited.

As he waited, he looked at the sign in the dim light. He smiled. This was enough of a red herring to throw the police off for months. And if by chance they suspected a friend or relative of one of the hospital's current patients, it would make no difference. There were at least thirty people in the Intensive Care Unit whose lives depended on one machine or another. To run down the friends and relatives of each of them would take a very long time. Eventually, they might even get around to asking him to "drop by" for questioning. But so what? There would be a few hundred others, connected with the thirty or so, they would have to question also. Then there would be all the known anti-life-support-systems groups and individuals.

It disturbed him that so many others would die also, but it could not be helped, really. To play with Myra's respirator in the hospital or to see that she had an accident when she returned home was to court life imprisonment. It was no secret to their friends and relatives that he wanted her gone.

To end all the lives hanging on the machines was to scatter the suspicion far and wide. That was the beauty of the thing.

Of course there were some people who only needed the machines for a short while before they could become self sustaining again. That was a pity. And there were even some operations scheduled at night that would never be completed. That, too, was unfortunate. But Myra had to die and he, Martin Wallace, had to live. The footsteps and voices faded away.

Slowly, he opened the door and slipped into the corridor. He walked

quickly to the staircase and walked up from the sub basement into the more brightly lit corridor of the basement. He threw the paper bag into a trash barrel and walked quickly over to the laundry cart near the elevators. He ripped the white coat off and threw it in the cart, then retrieved his own trench coat and slipped it on. He hit the elevator button and waited. He noticed that his knees were shaking as he stood staring up at the floor indicator. His head felt light and his mouth was dry, but his forehead was wet.

He could hear the elevator approach. It stopped and the doors slid open. Four visitors and an orderly stood staring at him silently. He froze. They stared.

He stepped into the car quickly and faced the control panel.

The car stopped automatically in the lobby. The doors slid open.

He turned so as not to face the guard and headed for the main doors. Every step was shaky and he thought his knees might give out and he would topple over. He tried to swallow, but almost choked on the dryness. The doors got bigger and bigger and soon he was pushing on one of them. Through. The foyer. More doors. Push. Outside.

He walked, almost ran, down the path to the parking lot. His hands moved in and out of his coat and pants pockets like fluttering birds. He began tearing at the pockets. Keys. Keys. There. He nearly sprinted the remaining distance to his car.

He pulled at the door handle. It would not budge. Locked. Locked. He took a deep breath and calmed himself slightly. With a hand shaking worse than he could ever imagine, he tried to place the key in the lock. Finally, after a full minute, he got it in and twisted it.

Inside, he had difficulty finding the right key and then could not hold his hand still enough to get it in the ignition. Finally, he steadied himself and put it in. He turned the key and the engine roared to life. The sound made him jump, but then soothed him. He took a long, deep breath and fumbled for a cigarette. Within forty-five minutes he would be sitting in P. J. Moriarty's with his friends.

He threw the big Cadillac into low and shot out of the parking space—directly into the path of a huge delivery van.

"Just take it easy, Mr. Wallace. You're going to be fine. Really."

He blinked his eyes. The voice was familiar. Dr. Wasserman.

The voice spoke again, but to someone else. "It was a simple whip-

lash. Those headrests don't always do the job. Sometimes they even cause worse injuries if they're not set properly. I suppose you had it set downward for yourself, but it was too low for him. Hit him in the back of the neck. But it's not serious."

A weak voice to his left answered. "Yes. I did most of the driving."

Myra.

Martin Wallace blinked into the overhead light. He tried to move his head, but couldn't. Something was in his mouth and he could not speak. He rolled his eyes downward as far as they would go. He could see a tube. He looked up. On the opposite wall, a television set was mounted on a high shelf. He was in Myra's room. The picture was bad and the sound was lowered so that he could not hear it. It was a commercial for Alpo. A toy poodle was being shown a can of the canine victuals by its mistress.

Another person entered the room. Martin Wallace caught a glimpse of him as he passed by. It was his family physician, Dr. Matirka. Then the face of the floor nurse, Maureen Hesse, came into view for a second, then the profile of the private nurse, Ellen.

Dr. Wasserman spoke to the others. "Whiplash. He's suffered swelling around the basal ganglia and the internal capsule above the base of the brain. Luckily, the reticular activating system was not involved. There is no loss of consciousness. He's conscious and can see and hear us. But everything from the neck down is paralyzed. He can't speak or breathe on his own. That's why I've put the intubation tube into his mouth and through the larynx, instead of into the trachea. We've given him dexamethasone to combat the swelling. The swelling and consequent paralysis didn't begin until we got him in here, so there's almost no period of anoxia. There will be no permanent damage at all once the swelling goes down in a few days."

Dr. Wasserman leaned over him and smiled. "Blink if you understood what I said, Mr. Wallace."

Martin Wallace blinked.

"So you see, as soon as the swelling at the base of the brain goes down in a few days, your nervous system will return to normal and we can take this respirator off. You'll leave here as good as you came in. Blink if you understand."

Martin Wallace blinked through eyes that were becoming misty. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"No need to be upset," said Dr. Matirka. He leaned over the bed. "In fact, I have more good news for you. Myra's breathing is returning to normal. She can get on fine without the respirator for extended periods. We're weaning her away from it a little at a time just to be safe, but I think she can go for at least an hour or two without it. In fact, she's off it now." He chuckled pleasantly and tapped Martin Wallace on the chest, but the paralyzed man felt nothing. Tears streamed down his face.

"Now, now," said Nurse Hesse, a little sternly, "getting upset will make it worse. You'll be fine in a few days. See, we didn't even have to make a tracheotomy opening for the respirator. When the swelling goes down, you can get up and walk out of here."

Ellen leaned over. "It could have been much worse. See, Mrs. Wallace is fine too. You'll both be out of here in a few days."

Only the muscles above his mouth responded to his commands. His eyes blinked furiously and tears streamed down from them. His nose twitched spasmodically and his upper lip quivered. His forehead furrowed. Even his ears wiggled just a bit.

"He does seem quite upset about something, doesn't he?" remarked Ellen.

"He'll be better when he begins to believe us," said Dr. Wasserman. Martin Wallace fixed his blurry eyes on the television screen. The picture tube said: *Ten O'Clock News*.

Myra spoke. "Turn on *Medical Center* and raise the volume for me, Ellen. I'm not interested in the news."

The lights went out.

Someone said, "Damn it."

There was a short silence.

Dr. Wasserman's voice spoke softly. "Just a second. The auxiliary generators will kick in."

Silence.

"Just a second. They'll be on in just a half second."

Martin Wallace could hear Myra's voice in the dark as he struggled to breathe.

"I'm going to miss part of the show." Petulant.

"Just a second." Dr. Wasserman's voice sounded anxious now.

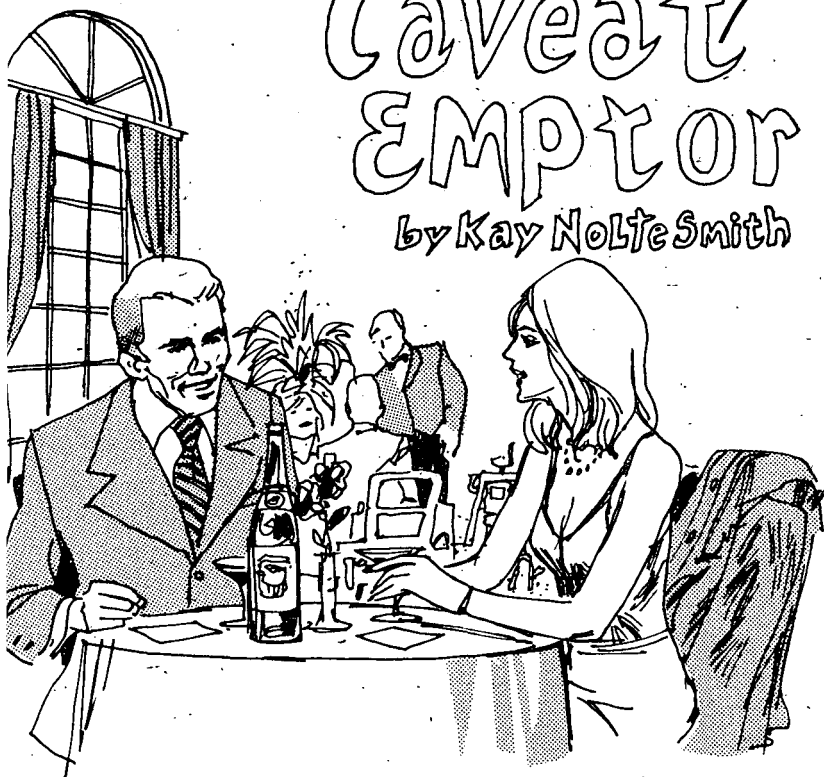
"They'll be on in just a half second."

But Martin Wallace knew they would not be on ever again.

he man who does not do his own thinking is already a slave.

Caveat Emptor

by Kay Nolte Smith



he wish first occurred to Judson Wick while he was attending the opera.

An opera box was not his normal milieu, but he could not pass up the chance to escort the elderly widow who glittered with diamonds and influence; so, masking his lack of interest and knowledge, he kept an attentive look on his handsome, if rather bland, face and bent his neck, dark head in response to the widow's frequent nudges. It was

during such a moment, when he did focus on the performance, that the wish occurred to him. He smiled ruefully and dismissed it.

It came back to him the next day, during his yearly lunch with the manager of Wick Industries. The man always recited lists of figures—this year they showed the declining value of the company's stock—and reminisced at irritating length about the years when Judson's father had built and run the company. It was Judson's practice to keep his manner aloof and unconcerned; but this time, when the manager made pointed references to "the leisurely life," the manner began to show fine cracks, like battered safety glass—until the moment was saved by the sudden return of the wish.

That evening it returned once more when, as a guest of the director, Judson attended the opening of a Broadway play and the party that followed. He ate smoked oysters and listened while the rave reviews were read aloud; over the rim of his champagne glass he watched the director, with whom he had gone to school, standing in the spotlight of success, and the wish came back so forcefully that the champagne soured in his throat and he left the party.

He barely had returned to his apartment when the doorbell rang. His spirits lifted at the thought that the red haired actress had changed her mind about a nightcap, but the person at the door was not female, and the hair was quite gray. The suit was gray too, in both color and spirit, drooping on the man's shoulders and rounding over his knees. Everything about him seemed tired and sad except for his tie, a strip of vivid orange silk that ran down his shirtfront like a tongue of flame. "Good evening," he said. "I am advised by my firm that you have some property for sale."

"I think you've got the wrong apartment."

"I think not. You are Judson A. Wick, you are forty-one years old and you are interested in selling the balance."

"Of what?" asked Judson cautiously.

"Last night you attended Gounod's opera and made a wish, which you have repeated twice. Therefore you are requesting an arrangement similar to Doctor Faust's. May I come in?"

Judson moved aside mechanically while his mind struggled for comprehension. "I think you're putting me on."

"Mr. Wick," sighed the man, "if I were not what I claim to be, how could I have known about your wish?"

"I don't know," said Judson finally. "But you don't look the part. Who ever heard of you as the man in the gray flannel suit?"

"But I am just a salesman, a mere servant of the firm. Call me John, if you like." The man shot his cuffs and smoothed his tie. "This is the twentieth century, Mr. Wick. We are no longer a Middle Ages barter service but a modern business corporation. Naturally we don't ask you to take us on faith. We offer, in fact we insist upon, a twenty-four-hour period in which you sample our merchandise free of charge, with no further obligation. Now, for what did you wish to negotiate? Power? Knowledge? Eternal Youth?" When Judson frowned, he added, "Then there is our most popular offer, Fame and Influence."

"Ah," said Judson. "Yes."

"In which field would you want it?"

Judson shrugged, "I wouldn't care. No, wait a minute." Into his mind bubbled the memory of champagne and rave reviews. "Make it show business. Broadway. No, make it bigger. Hollywood."

The man took out a small, gray pad, made a note, and rose. "When you wake up tomorrow, the twenty-four hours will begin. Incidentally, we'll be observing you, to insure that satisfaction is achieved. Then I return at the end of the period, with a contract for you to sign."

Judson's gaze wavered and slid around the room. "All right," he said finally. "What have I got to lose?"

Something flickered for a moment in the man's gray eyes, like matches at the ends of two tunnels. Then the orange tie dimmed out, and he was gone.

When Judson awoke at ten, he heard a voice that seemed to be located in his ear. "Good morning," it said in metallic, asexual tones. "The observation has begun. We are ready to grant your wishes." After a moment there was an odd sensation inside Judson's head: a faint, not unpleasant, echoing, rather as if someone were listening on a telephone extension. "They mean it," he said softly. "What the hell do you know about that?"

The words made him smile; he lay in bed for some moments grinning, but finally he began to consider what his requests should be. Self-consciously at first, because he was aware of the inner listener, and then with growing pleasure in the fact of an audience, he thought of some of the important film people he had met in the past, during

the years when he had been married to Shelley and she had not yet catapulted to fame. He could, he thought, choose to be like any of them—to be one of those who moved on the edges of the limelight but in the center of power, or even to be an actor, perhaps the top male box office star in the country. Or the world.

The pale green phone on his nightstand rang. In a rather puzzled voice a man introduced himself as a reporter from *Variety*, said he had just heard there was an important story to be gotten from a Judson Wick, and inquired what it might be.

It took all of Judson's skill to convince the man there was a story but that it could not be divulged yet; when he hung up, he was sharply aware that the inner listener was still listening. He got into the shower and made a careful list of people he might call, narrowing it to three, one of whom was his director friend of the night before, but finally rejecting all of them. While he was shaving, the thought that Shelley was in town promoting her latest picture kept pulling at his mind. He nicked his chin, swore, and suddenly laughed aloud: why should he worry about finding an excuse to call? Shelley would call him—if he wished.

When he reached the restaurant two hours later, Shelley was just arriving in a cloud of reporters. He detached her and led her to a table, where he insisted that she talk about her new film throughout their first drink. "All right," she finally said. "I'm the one who called you, God knows why, so I must want to hear what you've been up to all these years."

He took her hand, and a deep breath; it seemed to him that the interest of the inner listener had quickened. Picking his way among the words, he said, "I'm on to something big. Very big. Something that's going to lead me straight to your town."

"Something in pictures, you mean?"

"What else do you do in Hollywood?"

"But you don't know anything about the industry."

"Shelley," he said softly, "I'll be able to do anything I want. Anything."

She studied him, her violet eyes narrowing to points of black light. "Are you serious? You're going to produce a picture?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that. Of course. That's what I'm going to do."

"What picture?"

He raised a hand for the waiter, wishing for him to come immediately, and ordered more drinks. Then he leaned back and said carefully, "Let's put it this way. I'm in the market for ideas."

"Are you? That's a coincidence." Shelley tapped her glass slowly with one mauve and perfect nail. "There's a book that Global is planning to buy for Lisa Gordon. But it would be so right for me. If someone else got it, that is. If someone else were able to get it."

"That's a coincidence." He smiled boyishly, the smile she used to say she liked. "Because what I had in mind was to make a great picture for Shelley."

When he returned to his apartment, there were eighteen hours left of the twenty-four. Despite the successful lunch, there was a fist of tension at the back of his neck that would not uncurl. He made a martini and sat staring down at its olive eye. Then he picked up the phone and called the elderly widow whom he had escorted to *Faust*. Adopting the bantering manner she liked, he inquired about the charity ball she was staging, automatically wangled an invitation, and finally extracted the true object of his call, a telephone number.

He dialed it, adjusting his mental posture to one of deference; to the famous film critic who answered, he posed as a graduate student researching the adapting of novels to the screen. He sought the critic's opinion of several recent films, and then casually mentioned the novel Shelley had suggested. When the critic spoke of it enthusiastically, he asked, in a casual, speculative manner, which writers and directors would be most capable of translating such a property to the screen. He hung up with a half smile that could not seem to grow; he sat fingering the back of his neck, and told himself that he needed to get out.

An hour later he headed for an art gallery on Madison Avenue. The crowd at the opening was already so dense that there was no way, or need, to see the paintings; he thrust himself in among the bodies and soon had collected enough comments to deliver them to the artist as if they were his own tribute. Then he was free to turn to the real business of the evening.

Moving among the crowd with studied aimlessness, he talked to a Senator's mistress and the president of a Fifth Avenue store, telling them that he was going to make a film; the sudden interest in their eyes became a glint in his own. He told the wives of three indus-

trialists that Shelley Garnett would be starring in his picture; the warmth in their voices became a cool assurance in his own. He told two art critics of the major literary property he was going to buy and the screenwriter and director he planned to hire; the attentiveness in their manner became a certainty in his own veins.

By nine o'clock the crowd had thinned, but its power was still with him. With the insolence of confidence, he attached himself to the painter and to the man's plans for dinner with a few influential clients.

When he got home at two o'clock, he did not know whether his exultation was the racing of his own pulse or the throbbing attention of the inner listener. He paced the living room in wide, jagged arcs; finally he took a sleeping pill and forced himself to lie on the bed.

Around five o'clock his staring eyes closed, but behind their lids a dream began almost at once: at the end of a flame colored carpet, down which he walked for dozens of triumphant yards, he was greeted by a massive figure in red.

John wiped his face with a gray handkerchief and turned to the last entry in his notebook. He was making his daily report to the gentleman known simply as M, who sat behind a battered desk in an office that had seen better centuries. M wore a gray cape as thin as smoke, and a chronic scowl.

"Merchandise check on Judson A. Wick," John read. "Requested Fame and Influence. Field: none. When pressed, subject chose the film industry, a desire inspired by watching a friend's success. Here is the printout on his mental processes: Settled on becoming a producer, a notion which he got from his ex-wife. Decided to produce a certain novel, an idea which came from the same source. Determined that the novel was brilliant, by checking the opinion of a noted film critic. Selected a screenwriter and director, names he also got from the critic. Subject ended the trial period feeling confident and self-assured, a state which he induced by seeking out the reactions of influential persons at a fashionable cultural event."

M glowered. "Do you mean there wasn't even one of his own? Not one opinion or desire?"

"No, all were derived from other people. I believe he even got the idea of selling his soul from the Gounod opera."

"Damnation!" roared M. "There are too many like him! They're ruin-

ing my business! I need some kind of consumer protection. It's fraud, that's what it is—people trying to sell me borrowed merchandise. If I didn't check them out first, they'd bankrupt me." He sighed, in a shower of sparks. "Why are the ones without a soul of their own always the most eager to sell?"

John smiled wryly. "I'll have the incident erased from Wick's mind."

"What mind?" snarled M. "Just suppose I took people like that. Where's my profit? Where's my pleasure? Turn them into servants, procurers of other souls, and they'd feel right at home. No agony at all." His glance darted hotly over John's face. "Not like you, eh, Doctor?"

"No, not like me."

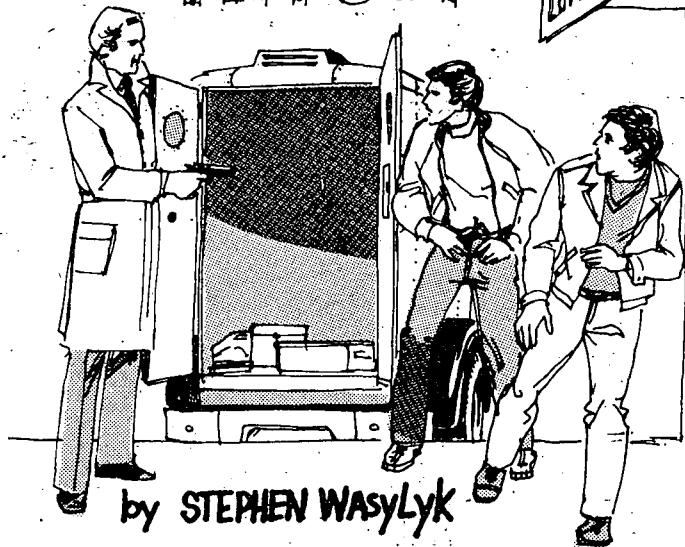
"Well," sighed M, "get back out into the field. And see if you can find me someone like you. Someone with clear title to his property."

Something in the depths of John Faust's eyes glowed in pain for a moment. Then he closed his notebook and left the office wearily and sadly.



A very wise man once said, "The ways to enrich are many, and most of them foul. . ."

THE BIG OLD MELON



The motel room was small. Maybe that was what gave me the closed-in feeling. Or maybe it was the action Gorman Phillips had lined up for the three of us. I didn't like Phillips and I could have dusted out of that room with no regrets but I looked over at Cole and he smiled and I knew he could sense what was going through my mind.

It had always been like that between me and my younger brother. The five year difference in our ages should have made me the wiser

one but it didn't work that way. Cole had always been smarter, the leader, even when we were kids. Once Mom had died and he had joined up with me, it hadn't taken him long to step out front and I was glad to let him do it. No use pretending. He had more brains than I did. Not that I was a complete dummy but Cole was something special. The proof was I had served time before he showed up but none since. We had sure lived a lot better too.

Cole was always hungering for bigger and better things, always looking for the big score he called The Big Old Melon, while I was content to be a small thief. I guess I wouldn't have been a thief at all except that I liked to move around. That meant when I moved into a new town, it took a little time to find a job and I always needed a little cash to tide me over. But Cole. He couldn't see working at all. He wanted to score big and live high. Maybe if I was as smart and good looking as he was, the fine cars and the fancy clothes and the streamlined broads would be what I wanted too. But I was big and slow moving and couldn't think any further than stick 'em up and run. When I could no longer run fast, I'd have to find a good job and settle down and that would be it for me.

I half listened to what Phillips was explaining for what seemed to be the tenth time. I could afford to look him out because I had memorized all the action days ago and now I just sat and looked interested and studied Phillips, trying to figure out why I didn't like him.

He was middle aged, maybe fifteen or twenty years older than I was. It was hard to tell. He still had plenty of muscle under the well tailored suit, his stomach flat, his cheeks hollowed below high bones. Ordinary enough-looking until you noticed his eyes. The flesh above them folded down, puffy and soft, narrowing them into slits and giving him a mean look. I remembered one of my grade school teachers once saying the eyes were the windows of the soul, which was a phrase that had stayed with me. If it were true, Cole and I were fools for going in with a man with eyes like that.

He had mentioned to a man we knew he was looking for two good men and the man had put us in touch. Things had gone from there so that now we were ready to go tomorrow into the biggest operation Cole and I had ever been part of. The most money. And the most risk.

The total take would be big. Phillips wouldn't say how much because it would all belong to him except for the twenty-five thousand each

Cole and I had agreed to settle for, because, as Phillips had explained, we really had no vested interest in the operation. He needed bodies to help him and almost anyone would do. After all, it was his idea, his plan and his seed money.

It was the kind of thing I would ordinarily walk away from but to Cole it spelled opportunity.

Phillips looked at me. "Are you listening, Kern?"

I nodded.

"Do you understand everything?"

I felt a little flicker of resentment. I wasn't that dumb. "I don't have to," I said. "I'll be with you. All I have to do is follow along. If I do anything wrong, you'll be there to straighten me out."

He stared at me for a long moment, then turned away. "Okay," he said. "You two go to your room and stay there. No bars and no drinking tonight. I don't want anyone getting into trouble over booze and broads. We'll just play it cool and stay out of sight."

Before Cole and I could move, someone tapped at the door, a rhythmic knock like a signal. Phillips snapped the lock and pulled it open.

The girl who stood there was small, reddish gold hair parted in the center and flowing long and free to her shoulders, framing a pinched face with big dark eyes and a generous mouth. She was wearing a thin blue blouse and slacks tightly fitted around the hips that left no doubt that she had a nice body and didn't mind displaying it.

I looked at Phillips. "No broads?" I said and Cole and I walked out.

"Wonder where she came from?" asked Cole as we crossed the motel parking area to our room.

"If that's the only surprise he has for us, I'll be happy," I said. "I told you before. I don't like him and I don't trust him and I would just as soon pull out."

Cole bent his six-foot frame to insert the key in the lock. "Listen, Kern," he said. "We each get twenty-five thousand. The best we ever did on our own was that small bank in Kansas for ten, but it's more than the money. I want to see how a big man operates. I want to learn as much as I can. You'll be with him tomorrow. Watch. Ask questions. Memorize. Let's find out how he put this thing together. He's not any smarter than I am. He's just older, more experienced and one of these days, we won't need someone like him. We'll do it on our own. We'll

take the big cut and leave the small share to somebody else." He grinned. "That Big Old Melon will be ours and we can settle down in Miami or Vegas or Los Angeles and live in style."

I crossed the room and pushed the air conditioner control down another notch or two. "If he's such a big mozzarella, how come I never heard of him? Nobody I know seems to know him. He doesn't know anybody either. I mention names and places that he just lets slip by. I'm telling you, this guy is bad news."

Cole shrugged. "He's a winner. He comes and goes and nobody knows who he really is. What difference does it make?"

"None, I guess, but we ought to have some way to protect ourselves."

Cole grinned. He rummaged through his bag, palming a snub nose .38 and holding it out. "When we meet for our share afterward, this will be in my belt," he said. "Is that enough?"

I looked at the gun, then at his face. "I hope so," I said.

It was one o'clock the next afternoon when I joined Phillips in his car. Phillips was dressed in a dark suit, a small mustache and trim Van Dyke pasted to his lean face, giving him a distinguished look. I was wearing a long haired dark wig which was hot as hell and a big pair of tinted sunglasses that made me look like the lead singer in a second-rate rock group and feel even more stupid than usual.

"Cole has the truck?" he asked.

"He picked it up this morning."

He nodded. "Then that's under control. All he has to do now is be at the right place at the right time."

"He'll do that," I said.

"Yes, I'm sure he will. That's why I gave him that part."

Which was another little dig at my intelligence.

Twenty minutes later, he swung to the curb in the center of town. The girl was standing there. "Everything all right?" he asked.

"Fine," she said.

We left the car, she stepped in and drove it away, leaving a breath of expensive perfume behind.

"I didn't know she was part of it," I said.

"Someone has to shift the cars around," he said. "We can't leave this one in the street for them to find. She'll bury it in the airport parking

lot and pick up another. Cole will have your car. How did you expect me to leave? By pack mule, subway or cab?"

"I never gave it a thought," I said.

"Naturally," he said.

We walked south and turned a corner into a wide street only a block long known as Jeweler's Row. Practically every building on either side was taken up with stores and offices of people who specialized in the wholesale jewelry business. The ground floors ranged from elaborate set ups that sold everything, to small one man operations that handled only one line. The upper floors of the old buildings were offices, again broken up into large and small dealers. No one had ever put it down on paper, but the diamond business alone in this one short block ran into millions each year. It would seem that one of them would be an ideal mark to knock over but it wasn't as simple as it sounded. Most kept their doors locked and admitted only people they knew or who had identification. The ones that didn't kept their valuable merchandise in locked safes. One thing they all had in common was an alarm system. One push of the button and the police would seal off the area within minutes and the arrangement of the streets in that area made that very easy to do. Aside from an occasional salesman being knocked over and his sample case ripped off, no one had ever successfully scored in that area, rich as it was.

Phillips mounted the steps of an old brownstone and led the way to a small office on the second floor. Black letters on the frosted glass door said: *Hendryk Van Melden, Diamond Merchant*.

Phillips opened the door to the inner office. It was completely empty except for a small cardboard carton on the floor.

"Close the door," he said.

I looked around. Phillips had described the office but I had never been there because he hadn't wanted the other tenants to see anyone except himself. Part of his seed money had undoubtedly gone to rent the place, for how long I didn't know, but certainly for long enough to have the phone that sat in the corner listed in the directory to make Hendryk Van Melden seem legitimate.

I glanced at my watch. Things should get under way at any minute and if Phillips' plan had any weakness, it was right now, when he had to depend on someone else but there was little we could do about that and Phillips had certainly taken it into consideration.

We were there about five minutes when we heard the outer door open. Phillips looked out. I saw him smile. "Right on time," he said. "May I see your identification, please?"

A hand held a card up to the window. Phillips nodded and opened the door.

Two uniformed men came through. The uniforms were dark gray, patches on the left shoulder of their short sleeved shirts reading *Continental Security Service*. Polished gun belts around their waists and shiny metal badges on their chests and peaked hats gave them an air of authority. One carried a clipboard that held a sheaf of papers.

I pushed a gun into the ribs of the second man (through.) He didn't have to be told what it was. His hands went up as his head jerked half around, fear flickering in the widened eyes.

"Just take it easy," I said.

The first man turned, took it all in and reached for his gun. Phillips decked him with a vicious swipe to the back of the neck. He went down, the clipboard clattering on the floor.

"Now you'll have to use this one," I said.

He shrugged. "One is as good as another." He opened the carton, pulled on a pair of light gloves, bent, pulled the man's gun out, tossed it to me, yanked his arms behind him, cuffed his wrists and then slapped a wide band of adhesive tape over his mouth. He slipped a noose over his ankles and pulled his legs up behind him, tied the rope to the handcuffs, then dug a hand into the man's collar and dragged him into a small closet.

I pushed my man forward. Phillips removed the gun from his holster, dumped the cartridges on the floor and replaced the gun. "Listen," he said. "There's a third man on the armored truck?"

The man nodded.

"All right," said Phillips. "You and I are going downstairs. I'll be right behind you. You won't see my gun and neither will anyone else but you'll know it's there. When we get to the front door, I want you to call to the third man. Tell him you need him. I don't care what you say or how you do it, but I want him to come up to this room. If anything goes wrong, if you get fancy, I'll shoot both of you, you first. Then my friend here will finish off the man in the closet when he hears the shots. If you cooperate, nothing happens to you and you can live it up at your favorite taproom tonight telling all your drinking buddies

about your big adventure. Is that clear?"

The man nodded.

Phillips slipped a hand inside his coat. "Then let's go."

They walked out. I went to the window and looked down into the street.

The armored car was double parked, the third man standing near the rear door.

Phillips had been right so far. It remained to be seen if he would be right all the way.

In a couple of minutes, I saw the man lift his head and stare at the entrance to the building, then walk forward and up the steps. I didn't know what the second man had said to him but I did know the third man was in for a chewing out when this was over because he wasn't supposed to leave the truck.

I put my back against the wall alongside the door and waited, gun ready.

The two guards came in first, Phillips behind them. The third man was cursing.

"Shut up," I said. Phillips told them both to unbuckle their gun belts and let them drop, then manacled their wrists behind them, taped their mouths closed, made them hit the floor and trussed their legs to their wrists as he had the first man. He removed their badges, their identification and keys from their pockets and roughly dragged them into the closet with the unconscious man.

The cardboard carton yielded two uniforms and caps identical with those worn by the guards. Phillips and I put them on, placing our clothes and guns in the carton. Each of us strapped on one of the guard's gun belts. Phillips tossed aside the empty gun from the second man's belt and held out his hand. I gave him the one he had taken from the first man. We pinned on the badges and split the identification which was nothing more than a pair of official-looking plastic-covered cards, each bearing the man's photo. The pictures were the usual harsh, one minute type and unless someone looked at them very closely, they just about could have been anyone.

Phillips pulled off his beard and mustache and placed them in the carton. I threw in the sunglasses and the long wig. From here on we could be recognized and remembered but neither of us had a record in this town so there would be no mug shots available.

Phillips yanked out the phone and took one last tour of the room, wiping off prints with his gloved hands wherever he thought we might have left them. I polished up the guard's empty gun and threw it in a corner.

We left, Phillips carefully wiping off the doorknobs before pocketing the gloves, while I carried the carton before me as if it contained something very valuable, Phillips following and carrying the clipboard, his hand on his gun as if he were guarding me. We met no one in the hall or on the stairs.

Outside, we unlocked the truck, placed the carton inside, then climbed into the front seat.

The first phase was over. We had the truck and to anyone seeing us, we were just a couple of guards carrying out the transfer of something valuable, which was nothing unusual in that area. Maybe somebody had noticed there were now two guards instead of three and that they looked a little different than the men who had gone into the building but the odds were against it.

"They might have given us more trouble," I said, as Phillips put the truck in gear.

"I was sure they wouldn't," he said. "After all, they had nothing to protect. They were hired to transfer a shipment of diamonds from the old office of a man named Van Melden to his new one but there were no diamonds and the truck was empty. Why fight over nothing and take a chance of getting killed? We had the drop on them and they knew it. Would you take a chance against those odds? For nothing?"

"I guess not," I said. "But people are unpredictable."

"Events are unpredictable," he said. "Not people. You can pretty well count on what they're going to do in a given situation if you study them deeply enough. Knowing what people will do is the key to power. Fortunes have been made because of it and governments have toppled because of it." He held up his wrist to look at his watch. "So far our timing is perfect. If your brother does his end of it . . ."

"You don't have to worry about him," I said.

"I am aware of that. I told you that *events* are unpredictable. A situation may present itself that he cannot control that will keep him from doing his job. If so, he knows how to intercept us and we call it all off, abandon the armored truck and come up with another angle."

"And you toss away all the money you spent renting the office, buy-

ing the uniforms and renting Cole's trailer and the time we just spent ripping off this truck?"

He shrugged. "The investment is a great deal larger than you can imagine but it is better to let it go than take a chance on drawing ten to twenty. I will have invested time and money and lost out, yes, but the same thing could have happened if I had decided to buy a certain stock and it had gone down instead of up. You take your losses and try again. Eventually, if you are smart enough, you win and when you win, the gain is big enough to wipe out all your losses. Money is never a problem. If you lose it, you can always make more, but if they pick you up and put you away, you can never get that time back. Any fool can be a thief. The prisons are full of them. The idea is to be a thief and not get caught so I've always followed one rule—unless you are absolutely sure you can get away with it, don't try it."

Being one of those fools who had been in prison, I had to agree.

He jockeyed the truck into a one way street and joined the flow of traffic. I wondered how long it would be before someone discovered the three guards in the closet. They couldn't yell, but I was sure they would manage to make noise in some way. Sooner or later, they would attract someone's attention. I had asked Phillips about that. He said not to worry about it. He'd spent several hours pounding away in that empty office and had told several people in the building that he was doing some remodeling. The other tenants would take their time investigating any noise.

Smart, I thought. Maybe even smarter than Cole.

The radio in the cab of the truck which had been producing nothing but static now buzzed and a voice came through:

"KM48 to dispatcher."

"Dispatcher, go."

"KM48 delayed in traffic jam. Some idiot has a big tractor-trailer blocking the street. Notify the client we will be delayed."

"Dispatcher, will do."

I looked at Phillips. He was grinning.

"Is that the armored truck we're replacing?" I asked.

He nodded. "Your brother has done his job."

"But if that dispatcher calls . . ."

"Forget it."

I didn't forget it, the palms of my hands getting wet. What was I

walking into?

He turned the truck into a side street and I rubbed the palms of my hands on my trousers. Phillips pulled up along the curb.

"All right," he said quietly. "Let's go."

We left the truck and stepped up on the narrow sidewalk. Slightly to our right was the side entrance to a bank. A uniformed guard, hands behind his back, was standing just inside the revolving door. Phillips grinned at him and waved. Directly ahead of us was a small alcove recessed into the building, the service entrance for the bank and the offices above. Phillips pressed a bell alongside a metal door set into the wall.

The door swung outward.

The white-haired guard who pushed it open looked from me to Phillips and back again. "You're not the usual men," he said warily.

Phillips grinned and held up his hand, finger pointed and thumb extended. "We're holdup men," he said. "Pow! Pow!"

The man smiled. "Can the comedy," he said. "What's the story?"

Phillips flashed his ID card, fast enough so that the man couldn't get a good look at the photo but could recognize the form. "The usual truck ran into trouble," he said. "They pulled us off a nice soft assignment to come over here to take care of you because the company knows you guys like to get rid of the stuff on time and there would be a lot of hell raised if you had to keep it overnight." He waved. "So damned anxious, they didn't take time to dig up a third man and you can bet I'm going to complain about that. It's in the union contract. Three men to a truck."

"All right," said the guard. "Don't tell me your troubles. I have enough of my own. Just get the stuff out of here."

"Has our man checked it out? I don't sign for nothing unless the company man checks it out first."

"He was here earlier, counted it all up and sealed the bags. All you have to do is load them up and take them out."

"No problem," said Phillips.

We followed the guard down a short hall to a big vault off the main lobby of the bank. The door was open but the entrance was closed off by a stainless steel grille.

I wondered why the dispatcher hadn't called about the delayed truck. If he called while we were here . . .

I could feel the perspiration trickling down my sides even though the bank was air conditioned.

"Open up," said the guard.

Another uniformed man, bald headed, with a heavy belly, appeared on the other side of the grille and snapped a lock open. We went in. I had never been in a vault before but I wasn't going to gawk around like a tourist. As far as I was concerned, I didn't care if I never entered another one. I kept my eyes on a small flat hand truck with five or six big gray canvas bags piled on it.

"There it is," said the white haired guard.

Phillips knelt and very carefully fingered the metal seals on all of the bags.

"Don't you trust us?" asked the guard.

"When I have to sign for something, I trust nobody," said Phillips. "I take these bags and one of these seals is a little loose or broken and they come right to me."

"I don't blame you," said the guard. "It pays to be careful."

Phillips rose. "Okay," he said. He lifted the clipboard, filled in a receipt carefully, signed it and tore it off and handed it to the guard. "Will this satisfy the vice president in charge of filing receipts?"

The man grinned and looked at the paper closely. "It always has," he said.

Phillips motioned. I took hold of the handle on the truck and steered it out of the vault and down the hall. Phillips and the guard followed.

"Listen, Mac," said Phillips. "We don't have a third man. How about you standing by on the sidewalk while my partner and I load up? Nobody is going to knock us over but it makes us look good, know what I mean? I'll see the boys take care of you next time around."

"Sure," said the guard.

A few minutes later, we climbed into the truck and pulled away. I realized that my heart was pounding. "Hell," I said. "We made it."

"I told you we would."

Learn as much as you can, Cole had said. "I still don't see how."

Phillips pulled into heavy traffic and we picked up speed.

"There was nothing to worry about. They were expecting an armored truck and one came. Why should they question us? We had the proper uniforms and ID and we knew that a company man had already been there to verify the contents of the shipment and seal the bags. All of

that counts, but most important, we had the proper papers to give him. His little world revolves around getting a signature on the proper papers. It clears him of responsibility and the name of the game is not to be responsible for anything. Look at it his way. What kind of crook gives you a signed receipt on the official form?"

"The dispatcher took the call from the other truck. He could have called . . ."

"I told you not to worry about that."

It came to me then. The dispatcher was in on it. From the beginning, which was how Phillips had found it so easy to get his hands on a truck in the first place, get the proper uniforms, know how to fill out the receipt, knew the company procedures. I wondered how much that would cost Phillips. Or had already cost him. If the dispatcher was smart, he would have asked for his money up front in case something went wrong. The dispatcher would have little trouble covering up. It would be his word against that of someone in the bank that he had relayed the message about the truck being delayed. He could even put the call on record by dialing the bank and hanging up when someone answered, talking into a dead phone and pretending to pass on the information. They might suspect but they couldn't prove a thing.

I didn't like Phillips and I didn't trust him but I had to admire him. Cole was a long way from putting something together like this. I jerked a thumb at the rear of the truck. "How much do you think is there?"

"Enough to cover your twenty-five thousand," he said coldly.

We rode in silence for a few blocks. "You could have taken in a third man as a truck guard," I said. "It would have made it more authentic."

"I didn't want to be too perfect. We were supposed to be a last minute substitution, not a full crew sitting around with nothing to do. Complaining about the third man being missing was a story he would buy. He could understand that because it is something that an employer might do to save a buck. A crook, never."

He twisted the wheel, drove for a half block and twisted the wheel again. We were five minutes from the bank, rumbling down a very narrow street between deserted buildings in a run-down section of town that had once been prosperous but was now scheduled to be levelled for an interstate that would skirt the edge of center city, paralleling the waterfront.

He pointed. "Get that door."

I climbed down. The door he had indicated was a big overhead type. I bent and pulled. It squealed as it went up. He drove the truck through and I pulled the door closed and looked around.

We were in what used to be a loading bay for the tenants who had once occupied the building. The only light was that of the headlights Phillips had turned on, reflecting from a dirty cement loading dock.

I had never been there before. Phillips said there was no point in my knowing. Cole had, because Phillips had to show him where to go after he had jammed traffic with the tractor-trailer.

A horn sounded briefly outside. Phillips looked out the small door at the side and motioned to me to raise the overhead door again. As it squealed upward, a gray Mercedes moved through, brushing me aside. The girl was at the wheel. I dropped the door again, wondering where Cole was. The plan had been to abandon the tractor-trailer where he had caused the jam, if that was possible, and if not, to leave it anywhere in center city, pick up our car and drive here.

We would collect our money and leave Phillips on his own.

The girl had opened the trunk of the Mercedes and dragged out two large suitcases. Phillips had climbed into the rear of the truck and turned on the dome light. The canvas bags had leather tops that folded over and fastened with a big buckle through which the Continental Security man had passed a thin, strong, braided wire and locked the ends in place with a lead seal. Without a big pair of wire cutters there was no way to snip that wire. Phillips didn't bother. He used a sharp knife on the canvas, slicing the first bag open and turning bundles of official looking documents out on the floor. He pawed through them, tossing some aside and placing others on a wooden bench that ran along the side of the truck.

When he finished, he sliced open the second bag. More money than I had ever seen made a mound on the floor. He motioned to me to stack it on the bench.

There were two more bags of money and one of papers. Phillips stacked most of those papers on the bench.

We had just finished when we heard a dull thud. Phillips' gun was in his hand before mine and we faced the open truck door and then I heard Cole's voice say, "How are we doing, honey?" to the girl and I put my gun away.

Cole poked his head in through the door, saw the money and

grinned. "I left the car outside," he said. "You can give us our money and we go."

Phillips hadn't holstered his gun. Now it swung slowly from Cole to me and back again. "That won't be necessary. You get nothing. Not because I want to keep it all for myself because the fifty grand is peanuts. I just don't like to leave people behind who can identify me and who can talk about the operation."

Now I knew why nobody had ever heard of him.

He pulled the trigger. The hammer flicked back and forward with a solid *click*. Phillips looked at me, a sudden surprise in his eyes and I knew he had realized what I had done.

While he had been downstairs getting the third guard, I had unloaded the first man's gun I had been holding for him, handing it to him when he asked for it, thinking it was still loaded. There really had been no reason for him to check it because while he figured me to be dumb, he didn't figure me to be dumb enough to send him into an operation like that without any heat. It might have been important to him but it sure wasn't to me. If anything had gone wrong, I wasn't about to become involved in any sort of shoot-out, and I wasn't going to let him get involved either. I'd have given up. Killing never did come easy to me.

Cole wasn't like that.

He shot Phillips with his snub nosed .38 while the surprise was still in his eyes, the report deafening in that enclosed space, leaving me swallowing hard to get rid of the ringing in my ears and barely able to hear the small *pop* outside as the girl shot Cole in the back and he pitched forward into the truck, twisted himself around and fired.

The girl gave a tinny little scream and then I could hear nothing but the ringing in my ears.

I knelt by Cole and lifted his head. Pain flared his nostrils and corded his neck muscles and his face seemed to have lost all color.

"Hang on," I said. "You'll make it."

"No way," he whispered. "I can feel it."

"No," I said. "You've got to hang on."

"The Big Old Melon," he said. "We'll never make it now."

"We made it," I said. "There is only the two of us."

He coughed. "It's all yours."

"I don't want it," I said.

He smiled. "Crazy," he said. "You always were a little crazy."

He died then, in my arms, and I felt a numbness I knew would take a long time to go away.

I brought in our car, depositing him gently in the front seat and fastening the seat belt and shoulder strap so that he slumped only-a-little like a man taking a nap. Then I took the suitcases the girl had brought and filled them with the bills that were on the bench in the truck. I didn't know how much was there. I didn't bother to count, but I stacked bundles of tens and twenties and fifties and hundreds, all of them old and worn. Big as the suitcases were, they couldn't hold all of the money. When I had finished, there was still some left, along with all of the papers. One bundle of fifties I slipped into my pocket. Then I went through the truck with my handkerchief, buffing everything I had touched or thought I had touched, finishing with the gun that had fallen out of Cole's hand, cleaning that right down to the cartridges he would have fingered when he loaded it. Then I pressed the gun into Phillips' hand. The police would spend a long time trying to puzzle that one out.

All of that taken care of, I shed the uniform Phillips had provided, making sure I left no prints on anything that would hold an impression, dug my own clothing from the cardboard carton and put it on.

Like Phillips in the office, I took one last look around, reviewing everything I could see, until I was satisfied there was no record anywhere that either Cole or I had been there.

It was the kind of scene they love to make up for a gristmill movie, the reflected headlights softening the darkness enough to pick out the crumpled body of the girl on the dirty cement floor, the bright rectangle of the narrow rear door of the truck a window that showcased Phillips' body, the scattered money and papers, the slashed-open bags.

It had taken only seconds, I thought. They had all been alive and then in a burst of noise they were dead. For what? For the money? For the Big Old Melon everybody was always chasing?

I slammed the car door hard and drove out of there.

I made one stop on the way out of the city at a deserted phone booth along a quiet street. To the police. I told the man who answered to check out the office on Jeweler's Row and the building I had just left and hung up.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, I was in a small town about sixty

miles away in the office of an undertaker I had heard of through the grapevine. The undertaker was one of the few who had a crematorium and columbarium attached to his funeral home. If you knew the right words and mentioned the right names, he could, for enough money, produce a phoney doctor's death certificate which was what I needed at the moment. It took more than the bundle of fifties in my pocket to have the cause of Cole's death listed as pneumonia with complications and another bundle from a suitcase for a plain wooden coffin and the services of the crematorium.

The undertaker must have had family of his own. He allowed me fifteen minutes alone with my dead brother and allowed me to close the coffin for the last time by myself.

Included in the price was an urn for the ashes and a niche in the columbarium and when it was all done and the urn was put away and the niche door sealed, I slowly walked out into the darkened parking lot, the night bringing with it a stillness that made the summer heat hang, oppressive and oven heavy.

It was time to move on, to try a different section of the country, to try to forget Cole, to move in loneliness the way my days were before Cole had joined me.

I fanned through the bills I had left.

Three hundred.

I had started out that morning with forty.

For a dummy like me, about what I had been used to and about what I could expect. I was content.

Cole should be content too. I had dumped all of the money from the suitcases into the coffin before I closed it and the ashes of what must have been close to a million dollars now mingled with his for eternity.

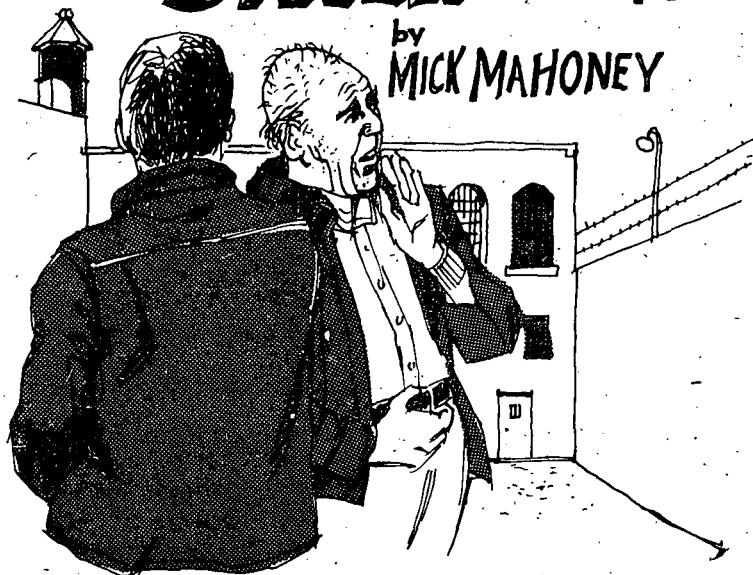
He was my brother and I wouldn't let anyone, not even Death, cheat him of the Big Old Melon he'd always wanted.



One doesn't often think of the penitentiary as a cloud with a silver lining.

THE SILVER LINING

by
MICK MAHONEY



Even the darkest cloud has a silver lining, or so they say. And it must be true because there I was: a six-time loser, an ex-con just coming off a three to five for a two bit caper, with a smile on my face and a half million dollars as good as in my pocket.

Not that I was smiling when I went in. Not by a long shot. You don't mind spending some time in the slammer if crime is paying off for you, but I was in the red. I'd tripped up so many times I was even thinking

of going legit. But just when it came down to a point where I had exactly nothing to look forward to I got the big break, the one you hardly dare dream about whether you're a thief or an office clerk. That's what I mean about a silver lining, because, believe it or not, it was being sent up the river that made it all possible.

You see, while I was in prison I met the famous Jimmy McCarthy, Jimmy Mack he was called. We worked together in the box factory at first; later we used to hang around together and got to be real pals.

Jimmy looked exactly like a vulture with those hunched shoulders, tiny eyes that peered out from little caves on each side of his big nose, and the bristles that sprouted from his bald skull. He had the sort of permanent poker face that you find on a lot of older cons. You could never tell whether he was about to snap your head off or fall asleep.

Jimmy got a lot of respect in prison and I was honored that he chose me to get friendly with. Of course he was mainly looked up to for his ability as a thief. Guys were always coming up to him with 'waddaya think about such and such a job' or 'where did I go wrong on this or that burglary.' He either gave advice or not depending on his mood. But old Jimmy was also respected the way a madman is. There weren't too many that didn't think that Jimmy was missing a few of his marbles.

Now I suppose that some of you haven't even heard of the great Jimmy Mack. It has been a few years since he was in the limelight. Seventeen to be exact. You must remember the big armored truck robbery, though; pulled off as smoothly as a baby's bottom for a million and a half cash. That job is a legend in criminal circles. I don't know how many times we sat in the corner of the rec yard while Jimmy would go over the details in his low, phlegmy voice.

"Planning," he'd say, hitting his palm with his fist, "planning, planning, planning. I got so I knew how many sugars the guards took in their coffee. The driver, he always drank tea, with lemon."

And the planning paid off in a truly brilliant heist. But anybody that's been around even a little bit knows it's the things you don't plan on that get you in the end.

You see, Jimmy had recruited a top-notch stock car driver and a punchy ex-light heavyweight for the job. They did just what they were told and everything went hunky-dory. After Jimmy had stashed the loot they all laid low, as planned, to wait for things to cool off. But

maybe that fighter had taken a few more shots to the head than Jimmy had figured. It turned out the slugger got plastered in a bar one night and shot his mouth off. Well, loose talk and the kind of reward the insurance company had out combined to land Jimmy in the tank real quick.

Now the standard procedure in a case like that is that when you're caught you hand over the loot in exchange for a lighter sentence. It's sort of the rules of the game. Nobody gets hurt, no hard feelings, and you get a few years free room and board to figure out where you went wrong, so you can pull off the next one without a hitch. As I say, that's what usually happens.

But with Jimmy it was different. He wouldn't give over. He was the only one who knew where the money was stashed and he clammed up. And that more than anything was why he was known to every stick-up artist and second-story man in the business as a mad genius.

The authorities really had no choice in Jimmy's case. They weren't about to let him out so he could pick up the cash and live the life of Riley. They couldn't do that; word might get out that crime really does pay. They tried every way they could think of to make him talk, offered him all kinds of deals and such. No go. Jimmy kept his mouth shut. In the end they gave him a series of maximum sentences, consecutive instead of concurrent like they usually do, so that Jimmy went up for what amounted to a life term without even the hope of a parole.

"They thought I'd break," he'd say. Then he'd spit.

Of course nobody really could figure out what made Jimmy do that. What was the point in sitting on a million and a half if you were going to be locked up for the rest of your life? Some thought he had a scheme: a big break already planned, a pardon arranged, some secret deal with the insurance company, or something. Others thought of Jimmy as a real noble character, a kind of martyr who would rather die a rich man than give in to the world and go back to being a bum. In the end, though, they all came to the conclusion that he was crazy. The authorities even sent in a couple of head shrinkers. Yes, he's definitely off his rocker, they said. Not that that helped them to get back any of the loot. And I admit that I thought there was something peculiar about it myself. That is, until I found out the real reason.

Eventually Jimmy came to trust me. One day after he'd told me for the twenty thousandth time the complete story of the robbery, the

planning, planning, and the driver's tea and lemon and all, I decided to come right out and ask him.

"And why didn't you give the loot back and get yourself a break?" I said.

Jimmy looked at me with that expression that was no expression. His eyes drilled holes out the back of my head. Then his face changed; it didn't move or anything, he just started looking a little more like a human and a little less like a snake.

"I got a daughter," he said real slow. "A little girl that means more to me than life."

Up until then Jimmy had only talked to me about professional matters. Now he told me of his family: his wife, a terrible nag who never once appreciated the risks Jimmy took to provide for her; and his daughter Mandy, the sweetest child God ever allowed to walk the earth despite all her mother's attempts to turn her against her own father. The little girl was a princess and, Jimmy decided, she must live the life of a queen. It was with her in mind that he planned and committed the masterpiece that got him where he was. Not only that but she was also the reason Jimmy refused to hand over the loot. His plan was to get the money to her somehow. I was fortunate enough to become part of that plan.

Of course Jimmy had not counted on getting caught. He'd figured that a few months after the robbery the coast would be clear and he could slip down to Mexico, divorce his insufferable wife, and take little Mandy on some kind of lifetime pleasure cruise. But instead the worst happened.

So for seventeen years Jimmy hung on, waiting for a chance to get word to his little girl. You see, Jimmy in his wisdom had planned on the possibility of his taking a fall. He'd hidden the cash in a spot his daughter would know about. Of course he couldn't tell her before the bust because she was only eleven at the time and he couldn't take the chance that his wife would get her hands on the loot. Besides, the cops kept a close watch on the family at first, figuring they might know where the money was stashed. Not only that but they'd sent stoolies in to try and get Jimmy to confide in them. That's why he was always so suspicious.

By the time I met him, though, almost everybody had forgotten old Jimmy. They just gave up on him as looney. But that's because they

didn't know the dream that Jimmy held on to. He wasn't really any different than a lot of men. I mean, how many fathers are there that spend forty years working at a job that's not much better than prison in order to give their kids a better break?

You may be wondering why Jimmy chose me to take the information to Mandy. Why not some other short-timer and why not years before? The heat had been off for at least the last ten years. Well, first of all Jimmy needed somebody reliable; and they're just as hard to come by in prison as out. He was willing to let the messenger take a generous amount for himself, half a million to be exact; but he didn't want to send out some mug that would string poor Mandy along and then grab the bundle. Jimmy had an uncanny way of sensing the true character of a person, having lived among bluffers and con men all his life. And even if I say so myself, I'm basically an honorable type. But probably more than anything else, Jimmy was getting old. He'd lived the kind of life that saps your youth and the years had given him a real working over. He was a proud man; but hope will keep you alive a lot longer than pride and Jimmy didn't have a hope in the world. Except, that is, to get a message to his daughter that would make her a rich woman. He chose me to deliver that message and, brother, I was glad he did.

And what was a reliable, honorable fellow like me doing behind bars in the first place? I won't go into the details because it's too embarrassing. But I will give any of you potential crooks a word of advice: don't ever try to pinch a Ferris wheel.

As it turned out I served two years and two months of a three to five for grand larceny before I finally got parolled. Was I happy or what? I couldn't wait to locate Mandy and pick up an easy half million. And who knows, if she was as sweet and pretty as Jimmy claimed, plus had a million dollars. . . well, the possibilities were nothing but encouraging.

I knew about all there was to know about the family. Jimmy had gone into great detail: how Mandy's nose turned up just so, how the wife was always griping about her arthritis, everything. Still, it took a couple of weeks to find them. I had to be pretty discreet about asking around so as not to raise any suspicion. They'd moved quite a few times since Jimmy went in, but I finally traced them to a dumpy section on the outskirts of the town where they lived.

The house was small with a crooked porch and gray, peeling paint.

The yard was just gravel and weeds; and there was a long wooden ramp up the front steps. I figured the old lady must have taken to a wheel chair. But when I knocked she answered the door herself. She was just like Jimmy had described her: fat, mean looking, with greasy hair and a sloppy mouth. Her eyes were just as hard as his.

"Mrs. McCarthy?" I said.

She looked at me for a minute and took a drag on her cigarette. "What the hell do you want?" she said in a voice like sandpaper.

"I have some business with your daughter Mandy," I answered. She crossed her arms and sort of squinted.

"I'm Mandy. Mrs. Nichols to you. Now what do you want?"

Let me tell you I wasn't ready for that one. She had that kind of puffy face and coarse, pocked skin that could have made her about any age. It dawned on me that the little milk and honey angel that Jimmy had in mind was an eleven year old girl. But seventeen years had gone under the bridge since he'd last seen her. Here she stood now, twenty-eight going on fifty-five. I swallowed my surprise. "I have a message from your father."

"So old Jimmy Mack hasn't rotted away yet, huh?" Her smile lacked a few teeth. "Sure, come on in."

The house was shabby enough, beer cans and trashy magazines all over, the ashtray overflowing with lipstick smeared butts. I could hear a TV going somewhere and kids yelling and whining.

"I guess you must be just out of the can yourself. Don't worry, I'm used to dealing with hoods. I married one," she said, making a sweeping gesture, "and look where it got me." She tossed some newspapers off a chair and motioned for me to sit down.

I decided to get the whole thing over with as soon as possible and then write to Jimmy and say everything had gone smooth. Might as well leave the old guy his dreams.

I explained the deal Jimmy and I had agreed on, how we would go together to pick up the money and I would take my share and leave her with a million. You might have thought from the blank look on her face I was trying to sell her a vacuum cleaner. She sure took after her father in that way. Then I told her how Jimmy wanted her to be sure to know that the million was all hers and that she wasn't to let her mother have any of it. I also added something about how much her father loved her and had sacrificed for her. It was strange because I

knew that Jimmy didn't have any idea that his sweet little daughter no longer fit the vision that he had of her; but I figured maybe she'd be moved by what he'd done for her. When I finished she just sat there looking at me with a sort of half-smile.

"A million dollars, huh? So that explains it. We thought he was nuts all along and we was right.

"Mister, do you know how many times I would have given a million dollars to have my old man around when I was growing up, dammit all? And poor Mama's not supposed to get any? Why, it nearly killed her when he went in. At first we hoped he would give in and tell but he never did. And Mama got sick so we couldn't even go and see him. She's been an invalid for twelve years now.

"Sure, they used to fight like a couple of tom cats. But he was a hard man and she had to be hard just to keep up with him. But in the end he destroyed her.

"Yeah, I'll take his million dollars all right; but I'll still curse his soul for leaving us. Mama married a fool and I married a fool and no million dollars is going to change that. Why, if my husband finds out I've got any cash he'll be back here in two minutes to beat it out of me and throw it away on the horses."

Poor Jimmy, I thought. All those years in the slammer and the loot winds up in the hands of an ungrateful witch like this. And I knew the last thing he wanted was for his wife to profit from any of it. Now the two of them, together with the hoodlum son-in-law, would sit around and squander Jimmy's life.

The sky was a dirty gray when we set out to collect the cash. The landmark we were looking for was a big beech tree way off in the back of a vacant lot. Jimmy used to sit under it with Mandy when she was small and tell her stories. I knew how many feet and in what direction to dig.

Mandy knew the place as soon as I mentioned it though she hadn't been back to that old neighborhood since she was a kid.

"We were real poor in those days; Mister. But let me tell you I've never been so happy since. Jimmy Mack used to sit there under that tree on long summer evenings and tell me about pirates and dragons and giants up in the clouds. I guess he knew I'd never forget that spot so that's why he stashed the stuff there. Slow down now. Right down

ere. Right at the bottom of this hill." Her voice betrayed the excitement that we both felt now.

A light rain was beginning to fall as we pulled up to a red light at the bottom of the hill. On the corner was a gas station, its revolving fluorescent sign bright against the murky sky. Behind it there was a huge expanse of macadam and the low, plain buildings of a shopping center. My stomach turned over. Urban renewal. I looked at Mandy. She was smiling her notched smile. "Somewhere in the area of that fried chicken joint, I'd say."

I pulled into the parking lot. The asphalt cast smeared reflections. We both got out and walked around aimlessly. Maybe there was a million and a half buried under the pavement; maybe some bulldozer operator was living it up on the French Riviera. Who knows? It hardly mattered.

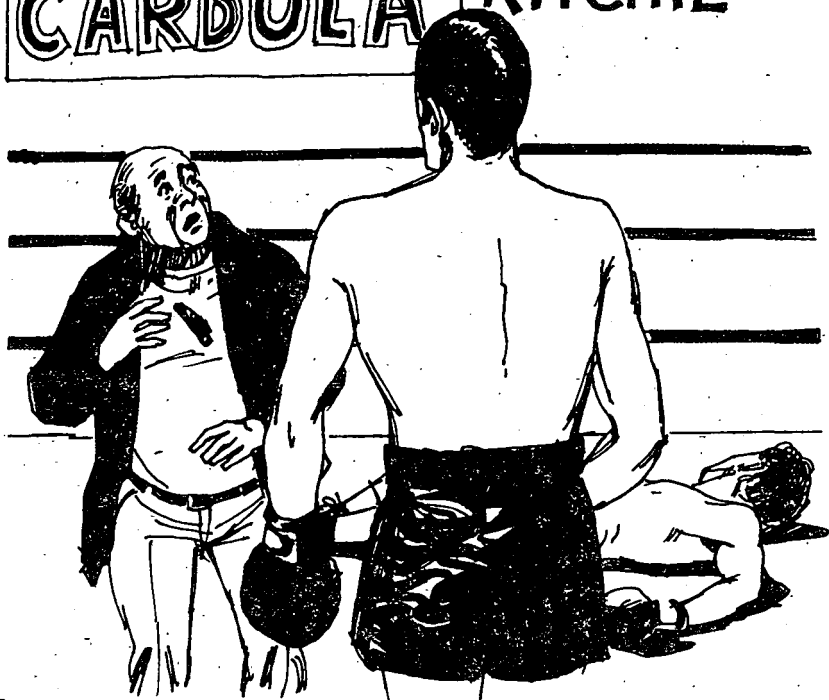
We stood there under the buzzing sulphur streetlights for a while getting wet. Then Jimmy Mack's daughter started to laugh. I'd like to tell you she laughed till she cried, but she didn't. I got in the car and left her there laughing and laughing, so help me. As I drove away it began to pour. And none of those clouds up there had a lining that was anything but black as pitch, so far as I could see.



He could only fight at night. And it's a good bet he ate his salad without garlic. . .

KID CARDULA

by
JACK
RITCHIE



It's just about time for me to close down the gym for the night when this tall stranger comes up to me.

He wears a black hat, black suit, black shoes, black topcoat, and he carries a zipper bag.

His eyes are black too. "I understand that you manage boxers?"

I shrug. "I had a few good boys in my time."

Sure, I had a few good boys, but never *real* good. The best I ever

done was with Chappie Strauss. He was listed as number ten in the lightweight division by *Ring Magazine*. Once. And I had to pick my fights careful to get him that far. Then he meets Galanio, which is a catastrophe, and he loses his next four fights too before I decide it's time to retire him.

"I would like you to manage me," the stranger says. "I plan to enter the fight ring."

I look him over. He seems well built and I put his weight at around one-ninety. Height maybe six foot one. But he looks pale, like his face hasn't seen the sun for some time. And there is also the question of his age. It's hard to pin-point, but he's no kid.

"How old are you?" I ask.

He shifts a little. "What is the ideal age for a boxer?"

"Mister," I say, "in this state it's illegal for any man over forty to even step into the ring."

"I'm thirty," he says fast. "I'll see that you get a birth certificate to verify that."

I smile a little. "Look, man, at thirty in this game, you're just about over the hill. Not starting."

His eyes glitter a little. "But I am strong. Incredibly strong."

I stretch the smile to a grin. "Like the poet says, you got the strength of ten because your heart is pure?"

He nods. "I do literally have the strength of ten, though not for that reason. As a matter of fact, realizing that I possessed this tremendous strength, it finally occurred to me that I might as well capitalize on it. Legitimately."

He puts down the zipper bag and walks over to where a set of barbells is laying on the mat and does a fast clean and jerk like he was handling a baby's rattle.

I don't know how many pounds is on that bar, weight lifting not being my field. But I remember seeing Wisniewski working with those weights a couple of hours ago and he grunts and sweats and Wisniewski is a heavyweight with a couple of state lifting titles to his credit.

I'm a little impressed, but still not too interested. "So you're strong. Maybe I can give you the names of a few of the weightmen who work out here. They got some kind of a club."

He glares, at which he seems good. "There is no money in weight

lifting and I need a great deal of money." He sighs. "The subject of money never really entered my mind until recently. I simply dipped into my capital when necessary and then suddenly I woke one evening to discover that I was broke."

I look him over again. His clothes look expensive, but a touch shabby, like they been worn too long and maybe slept in.

"I do read the newspapers," he says, "including the sports pages, and I see that there is a fortune to be made in the prize ring with a minimum of effort." He indicates the zipper bag. "Before I ran completely out of money, I bought boxing trunks and shoes. I will have to borrow the boxing gloves."

I raise an eyebrow. "You mean you want to step into the ring with somebody right now?"

"Precisely."

I look down the gym floor. By now the place is empty except for Alfie Bogan, who's still working out on the heavy bag.

Alfie Bogan is a good kid and a hard worker. He's got a fair punch and high hopes for the ring. So far he's won all six of his fights, three by knockouts and three by decisions. But I can't see what's in his future. He just don't have enough to get to the top.

All right, I think to myself. Why not give the gentleman in black a tryout and get this over with so I can get to bed, which is a cot in my office.

I call Alfie over and say, "This here nice man wants to step into the ring with you for a couple of rounds."

It's okay with Alfie, so the stranger disappears into the locker room and comes back wearing black trunks.

I fit him with gloves and he and Alfie climb into the ring and go to opposite corners.

I take the wrapper off a new cigar, stroke the gong, and start lighting up.

Alfie comes charging out of his corner, the way he always does, and meets the stranger three-quarters of the way across the ring. He throws a right and a left hook, which the stranger shrugs off. Then the stranger flicks out his left. You don't really see it, you just know it happened. It connects with Alfie's chin and Alfie hits the canvas on his back and stays there. I mean he's out.

I notice that my match is burning my fingers and quick blow it out.

Then I climb into the ring to look at Alfie. He's still breathing, but he won't be awake for a while.

When you been in the fight game as long as I have, you don't need no long study to rate a fighter. Just that one left—and even the *sound* of it connecting—has got my heart beating a little faster.

I look around the gym for somebody to replace Alfie, but like I said before, it's empty. I lick my lips, "Kid, what about your right hand? Is it anywhere near as good as your left?"

"Actually my right hand is the better of the two."

I begin to sweat with the possibilities. "Kid, I'm impressed by your punch. I'll admit that. But the fight game is more than just punching. Can you *take* a punch too?"

He smiles thin—like a kid wearing new braces. "Of course. Please hit me."

Why not? I think. I might as well find out right now if he can take a punch. I take the glove off Alfie's right hand and slip into it.

In my day—which was thirty years ago—I had a pretty good right and I think I still got most of it. So I haul off and give it all I got. Right on the button of his chin.

And then I hop around the ring with tears in my eyes because I think I just busted my hand, but the stranger is still standing there with that narrow smile on his face and his hair not even mussed.

Alfie comes back into this world while I'm checking my hand and am relieved to discover that it ain't broken after all.

He groans and staggers to his feet, ready to start all over again. "A lucky punch." The boy is all heart, but no brains.

"No more tonight, Alfie," I say. "Some other time." I send him off to the showers and take the stranger into my office. "What's your name?"

"I am known as Cardula."

Cardula? Probably Puerto Rican, I guess. He's got a little accent. "All right," I say, "from now on you're Kid Cardula. Call me Manny." I light my cigar. "Kid, I just *may* be able to make something out of you. But first, let's get off on the right foot by making everything legal. First thing tomorrow morning we see my lawyer and he'll draw up papers which make us business associates."

Kid Cardula looks uneasy. "Unfortunately I can't make it tomorrow morning. Or the afternoon. For that matter, I can't make it *any* morn-

ing or afternoon."

I frown. "Why not?"

"I suffer from what may be termed photophobia."

"What the hell is photophobia?"

"I simply cannot endure sunlight."

"You break out in a rash or something?"

"Quite a bit more than a rash."

I chew my cigar. "Does this photophobia hurt your fighting any?"

"Not at all. Actually I regard it as responsible for my strength. However all of my matches will have to be scheduled for evenings."

"Not much sweat there. Damn near all matches today are in the evening anyway." I think a little while. "Kid, I don't think we need to mention this photophobia to the State Medical Commission. I don't know how they stand on the subject and it's better we take no chances. This photophobia isn't catching, is it?"

"Not in the usual sense." He smiles wide this time, and I see why he's been smiling tight before. He's got these two outsize upper teeth, one on each side of his mouth. Personally, if I had teeth like that, I'd have them pulled, whether they got cavities or not.

He clears his throat. "Manny, would it be at all possible for me to get an advance on my future earnings?"

Ordinarily if anybody I just meet for the first time asks me for money, I tell him to go to hell. But with Kid Cardula and his future, I think I can make an exception. "Sure, Kid," I say. "I guess you're a little short on eating money?"

"I am not particularly concerned about eating money," the Kid says. But my landlord threatens to evict me if I don't pay the rent."

The next morning at around eleven, I get a phone call from Hanahan. It's about the McCardle-Jablonec main event on Saturday night's card at the arena.

McCardle is Hanahan's pride and joy. He's a heavyweight, got some style and speed, and he's young. Hanahan is bringing him along careful, picking and choosing. Maybe McCardle isn't exactly championship material, but he should get in a few big money fights before it's time to retire.

"Manny," Hanahan says, "we got a little trouble with the Saturday night card. Jablonec showed up at the weigh-ins with a virus, so he got scratched. I need somebody to fill in. You got anybody around

there who'll fit the role?"

Jabloncic has 18 wins and 10 losses, which record don't look too bad on paper, except that it don't mention that he got six of them losses—all by knockouts—in a row after his eighteenth win. So I know exactly what type of a fighter Hanahan wants as a substitute for Jabloncic.

I think a little. Off hand, there are three or four veterans who hang around the gym and could use the money and don't mind the beating.

And then I remember Kid Cardula.

Ordinarily when you got a new boy, you bring him up slow, like three-round preliminaries. But with Kid Cardula I feel I got something that can't wait and we might as well take some shortcuts.

I speak into the phone. "Well, off hand, Hanahan, I can't think of anybody except this new face that just come to me last night. Kid Cardula, I think he calls himself."

"Never heard of him. What's his win-lose?"

"I don't know. He's some kind of foreign fighter. Puerto Rico, I think. I don't have his records yet."

Hanahan is cautious. "You ever seen him fight?"

"Well, I put him in the ring here for just a few seconds to see if he has anything. His left is fair, but I never seen him use his right hand once. Don't even know if he has one."

Hanahan is interested. "Anything else?"

"He came in here wearing a shabby suit and gave me a sob story about being down and out. He's thirty-five if he's a day. I'll swear to that."

Hanahan is pleased. "Well, all right. But I don't want anybody *too* easy. Can he stand up for a couple of rounds?"

"Hanahan, I can't guarantee anything, but I'll try the best I can."

That evening, when Kid Cardula shows up at the gym, I quick rush him to my lawyer and then to the weigh-in and physical under the arena, where I also sign papers which gives us ten percent of the night's gross.

I provide Kid Cardula with a robe which has got no lettering on the back yet, but it's black, his favorite color, and we go out into the arena.

McCardle is a local boy, which means he's got a following. Half his neighborhood is at the arena and it ain't really a bad house. Not like the old days, but good enough.

We set up shop inside the ring and when the bell rings, McCardle makes the sign of the cross and dances out of his corner.

But Kid Cardula don't move an inch. He turns to me, and his face looks scared. "Does McCardle *have* to do that?"

"Do what?" I ask. "Now look, Kid, this is no time to get stage fright. Get out there and fight."

The Kid peeks back over his shoulder where the referee and McCardle are waiting for him in the center of the ring. Then he takes a deep breath, turns, and glides out of our corner.

His left whips out, makes the connection with McCardle's jaw, and it's all over. Just like that. McCardle is lying there, in the same pose as Alfie Bogan last night.

Even the referee is stunned and wastes a few seconds getting around to the count, not that it really matters. The bout is wrapped up in nineteen seconds, including the count.

There's some booing. Not because anybody thinks that McCardle threw the fight, but because everything went so quick with the wrong man winning and the fans figure they didn't get enough time for the price of their tickets.

When we're back in the dressing room, the first person who comes storming in is Hanahan, his face beet red. He glares at Kid Cardula and then drags me to a corner. "What the hell are you doing to me, Manny?"

I am innocence. "Hanahan, I swear that was the luckiest punch I ever seen in my life."

"You're damn right it was a lucky punch. We'll have the re-match as soon as I can book the arena again."

"Re-match?" I rub my chin. "Maybe so, Hanahan, but in this event I feel that I got to protect the Kid's interests. It's like a sacred trust. So for the re-match, we make his cut of the gate sixty percent instead of ten, right?"

Hanahan is fit to explode, but he's got this black spot on his fighter's record and the sooner he gets it off, the better. So by the time we finish yelling at each other, we decide to split the purse fifty-fifty, which is about what I expect anyway.

A couple of nights later when I close up the gym and go to my office, I find the Kid sitting there watching the late show on my portable TV set. It's one of them Dracula pictures and he turns to another

channel when I enter.

I nod. "Never could stand them vampire pictures myself either. Even in a movie, I like logic, and they ain't got no logic."

"No logic?"

"Right. Like when you start off with one vampire and he goes out and drinks somebody's blood and that turns his victim into a vampire too, right? So now there's *two* vampires. A week later, they both get hungry and go out and feed on two victims. Now you got *four* vampires. A week later them four vampires go out to feed and now you got *eight* vampires."

"Ah, yes," Kid Cardula says. "And at the end of twenty-one weeks, one would logically expect to have a total of 1,048,576 vampires?"

"About that. And at the end of thirty weeks or so, everybody on the face of the earth is a vampire, and a week later all of them starve to death because they got no food supply any more."

Kid Cardula smiles, showing them big teeth. "You've got a head on your shoulders, Manny. However, suppose that these fictitious vampires, realizing that draining *all* of the blood from their victims will turn them into vampires and thereby competitors, exercise a certain restraint instead? Suppose they simply take a sip, so to speak, from one person and a sip from the next, leaving their victims with just a slight anemia and lassitude for a few days, but otherwise none the worse for wear?"

I nod, turn down the TV volume, and get back to the fight business. "Now, Kid, I know that you'll be able to put McCardle away again in a few seconds, but we got to remember that fighting is also show biz. People don't pay good money for long to see twenty-second fights. We got to give the customers a performance that lasts a while. So when we meet McCardle again, I want you to carry him for a few rounds. Don't hit too hard. Make the match look even until say the fifth round and *then* put him away."

I light a cigar. "If we look too good, Kid, we'll have trouble getting opponents later and we got to think about the future. A string of knockouts is fine, Kid, but don't make them look too easy."

In the weeks which follow while we're waiting for the McCardle re-match, I can't get the Kid to do any training at all—no road work and he won't even consider shadow boxing in front of a mirror.

So I leave it at that, not wanting to tamper with something that

might be perfect. Also he won't give me his address. I suppose he's just got pride and don't want me to see the dump in which he lives. And he's got no phone. But he shows up at the gym every other night or so, just in case there's something concerning him.

The second McCardle fight comes and we take it in stride. The Kid carries McCardle for four rounds, but still making the bouts look good, and then in the fifth round he puts McCardle away with a short fast right.

In the days which follow, we don't have any particular trouble signing up more fights because we'll take any bout which comes our way. With Kid Cardula, I know I don't have to nurse him along. Also, we decide on the strategy of letting the Kid get himself knocked down two, maybe three, times per fight. With this maneuver, we establish that while the Kid can hit, he ain't so good at taking a punch. Consequently every manager who's got a pug with a punch figures that his boy has got a good chance of putting the Kid away.

We get seven bouts in the next year, all of which the Kid wins by knockouts, of course, and we're drawing attention from other parts of the country.

Now that some money is beginning to come in, I expect the Kid to brighten up a little, which he does for about six months, but then I notice that he's starting to brood about something. I try to get him to tell me about it, but he just shakes his head.

Also, now that he's getting publicity, he begins to attract the broads. They really go for his type. He's polite to them and all that, and even asks them their addresses, but as far as I know he never follows up or pays them a visit.

One morning after we'd just won our tenth fight—a nine round knockout over Irv Watson, who was on the way down, but still a draw—and I am sitting in my office dreaming about the day soon when I sell the gym or at least hire somebody to manage it, when there's a knock at the door.

The dame which enters and stands there looking scared is about your average height and weight, with average looks, and wearing good clothes. She's got black hair and a nose that's more than it should be. In all, nothing to get excited about.

She swallows hard. "Is this where I can find Mr. Kid Cardula?"

"He drops in every now and then," I say. "But it's not a schedule. I

never know when he'll turn up."

"Would you have his address?"

"No. He likes to keep that a secret."

She looks lost for a few seconds and then decides to tell me what brought her here. "About two weeks ago I drove out of state to see my aunt Harriet and when I came back, I got a late start and it got dark before I could make it home. I'm really not at all good with directions and it had been raining. I turned and turned, hoping that I'd find a road that looked familiar. Somehow I got on this muddy road and my car skidded right into a ditch. And I just couldn't get the car out. Finally I gave up and sat there, waiting for some car to pass, but there was no traffic at all. I couldn't even see a farmhouse light. I guess I finally fell asleep. I had the strangest dream, but I can't remember now exactly what it was, and when I woke, there was this tall distinguished looking man standing beside the open door of my car and staring down at me. He gave me quite a start at first, but I recovered and asked him if he'd give me a lift to someplace where I could get to a phone and call my father and have him send someone out to pick me up. His car was parked on the road and he drove me to a crossroads where there was a gas station open."

I notice that she's got what look like two big mosquito bites on one side of her throat.

She goes on. "Anyway, while I was making the phone call, he drove away before I could thank him or get his name. But I kept thinking about. . ." She blushed. "Then last night while I was watching the late news, there were things about sports and a picture of Kid Cardula appeared on the TV screen, and immediately I knew that this must be the stranger who had driven me to the gas station. So I asked around and somebody told me that you were his manager and gave me the address of your gym. And I just thought I'd drop in and thank him in person."

I nod. "I'll pass the thanks on to the Kid the next time I see him."

She still stands there, thinking, and suddenly she brightens again. "Also I wanted to return something to him. A money clip. With one thousand dollars in it. It was found beside my car when the tow truck went to pull it out of the ditch."

Sure, I think. Some nice honest tow truck driver finds a thousand bucks on the ground and he doesn't put it in his own pocket. But I nod

again. "So give me the thousand and I'll see that the Kid gets it."

She laughs a little. "Unfortunately I forgot to bring the money and the clip with me." She opens her purse and takes out a ball-point pen and some paper. "My name is Carrington. Daphne Carrington. I'll write the directions on how to get to our place. It's a bit complicated. We call it Carrington Eyrie. Perhaps you've heard of it? It was featured in *Stately Home and Formal Garden Magazine* last year. Mr. Cardula will have to come in person, of course. So that he can identify the clip."

When Kid Cardula drops in the next evening, I tell him about Daphne Carrington and give him the slip of paper she left.

The Kid frowns. "I didn't lose a thousand dollars. Besides, I never use a money clip."

I grin. "I thought not. But still she's willing to ante up a thousand bucks to meet you. Is any part of her story true?"

"Well. . . I *did* drive her to that filling station after I. . . after I found her asleep in the car."

"I didn't know you owned a car."

"I bought it last week. There are some places just too far to fly."

"What model is it?"

"A 1974 Volkswagen. The motor's in good condition, but the body needs a little work." He sits on the corner of my desk, his eyes thoughtful. "*She* was driving a Lincoln Continental."

"Don't worry about it, Kid. Pretty soon you'll be driving Lincoln Continentals too."

We begin spacing out our fights now. No bum-of-the-month stuff. Mostly because we're getting better quality opponents and also because it needs time and publicity to build up the interest and the big gates.

We win a couple more fights, which get television coverage, and the Kid should be happy, but he's still brooding.

And then one night he shows up in my office and he makes an announcement. "Manny, I'm getting married."

I'm a little astounded, but I see no threat. Lots of fighters are married. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Daphne Carrington."

I think a while before the name connects. "You mean *that* Daphne Carrington?"

He nods.

I stare at him. "I hope you don't take this wrong, Kid, but the dame ain't exactly no Raquel Welch, even in the face department."

His chin gets stubborn. "She has a tremendous personality."

That I doubt too. "Kid," I say, "be honest with yourself. She just ain't your type."

"She soon will be."

Suddenly the nub of the situation seems to flash into my mind and I'm shocked. "Kid you're not marrying this dame for her money, are you?"

He blushes, or looks like he tried to. "Why not? It's been done before."

"But, Kid, you don't *have* to marry anybody for their money. You're going to have money of your own soon. Big money. Millions."

He looks away. "Manny, I have been getting letters from my relatives and many concerned friends. But especially relatives. It seems that they have heard or been told, about my ring appearances. And they all point out—rather strongly—that for a man with my background, it is unthinkable that I should be appearing in a prize ring."

He still didn't look at me. "I have been thinking this over for a long time, Manny, and I am afraid that they are right. I shouldn't be a boxer. Certainly not a professional. All of my family and all of my friends strongly disapprove. And, Manny, one must have one's own self-respect and the approval of one's peers if one wants to achieve any happiness in this world."

"Peers?" I say. "You mean like royalty? You a count or something? You got blue blood in your veins?"

"Occasionally." He sighs. "My relatives have even begun a collection to save me from destitution. But I cannot accept charity from relatives."

"But you don't mind marrying a dame for her money?"

"My dear Manny," he says. "Marrying a woman for her money is as good a reason as any. Besides it will enable me to quit the fight game."

We argue and argue and I beg him to think it over for a while, telling him what all that ring money could mean to him—and me.

Finally he seems to give in a little, and when he leaves, he at least promises to think it over for a while.

About a week passes. I don't hear from him and I'm a nervous

wreck. Finally, at around ten-thirty one evening, Alfie Bogan comes into my office with an envelope.

Right away I get the feeling that the envelope should have a black border. My fingers tremble when I open it and read the note from Kid Cardula.

Dear Manny:

I sincerely regret the way things have turned out, but I am determined to quit the ring. I know that you pinned a great deal of hope on my future and I am certain that, under different circumstances, we would have made those millions you talked about.

But goodbye and good luck. I have, however, decided not to leave you empty handed.

Best wishes,

Kid Cardula

Not leave me empty handed? Did he enclose a nice little check? I shake the envelope, but nothing comes out. What the hell did he mean he wouldn't leave me empty handed?

I glare at Alfie Bogan, who's still standing there.

He grins. "Hit me."

I stare. Somehow Alfie looks different. He has these two big mosquito bites on his throat and these two long upper teeth, which I swear I never seen before.

"Hit me," he says again.

Maybe I shouldn't do it, but it's been a long hard week of disappointments. So I let him have it with all I got.

And break my hand.

But I'm smiling when the doc puts on the cast.

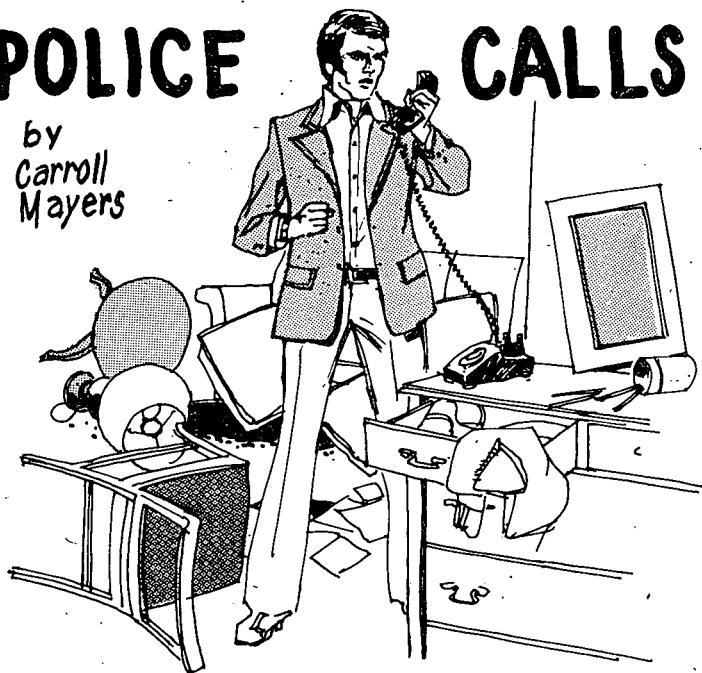
I got me a replacement for Kid Cardula.



What is the best way to catch a thief? In some cases it might be wiser to let him run at large. . .

POLICE CALLS

by
Carroll
Mayers



I am rather agitated when I phone police headquarters that first evening, but the officer I draw certainly is not. "What was that address again, Mr. Waters?"

"Walters. The Creston Arms. Apartment 4-D."

"And this man in the hall, he was trying to open your apartment door?"

"That's what it looked like," I say. "He was picking at the lock with

something—”

“Just like on TV, huh?”

“I don’t see what—”

“No-offense, sir. Can you give a description of the guy?”

“Nothing definite,” I say. “He spun around, ran down the fire stairs when I yelled.”

“That wasn’t very smart, Mr. Waters.”

“Look—”

“I mean, you should’ve quietly backed away, called us from another phone. He could’ve gotten violent.”

I draw a breath. “So I didn’t think,” I say. “I was startled, just coming off the elevator—”

“Yeah . . . well, that’s water over the dam,” he says philosophically. “Anything special you’d like us to do?”

I blink, wondering if I am hearing okay. “I beg pardon?”

“I’ve made a record. Glen Waters. The Creston Arms. Apartment 4-B.”

“Walters. 4-D.”

“Oh. Thanks. Like I say, I’ve got it all down . . .”

“And you’re not going to do anything about it?”

He is very patient. “You’ve got to understand, Mr. Walters,” he explains. “This’s a busy department; we can’t hightail all over town on every petty sneak-thief call. Especially with no specific description . . .”

I sigh again. “Thank you, Officer,” I say. “I only thought I should call.” And I hang up, trusting I will never have to call again.

But I do, three nights later. The voice which takes my call tells me it is the same officer. I am not enthusiastic.

“This is Glen Walters at the Creston Arms, apartment 4-D,” I say. “I want to report a break-in.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There was a man in my apartment when I came back from visiting down the hall—”

“What time was this, Mr. Waters?”

“Walters. Just now; only a couple of minutes ago. As I said, when I came back—”

“Just a second, sir. You say Walters. Didn’t you call in a few nights back? Something about a guy picking your lock?”

I am conscious my chest is beginning to tighten. "That's correct," I say. "It appears burglars are getting to consider my apartment some kind of windfall, but I can't help that—"

"Mr. Walters, do you realize how many crank calls this department gets in a week?"

I control myself admirably. "This is not a crank call, Officer," I say stiffly. "My other contact was not a crank call. I am only reporting an attempted robbery—"

"No offense intended, sir. I only want you to appreciate our position."

"And I'm trying to make you appreciate mine," I say. "There was a man in my apartment when I got back to it. I surprised him in the living room. He must've only just gotten in because nothing was disturbed yet. When he heard me behind him—"

"How had he gotten in, Mr. Walters? I mean, were there marks on the door jamb? Maybe you've heard: they're called jimmy marks, professionally."

A buzzing in my head begins to complement the constriction in my chest. "I didn't notice any," I tell him. "Probably I didn't fully close the apartment door when I left, and the latch didn't catch."

"Why had you gone down the hall, Mr. Walters?"

"Dammit, Officer, what difference does that make?"

"Only for the record, sir."

The buzzing is stronger now. "Well, for the record," I say distinctly, "I had gone down to visit a new tenant to borrow a cup of sugar."

"Aha!" he chuckles into the phone. "The old cup of sugar dodge, huh? What is she, Mr. Walters, a blonde? Or a redhead?"

(In fact, the lady in question is neither, being a most toothsome brunette with whom I am very anxious to become acquainted on—ah—intimate terms. The acquisition and involvement with such luscious fillies is a particular hobby of mine. Unfortunately, in this instance my bright smiles and nods in lobby and elevator are being pointedly ignored, and tonight my sugar ploy has fallen flat.)

I lace sarcasm into my rejoinder. "For the record, I assume?"

His chuckling dies a bit. "Sorry, sir. You know how it is, a little levity now and then. So—what happened when you surprised your intruder?"

"He whirled, swung at me and knocked me down," I say simply.

"By the time I'd regained my feet, he'd bolted out the door and was gone."

"You get a good look at him?"

"No. Chunky. Dark features. Dark sweater and slacks. That's about all."

"He get away with anything?"

"I don't think so," I say. "I haven't made a thorough check, but I believe I came back sooner than he'd expected. I imagine he's been watching various apartments, mine included, and when he saw me step out and the door didn't latch, he grabbed the opportunity."

"Most likely," he agrees. "We get a lot of squeals like that. Well, anything special you'd like us to do?"

I close my eyes. Counting to one hundred would have been silly, but I do make it to ten. Then I say deliberately, "You asked me that the other time."

He's contrite. "I probably did, Mr. Waters, but—"

"Walters, dammit!"

"Sorry. But you've got to understand—"

What with my tight chest and buzzing head I guess I am truly agitated now. "I know," I cut in. "I can't give you any good description; and the man likely didn't take anything anyhow; and I can't expect you to be chasing around town—so let's forget the whole thing." And I hang up.

When I have to call the police once more the following week I make up my mind there will be no nonsense if a certain officer happens to draw my "squeal." He does, and there isn't.

"This is Glen Walters again," I tell him firmly. "The Creston Arms. Apartment 4-D. I have been out for the evening and have just returned. I went to the movies. It's now eleven-thirty-two. The bedroom window of my apartment, on the fire escape, has been broken open; I can see the jimmy marks. There was no money on the premises, but the rooms have been ransacked. I want you to send someone over here right away—"

"No money loss, you say, Mr. Walters?"

"Dammit, man, that's not the point."

"We're awful busy tonight. There's a Shriners' convention and the traffic problem's something fierce—"

Chest, head, the works are starting up again. I almost yell into the

phone. "Don't you understand?" I plead. "Thieves keep breaking into this apartment! I demand an investigation."

"But—"

"No buts, Officer! I want a detective over here. I want him over here, immediately." This time, when I hang up, I hope it rattles his teeth.

For all my belligerence, I am not actually holding my breath waiting for said detective. It is just as well; nobody ever comes. I guess my citing no actual financial loss has something to do with it. That, and maybe the fact that there is a considerable number of Shriners in the country.

In any event, all the foregoing is a preamble to tonight. I am in quite an anticipatory state because the schedule calls for the company of a delectable redhead named Felicity (propitious omen?) I happened to meet in an intimate singles bar the evening before. Under my subtle blandishments, luscious Felicity has agreed to visit me tonight for cool cocktails, warm stereo, and whatever. Thought of the whatever is especially enthralling; the unexpected smooch Felicity bestowed on me in the bar promises much.

She is due shortly after eight. I have a few errands about town, but I get back to the apartment at seven-thirty. And walk in on disaster. Once again the rooms have been ransacked—plus.

Naturally, I am sick; my evening is zilch. But I am not too sick to formulate my impending call to the authorities. This time there will be no yelling, no cursing—and no put offs.

Accordingly, when I phone I am restrained but emphatic. My luck being what it is, I get the same officer, but even this does not deter me. I review all the pertinent facts crisply and then I conclude, "This is my fourth call in the past two weeks. I admit I suffered no previous losses, probably because those thieves were primarily interested in cash and I keep no loose cash on hand—"

"I should've told you before, sir. If they're looking just for money, it's likely amateurs. The professionals, you understand, will take anything . . ."

"I do understand," I say coldly, and this time they did. A clock radio is missing, and two suits of clothes, and a portable TV—

"Say, that's a shame! Was it a color TV?"

"—and a set of gold cuff links. Now *you* understand something, Of-

ficer. I definitely, positively expect a police investigation this time. I expect a detective—a real live, flesh-and-blood detective—to come here tonight. Within the hour. Failing that, I'll go to the city commission. I'll go to the mayor. I'll go to the governor."

"I can appreciate how upset and all you are, Mr. Waters, but—"

He is talking into a dead phone because, my resolution holding, I quietly break the connection. I am confident that my firm ultimatum will at last result in official action.

In the meantime, though, my exhilarating evening is ruined. I begin to half-straighten up the apartment, then reflect I should leave everything for the detective to witness. It also occurs to me to telephone Felicity (we'd exchanged numbers at the bar) to temporarily cancel her visitation. I try to reach her but nobody answers; unfortunately, she's probably already under way. Well, she'll understand . . .

The detective who comes is lean and tired-looking, with mournful brown eyes like a beagle's. He stands in the middle of the living room, looks around and shakes his head.

"It's a mess all right, Mr. Waters. You wonder how they know, eh?"

"Walters. Know what?"

"Where's a good place to hit. You take my aunt, over in Capitol City. She was hit just the past month. Lot of valuable antiques."

"This isn't the first time," I tell him grimly. "Counting tonight, I've called you people four times."

He shakes his head again. "Is that a fact? But then, I guess you've got insurance?"

My chest twinges. I say, "Look, Officer—" and then I break off as the door buzzer echoes. I move to answer, expecting it will be Felicity.

It is. She stops in the doorway with a bright, tantalizing smile on her wet lips and then she tilts forward from her spike heels and gives me a big kiss. "Hi, lover boy!"

I am a trifle embarrassed under the circumstances, but I assume the detective is a man of the world. I start to usher Felicity inside and then I stop, principally because said detective is abruptly making funny noises.

I swing back, surprised. The detective is looking—no, glaring—at Felicity, and now he is mouthing words. "So," he tells her furiously, "my ever-loving wife really gets around, doesn't she? I've been suspecting as much!"

After that, the action gets hectic as the detective's tired blood perks up

miraculously and he closes in on me, smashes my nose, knocks out two teeth, blacks one eye. Through it all, I vaguely appreciate you don't have to be single to patronize a singles bar. I also deplore footloose wives, particularly when they're married to cops . . .

So be a good citizen. Curb your dog, don't litter the sidewalk, and obey traffic regulations. But be a bit hesitant about calling the police, demanding action. Eventually, you just might get the wrong kind.

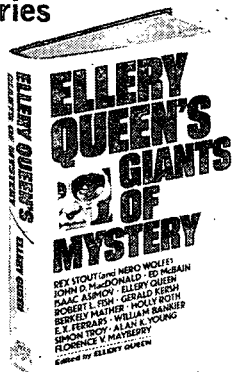
For myself, I plan two steps as soon as they release me from this hospital:

First, I'll move to another apartment—with triple locks.

Then I'll have the phone disconnected.

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Be kind to that silver plated urn—it may be somebody's mother. . .

GEMINI *And* THE MISSING MOTHER



The moderately young man knocked on the puckered glass door on which four-inch black letters proclaimed *Gemini Detective Agency*. Beside them a cardboard notice stuck on with tape added the warning, "Wet Paint." The young man regarded his knuckles. They were black. And the *D* of *Detective* was smeared.

"Oh, dear," he sighed, and fished a black bordered handkerchief from his breast pocket.

He knocked again, this time on the varnished oak surrounding the glass. The glass shuddered in its frame, and a gruff voice called from within, "Will you, for heaven's sake, stop dithering out there and come on in!"

"I'm awfully sorry about smearing the paint," he bleated as he opened the door, "but I didn't notice it was wet. I'm afraid I'm not myself. That's why I'm here. I saw your ad in the paper—confidential investigations and so on—so here I am." He paused and looked about the room. "Oh, it's you."

"Yes. It's us," said the rotund figure seated behind one of the two desks that stood side by side in the center of the room. "Today's our Grand Opening and you're our first customer."

An identical figure, short, round, blonde, freckled and female, stood beside the other desk. "Grab a chair," said the second twin, "and let's get down to business."

The young man looked around for a chair. There was none. Apart from the desks, a few packing boxes and two huge floral tributes bearing "Success" banners, the office was bare.

"Have to get some chairs," said the twin on the left. "Make a note," she directed her sister. "Uncomfortable chairs for clients. Pull up a box, Philbert, and let's have the gruesome details."

Philbert McNutt, for that was the nervous young man's unfortunate name, did as he was instructed. He gazed forlornly at the twin detectives, who grinned avidly and encouragingly back at him.

At length he spoke. "Which one is which? I never can tell."

"I'm Ernestine," said the twin on the left. "She's Josephine. Make a note, Joey. Get nameplates." Josephine scribbled on her notepad and resumed regarding Philbert like a benign but hungry porpoise.

"Well, girls," Philbert McNutt spoke haltingly. "I don't know how to tell you this. But it's not my fault, really. I mean, one minute she was there, and the next minute she was gone. So, what I really want is for you to help me find her."

"Missing person case," piped Josephine, and headed up a fresh sheet of notepaper accordingly.

"Who's missing? When was subject last seen? What did subject have for dinner? And did you check the bus depot?" Ernestine's questions emerged from the side of her mouth with machine gun rapidity.

"What? Oh, who's missing? Well, that's the most shameful part of it."

If anybody ever finds out . . . I mean, that's why I couldn't go to the police. It'd be all over town in a flash. So when I saw your ad . . . confidential, you know . . . I came right over."

"Get to the point, Philbert," snarled Ernestine.

"The point. Oh, yes. Well, the point is that . . . the problem is . . . Oh, Ernie and Joey," he sobbed, "you've got to promise not to tell a living soul. I've lost Mother!" Philbert plunged his face into his paint-smearred handkerchief and his shoulders trembled.

The twin detectives exchanged the sort of glance normally reserved for public exhibitions of mental aberration. Then Josephine toddled around her desk and laid a plump hand on the quivering shoulder of their client.

"Listen, Philbert," she said. "Everybody in town already knows you've lost your mother. Wasn't everybody at the funeral this morning? Where do you think we got these lovely floral tributes? We made the 'Success' banners ourselves."

Philbert raised his tear- and paint-streaked face. "I thought they looked familiar," he blubbered. "But you don't understand. It was after the funeral that I lost her. I might as well tell you all."

"All the details," barked Ernestine. "But if it's a seance you want, you're in the wrong shop. You'd better go see Amaryllis Feltz. She specializes in table thumping and chats with homeless spirits. Although, to be brutally honest, Philbert, old chum, I can't imagine why you would want to resurrect the old girl."

"Oh, I don't! Rest in peace and all that. No! I don't want Mother back in spirit or giving me orders from a glob of ectoplasm." Philbert squared his frail shoulders and tucked his damp handkerchief back into his pocket. "What I've lost is the urn containing her ashes, and without it I'm disinherited. All that lovely money will go to the Society for the Preservation of Indigent Widows of Trolley Car Conductors. It was in Mother's will—said urn to rest perpetually in said niche in said front parlor—and the lawyers are coming around in the morning for an inspection."

"I still think we ought to check the bus depot," said Ernestine. "Are you sure you didn't put Mother in a luggage locker and forget about her?"

"Quite sure," said Philbert stiffly. "I gave up the bus depot years ago."

"All right, all right, don't get huffy," puffed Ernestine. "Detectives always check out bus depots first thing."

"Excuse me for interrupting, Ernie," said Josephine, "but detectives always consider *cui bono* as well as bus depots. How many indigent widows of trolley car conductors have we on hand?"

"Only one," said Philbert. "Mrs. Lulubelle Wrampelmeier. She's a hundred and ten years old and lives at the Valley View Rest Home. She was at the funeral this morning, skulking about in her wheelchair and cackling 'I'm winning! I'm winning!' She never misses a funeral."

"Make a note, Joey," barked Ernestine. "Suspect Number One. Mrs. Lulubelle Wrampelmeier." Ernestine clambered down from her chair and began portentously pacing the small office. In her cinnamon colored smock and wide-legged trousers, she resembled nothing so much as an animated teddy bear. "Now then. We'll have to reconstruct the scene of the crime. Uh, what would you call the crime, anyway? Urn-napping?"

"Urn-napping is good," said Josephine, and made a note.

"All right," growled Ernestine. "Now, when did you first notice absence of urn, Philbert?"

"When we got home. I had put Mother in the back seat and even buckled the safety belt so she wouldn't tip over. When I went to get her, she was gone. Simply not there."

Ernestine narrowed her naturally narrow eyes ever further. "Who's 'we'? Did you have company on the sad occasion of bringing Mother home?"

"Well, I met Gregory Goodlove at The Magenta Mouse and he offered to . . . ah . . . see that I got home safely."

"Suspect Number Two!" shouted Ernestine. "Are you getting all this down, Joey?"

Joey nodded and scribbled.

"Now, wait a minute," protested Philbert. "You can't put Gregory down as a suspect. Why on earth would he want to kidnap Mother's ashes?"

"How should I know? I wouldn't put anything past Gregory Goodlove," replied Ernestine, wrinkling her pug nose as if she suddenly found herself in the neighborhood of a pig ranch. Josephine made notes and Philbert bristled.

"Gregory doesn't like you either," he pouted. "He thinks you're

bossy and tacky and . . . and insensitive."

"Sticks and stones . . ." began Ernestine.

Josephine interrupted timorously. "Excuse me, but what were you doing at The Magenta Mouse, Philbert?"

"Oh, well, ah . . . funerals and cremations and so on. Thirsty business, you know. I . . . ah . . . stopped in for a teeny Harvey Wallbanger." Philbert smirked.

"One Harvey Wallbanger?" queried Josephine.

"Maybe it was three," admitted Philbert.

"Or maybe it was six." Ernestine wagged a pudgy finger at her client. "Own up, Philbert. You were sloshed. No wonder you mislaid Mother. Did she accompany you into The Magenta Mouse?"

"Oh, no!" Philbert was shocked. "I would never take Mother into a bar. I left her in the car."

"How long did she have to wait?" demanded Ernestine. "How long did it take you to knock back eight or ten Harvey Wallbangers?"

"It was about 11:30 when I left the crematorium. So I guess it was close to twelve when I got to The Magenta Mouse. We had a few drinks and then Gregory said he would help me install Mother in her niche. It must have been about two o'clock when we left."

"So Mother was left unchaperoned in the car for approximately two hours while you and G. G. drowned your sorrows."

"Gregory is very understanding, which is more than I can truthfully say for you, Ernestine Pickle. I've a good mind to take this case elsewhere."

Ernestine chortled while Josephine looked alarmed. "There isn't any elsewhere, Philbert, old chum," she crowed. "We're the only private detectives in town. We've got a monopoly on the trade." Ernestine sank thoughtfully back into her chair. "I think the time has come for us to do a little legwork. Joey, you go down to The Magenta Mouse and make inquiries. Discreetly, mind you. None of this barging in and shouting, 'Has anybody seen an urn?' Find out if anybody was seen loitering around client's car. What kind of car are you driving these days, Philbert?"

"A lemon yellow Rabbit."

"Got that, Joey? Find out if anyone was seen removing an urn from a rabbit. Then get out to the Valley View and get the poop on Mrs. Wrampelmeier's whereabouts after the funeral."

"And what, may I ask," asked Josephine acidly, "will you be doing while I'm pounding my little hoofies off making inquiries?"

"I'm going home with our client to search the premises," replied Ernestine. "And to question Suspect Number Two if he's still there. Is he?"

"Poor Gregory had a headache," said Philbert. "So I put him to bed."

"I'll just bet he had a headache," sneered Ernestine. "Let's go. Lock the office; Joey. Can't have anyone making off with the petty cash."

The Magenta Mouse had begun life as a corsetiere's establishment. But under the onslaught of panty hose and old age, Mme. Modeste (*née* Maude Shank), daughter of the original proprietor, had been forced to retire. The shop stood empty, its fittings gathering dust until two imaginative young gentlemen, weary of being heckled over their sherry at the hotel's Men's Bar, decided to open their very own kind of cocktail lounge.

They gave the interior decorator instructions to "go wild" and so he did in a flurry of magenta velvet draperies and lime green banquettes. The fitting rooms became cozy nooks for private parties, and Mme. Modeste's fainting couch, refurbished in watermelon pink brocade, took pride of place in the main salon, while Tiffaniesque lamps shed a rosy flattering glow. The boys took turns tending bar, and hired as bouncer a six foot Amazon of decided misanthropic outlook whom they outfitted in magenta tights and imitation leopardskin tunic.

As Joey Pickle entered its dim precincts that afternoon, she was greeted affectionately by the leopard-skinned Amazon.

"Hi, Joey. Buy you a drink?"

"Well, maybe a Coke. I'm working on a case, and Ernie would have a fit if I had anything stronger. Thanks, Kitten."

"You want me to bash her, Joey? Anytime you want me to bash her, just say the word."

"Not today, Kitten. But you can help me with something else. I need some information."

"Oh, goody," squealed Kitten. "Come sit over here and tell me all about it."

While the amiable and enormous Kitten fussed about installing Joey in a lime green booth and providing her with a tall cool drink, Joey

reviewed her strategy. Kitten Kowalski could give her all the information she needed about Philbert's post-incinerary drinking bout, and maybe even tell her if anyone had approached his car with intent to sequester the urn. Mrs. Lulubelle Wrampelmeier presented a problem. If she had had anything to do with the disappearance of the urn, she certainly wouldn't tell Joey about it. The best thing, Joey thought, would be to find a way to search her room at the Valley View Rest Home.

Kitten Kowalski lumbered back to the booth carrying two large soft drinks and a bowl of salted peanuts on a tray.

"Is it murder?" she whispered.

"Can't tell you, Kitten. But it's an important case all right. Confidential, if you know what I mean. However," Joey paused significantly and sipped soda through her straw, "you might be able to provide a clue or two. Now. Did you at any time today observe the presence of one Philbert McNutt on the premises?"

"Hoo boy! Did I ever! I was sitting right here having my lunch. I wasn't on duty yet. And old Philbert comes prancing in singing 'Ding, dong, the witch is dead.' And then he shouts, 'Harvey Wallbangers for everybody!' Course, there's nobody here but me and Gregory Goodlove who always drinks his lunch. Hey, Joey, did Philbert knock off the old lady? Is that what you're investigating?"

"No. But that's an interesting possibility. Was Philbert carrying anything when he came in?"

Kitten shook her large shaggy head. "No. He came in empty-handed. But he was sure carrying a load when he left. Har! Har! I had to practically carry him out to his car. Light as a feather, he was. Cute little twerp."

"Hum. Very interesting," mused Joey. "And where was his car when you carried him out to it?"

"Oh, it was parked right out in front in the loading zone. He got a ticket. Am I telling you good things, Joey?"

"You're doing just fine, Kitten." Joey patted the beefy fist that dwarfed the peanut bowl. "Did you see who gave him the ticket?"

"Sure. It was that young cop, you know who I mean, he was in our senior karate class in high school. Alonzo something or other."

"Alonzo Stumpf?"

"Yeah. Well, he comes along and looks the car over inside and out

and finally writes a ticket and sticks it under the wiper."

"Aha! Suspect Number Three!" exclaimed Joey, scribbling furiously in her notebook. "Did anyone else approach the car?"

"Oh, gee, Joey. I don't know. I had to go put on my uniform." Kitten smoothed her leopardskin proudly over her massive torso. "Don't you think it's lovely? My Auntie made it for me when I got this job."

"It suits you, Kitten. Now, just a few more questions. Did anyone else come into the bar while Philbert and Gregory were here?"

"Let me think." Kitten pondered and munched peanuts. "We served a couple of businessmen's lunches in the private rooms, but they left by the back door. Oh, yeah. Madame Modeste came in to collect the rent. She always likes to do that in person and have a glass of peppermint schnapps on the house."

"Did you notice if she went anywhere near Philbert's car?"

"No. But she went near Philbert, the old hag. It was disgusting the way she was batting her mascara at him. She's old enough to be his grandmother in spite of her red hair and her corset stays. Poor Philbert. Every female in town is gonna be after him now that he's so rich."

The name of Madame Modeste was added to Joey's list.

"Now, Kitten. This is very important. Did you happen to notice, when you carried Philbert to the car, if there was anything on the back seat?"

"Only Gregory. He couldn't sit up, so I shoved him in the back. I offered to drive them home, but Philbert got insulted. What happened, Joey? Did he crack up that cute little car?"

"No. Philbert's okay. And you've been a big help, Kitten. I can't tell you anything more right now."

"Well, it's time for my break." Kitten rose majestically from the table. "I have to take some cookies to my Auntie. I make her some every week."

"That's nice," said Joey absently, finishing off the last of the peanuts. As Kitten lumbered away, Joey considered her enlarged list of suspects. Madame Modeste lived in an apartment above The Magenta Mouse and Alonzo Stumpf would be somewhere around town on his police scooter. It took only a few minutes of intense concentration for Joey to supply each of them with a possible motive for stealing the urn.

If, as Kitten suggested, Madame Modeste had been making a play

for Philbert with marrying the McNutt money in mind, she could have taken the urn to use as a lever. In that case, Philbert would certainly hear from her. Something to the effect of "To Whom It May Concern. I have your urn and will exchange for plain little band of gold." Joey had no illusions about the terms of Mrs. McNutt's will being secret. Everybody in Ponkiesburg knew everything about everybody else.

Alonzo Stumpf, on the other hand, was just plain mean. He enjoyed tormenting people in general, and Philbert in particular. He could well have taken the urn out of sheer spite.

Joey decided to tackle these two before biking all the way out to the Valley View to interview Mrs. Lulubelle Wrampelmeier.

The McNutt mansion brooded on the corner of Mayapple and Ninth behind an untidy screen of hemlocks. Philbert's Rabbit roared into the alley behind the house and screeched to a most unrabbitty halt. A shaken and ill-tempered Ernestine disembarked.

"Do you always drive like that?"

"I didn't frighten you, did I, Ernie?" said Philbert, affectionately patting the Rabbit's quivering snout.

"Course not," barked Ernestine. "Let's get to work. Lead me to the Sleeping Beauty."

"Oh, Ernie, you're not going to wake him up, are you?" said Philbert leading the way into the McNutt rear premises.

"Best time to question a suspect. Before he gets his wits about him and starts telling lies. What's this?"

Ernestine picked up a manila envelope that was lying on the kitchen table. "It's addressed to you, Philbert. Open it up."

Philbert examined the envelope upon which his name was scrawled in shocking pink crayola. "Funny," he said. "This wasn't here when I left."

"Open it!" shrieked Ernestine. "It may be a clue."

Philbert ripped open the envelope and drew forth a pink paper heart trimmed with a paper lace doily. "Oh," said Philbert, "isn't that sweet! A valentine. But it isn't even Valentine's Day."

"Read it," rasped Ernestine.

"It says," said Philbert, squinting at the crayoned message, "To Whom It May Concern. I have your urn and will exchange for plain little band of gold."

"Let me see that." Ernestine snatched the ransom message from Philbert's limp grasp. "Hmm. Not signed. Only this row of X's at the bottom. And no instructions on how to proceed. Well," growled Ernestine in her toughest manner, "let's see what Gorgeous Gregory has to say about this."

Josephine stumped her way up the narrow staircase that led to the patchouli scented lair which Mme. Modeste shared with a malevolent tortoise shell cat named Mitzi. She rang the bell. The door flew open immediately.

"Entrez, cheri," said a voice well oiled by peppermint schnapps.

Joey gazed in awe at the figure in the doorway. Mme. Modeste's at home garb consisted of a filmy black negligee which covered but failed to conceal the black corset, red garters and black stockings beneath. On her feet she wore feathered mules, and her wild frizz of orange hair was bisected by a black headache band trimmed with jet beads. Her face was an enamelled mask of dead white makeup, red lipstick and purple eye shadow.

"Oh, pouf!" said this apparition, with a ghastly moue of disappointment. "I thought you were somebody else."

"Story of my life," said Joey. "May I come in?"

"You might as well. Have you come for a fitting?" Mme. Modeste still supplied exquisitely engineered foundation garments to the few diehards in town, and she now cast a stern professional eye on Joey's indeterminate torso. "It won't be easy, but I think I can fix you up."

"Not today, thanks." Joey hustled into the room, taking care to avoid the divan where the cat, Mitzi, glared from a nest of velvet pillows. "I'm here to make some inquiries on behalf of our client, Philbert McNutt."

"Oh, that Philbert! So unreliable," pouted the ancient seductress. "He said he would come for tea. And does he appear? Not a bit. That naughty boy. He really needs someone to look after him now that his poor dear Maman is gone. So sad. She was a good customer of mine."

"So you were expecting Philbert this afternoon?" asked Joey, eying the tea table with its assortment of small cakes.

"But yes. As soon as he took his dear Maman home and installed her in her niche, he was to come for tea. And sympathy." The bedizened crone grinned lewdly.

"Harrumph," said Joey. "Those cakes look good."

"Have one if you like."

"So you knew about the urn?" asked Joey through a mouthful of macaroon.

"But certainly. Madame McNutt told me herself. Years ago when she had the niche built into the parlor. 'Maudie,' she said, 'there are two things I can't bear to leave behind me when I go. One is my house and the other is Philbert. They both need watching.'" Madame Modeste shrugged modestly. "I would be so happy to watch over them both."

Joey helped herself to a chocolate meringue. "Did you actually see the urn today?" she asked.

"Oh, but no. To the funeral I went, of course. It was only proper that I should. But to the crematorium, b-r-r-r," Madame Modeste shivered, "that I could not do. Try one of these cream puffs."

"Thanks," said Joey. "Detecting certainly makes me hungry."

"But you haven't told me," Madame Modeste produced an ingratiating smile, "what it is you are detecting. What has Philbert done now?"

"Nothing much," said Joey: "He's just mislaid Mother. And if we don't find her by tomorrow morning, Philbert's out in the cold." She reached for another macaroon.

"Oh, rats!" cried the harridan, snatching up the remaining tea-cakes. "The old lady was right. That boy needs watching every minute. Well, I guess he won't be showing up for tea. I don't want to keep you from your search. Every minute counts. And you must come back and let me fit you with a corset. You'd be surprised at the difference it will make. Au revoir. And good luck."

Joey Pickle found herself on the landing outside the closed door of Madame Modeste's apartment. Licking crumbs from her lips, she trudged down the stairs and mounted her ten-speed-tricycle which was parked at the curb. A pink parking ticket flapped insolently on the handlebar.

"Alonzo Stumpf," muttered Joey. She crumpled the ticket, dropped it down the sewer and wheeled away.

"Wake up! Come on, bright eyes! Let's see some life!"

"Oh, Ernie," begged Philbert, "don't shake him like that. You're making me dizzy."

"Arrgh," said the figure in the bed.

"What do you make of this, Goodlove?" demanded Ernestine, waving the valentine before the one bleary eye that had wrinkled itself open.

"Open heart surgery! And without an anesthetic! Philbert, save me! I think I'm going to faint." Gregory Goodlove rolled over and began snoring into the lace trimmed pillow.

"Get some cold water, Philbert," commanded Ernestine.

"Oh, heavens! Don't be such a brute!" Philbert bent over the recumbent form of his friend and tugged gently at a strand of lank black hair. "Wake up, Gregory. It's an emergency. Mother has been kidnapped."

"Stop that!" cried Gregory. He scrambled to a sitting position, while Philbert hastened to plump the pillows up against the carved headboard. "Oh, my head," groaned Gregory. "Now what's this about your mother?" His bloodshot eyes fell on Ernestine. "And what's Picklepuss doing here?"

"Mother's disappeared . . ." began Philbert.

". . . and I'm here to find out what you know about it, Goodlove," interrupted Ernestine. "For instance, do you know how this got on the kitchen table?" She brandished the valentine before his face.

"Ugh. How grotesque. I never saw it before in my life. Take it away. It's making me ill."

"Well, how did it get here?"

"Haven't the foggiest," said Gregory. "How about a little smackerel of something to eat? I'm starving."

"Good idea," burred Ernestine. "I'll have a beer with mine." She plumped herself down in an overstuffed wing chair. "While you two are rustling up some grub, I'll just do a little brainwork on the case. Can't trust that Josephine to come up with anything worthwhile." She closed her eyes and her plump lips began moving in and out.

"What's she doing?" whispered Gregory.

"Stoutheartedly working," said Philbert. "Let's go get some food."

Joey found Alonzo Stumpf directing rush hour traffic at the intersection of Main and Center. Twenty cars were backed up and honking while he painstakingly wrote out a ticket for a dog without a leash. Joey pedalled up to him.

"Hi, Joey," he greeted her, grinning. "Twenty-three tickets today, including yours. Beat my own record."

"Swell," said Joey. "Pick up anything interesting in the way of lost articles?"

Alonzo tucked the pink ticket under the dog's collar and said, "Go on home, boy." He turned to confer with Joey while the backed up traffic continued to honk. "Did you lose something, Joey?"

"Philbert McNutt lost his mother."

"Oh, yeah. Too bad. Maybe I shouldn't have given him a ticket today. But he was parked in violation, and I got my record to keep up. Nice car, that Rabbit."

"Notice anything unusual about it? Or in it?"

"W-e-e-ll, let's see. Color's a little outlandish for my taste. But I guess it suits Philbert. And flowered seat covers. Wow! Some kind of jar on the back seat. Guess that's all."

"Aha!" said Joey. "Did you see Lulubelle Wrampelmeier today?"

"Old party in a wheelchair? Sure did. Outside Hooker's Funeral Home. Gave her a ticket too. Operating vehicle without a license. Sure has been a good day."

"Keep up the good work, Alonzo." Joey pedalled away up the wrong side of the street. Alonzo's shouted threat of further tickets was drowned by the renewed honking of the cars waiting for his signal to drive on. Reluctantly, he waved them on their way.

While Joey doggedly pedalled the three miles out to the Valley View Rest Home, Ernestine opened her eyes, and her mouth, long enough to wolf down a liverwurst and tomato sandwich and two mugs of beer. She then subsided once again into the wing chair, eyes closed and plump lips moving in and out.

"But, Ernie," protested Philbert mildly, "aren't you going to do anything about the ransom valentine? I'd sure like to know who cared enough to send it."

Ernestine opened one beady eye. "Wait for further instructions," she growled. "Call me if you get any messages. Now, bug off, and let me analyze the evidence. You and Gregory search the house." The eye closed, the lips pushed in and out, and Ernestine's breathing became harsh and regular.

Philbert tiptoed away.

After a brief stop at the premises of Bug-B-Gone, operated by her second cousin's third husband, Joey Pickle arrived at the gates of the Valley View Rest Home. It was a low lying concrete block building that sprawled on a denuded hillside, exuding all the restful homeliness of a concentration camp.

Joey dismounted and marched through the front door. She wore a bright yellow coverall and carried an orange cannister with a long businesslike nozzle.

"Am I glad to see you!" said the attendant on duty at the desk. "Ants, roaches, crickets, spiders, you name it, we got it. Mice everywhere. Can't make the old biddies stop hiding food in their rooms."

"Bug-B-Gone will blast 'em out. I'll get right to work. Oh, I have a message for Mrs. Wrampelmeier. Where will I find her?"

"Room 14. She may be asleep. Old Lulubelle had a big day. Funeral this morning. We had to give her a sedative and put her to bed. You a relative?"

"No. Friend of a friend. Well, a squirt in time kills ninety-nine." Joey brandished her insecticide nozzle and toddled off up the long gray corridor.

The door of Room 14 was slightly ajar. Joey knocked softly and went in. In a high hospital bed with protectively barred sides lay a small frail figure. Her white hair was whiter than the pillowcase and her eyes were closed and lost in a maze of wrinkles. Beside the bed stood a nightstand. On it were a water carafe, a box of tissues and an overflowing ashtray. There was a dresser with a cracked mirror, a chair for visitors and little else in the room. Joey cautiously opened a door that presumably led to a closet.

"I see you, Sonny," said the dry ancient voice.

Joey whirled around. "Exterminator, ma'am."

"Mind, you don't step on Rodney."

"Who's Rodney?" Joey looked apprehensively over her shoulder into the depths of the closet.

"My pet roach. He usually doesn't come out until after supper. He knows I always bring him a little tidbit. But he might be extra hungry this evening. We both missed lunch today."

Joey moved quickly away from the closet.

"Pump me up, Sonny."

"What?" Joey stared into snapping eyes in the wrinkled face.

"The bed, Sonny. Don't be dense. I want to sit up. Crank up the bed."

"Oh, sure." Joey found a handle at the foot of the bed and began to crank.

When the old lady was propped up at a satisfactory angle, she grinned toothlessly at Joey and said, "Care for a cookie?"

Joey, who had been peering under the bed and investigating the contents of the nightstand where she found nothing but a bedpan and several dogeared issues of *Playgirl*, said, "I could use a little nourishment."

The ancient dame reached beneath her coverlet and brought out an assortment of treasures: a pinochle deck, a crumpled package of Virginia Slims, a pint of bourbon and a cookie jar. "Let's have a party."

"Just a cookie, ma'am. Thank you very much," said Joey, mindful of her manners. "Nice cookie jar."

"Good cookies too. My Maybelline brought 'em. She's the only one cares about old Lulubelle any more. 'Course, all the rest of 'em's dead and gone. Hah!" Mrs. Wramplemeier gummed a few cookies in morose silence.

Joey munched companionably and eyed the overflowing ashtray. "You smoke too much, Mrs. W. It'll take years off your life."

"Horsefeathers! I've smoked since I was seven. But I didn't smoke up that mess. That Maybelline! Brought me this nice cookie jar, but somebody'd been using it for an ashtray. I had to clean it all out before I could put the cookies in. If she wasn't my poor departed baby sister's only surviving grandchild, I'd think there was something wrong with her noodle. Have another."

"Thank you kindly, ma'am."

Joey helped herself again from the cookie jar, reflecting upon the unexpected fringe benefits of private detecting. It certainly didn't seem to be a business in which one would often go hungry. Suddenly, she froze in mid-crunch. The old lady, who had been happily gumming away at yet another cookie, began to turn purple. Her tiny black eyes leaped startled from their nests of wrinkles. Her breath whistled painfully in her scrawny throat and she sprayed crumbs all over Joey's clean yellow coverall.

"What's wrong? Oh, Mrs. W.! Can I get you a glass of water?"

"Water, hell! Where's that bourbon?" gasped the old lady and col-

apsed into her pillows. Wrinkles enclosed her snapping black eyes for the last time.

"Help!" cried Joey. "Oh, for pity's sake, help!" She scampered out of the room and down the corridor, shouting, "It's Mrs. Wrampelmeier! I think she's dead!"

"Choked on a chocolate chip," said the doctor.

"I've told them a million times not to hoard food in their rooms," said the nurse. "I'll go call her next of kin."

"Guess I'll be pushing off," said Joey.

Peddalling back to town, Joey brooded dejectedly on the failure of their first case. She dreaded telling Ernie that she had been unable to come up with a single clue. The urn seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth. In the gloomy twilight, she pedalled her tricycle into the alley behind the McNutt mansion and parked next to Philbert's Rabbit.

Lights blazed all over the house as Joey let herself in the back door. In the kitchen, dusty and sweat-stained, she found Philbert and Gregory wearily commiserating with each other.

"I can't think of a single other place to look," moaned Philbert.

"I simply can't remember whether we did or did not carry the dratted thing into the house," groaned Gregory.

"But what about the valentine? It all comes back to that. Whoever left the valentine must have the urn, and I'll have to marry whoever to get it back."

"Who's getting married? And what's all this about a valentine?" asked Joey.

"I am, I guess," said Philbert. "Take a look at this." He handed Joey his pink paper heart.

"Aha!" cried Joey. "I know the work of this artist. I've seen the style before. Where's Ernie?"

"Up in the guest room," said Philbert. "Working."

"Well, don't wake her up," said Joey. "Now, listen to this. As of an hour ago, we are fresh out of indigent widows of trolley car conductors. Mrs. Lulubelle Wrampelmeier is about to attend her last funeral."

"Oh, goody!" exulted Philbert. "I mean, that's too bad."

"Wait a minute. It seems she has a next of kin, so we're not out of the woods yet. Unless we find that urn before morning, Lulubelle's

only surviving relative will cash in, and you, Philbert, will get zilch."

"Oh, darn," grumped Philbert. "Well, did you come up with an clues?"

"Nary a one. Except that Maude Shank thinks you need looking at ter. Could she have sent this little number?" Joey sniffed the valentine. "Doesn't smell like her work. Maudie would have doused it with *eau de sewage*."

"I don't mind getting married," said Philbert wistfully. "Actually, it's pretty lonely in this mausoleum without Mother to liven things up."

"I'd be glad to move in and keep you company," volunteered Gregory:

"That's sweet of you, Gregory, but you lack that certain something Mother was so . . . so . . ."

"Strong-willed?" suggested Joey.

"That's a very nice way of putting it, Joey. Strong-willed. And sometimes I feel kind of lost without her. I wonder who sent that valentine."

"It'll come to me in a minute," said Joey. "Pink crayola and Valentine's Day. The only valentine I ever got. Oh, golly, the name is on the tip of my tongue . . ."

A door slammed somewhere upstairs and heavy footsteps could be heard on the staircase. At that moment, the doorbell rang. The three raced from the kitchen to the front hall, reaching it at the same moment that a tousled Ernestine reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Ernie, I've got it!" cried Joey. "In third grade . . ."

"So have I," sneered Ernie. "She sent you a valentine but she didn't send me one."

"And you tore it up."

Philbert opened the door.

"Maybelline!" chorused the twins.

"My goodness!" gasped Kitten Kowalski. "What a welcoming committee! Nobody but Auntie has called me Maybelline since third grade. I'd have been here sooner, Philbert, but I forgot where I left it and then Auntie Lulubelle choked on a cookie, so I had to go and clean out her room. But it's just as well, because that's where I left it and here it is." The Amazon held the urn cum cookie jar aloft in both meaty paws. "Will you marry me? You better say 'yes' because if you don't I'll bash you with it."

"Oh, Kitten . . . Maybelline . . . dear," sighed Philbert. "You're so . . . strong-willed."

"I hope your mother doesn't mind a few cookie crumbs," said Kitten shyly.

The doorbell rang again. Kitten handed Philbert the urn and turned to open the door with her most majestic lady-of-the-m Manor manner.

"Is that your bus double-parked outside?" asked Alonzo Stumpf. "You better move it before I give you a ticket. Thirty-seven in one day. Best day I ever had. Wouldn't mind making it thirty-eight."

Kitten moved ponderously through the doorway, her leopard-skinned arm raised and her huge fist clenched. Alonzo Stumpf sailed backward off the porch into the twilight.

"I feel so happy," purred Kitten. "I just had to bash somebody."

"Just one question, Maybelline," said Joey. "Did you always make chocolate chip cookies for your Auntie?"

"No," said Kitten, smiling sadly. "I just thought she might be getting tired of plain old ginger snaps."

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