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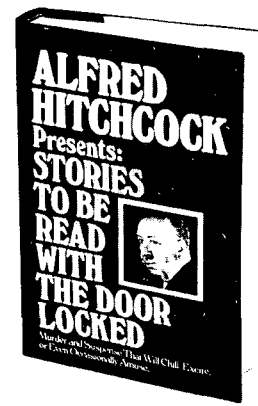

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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July 1976

Dear Reader:

Here we are well into summer; a time of peace and quiet and leisure. Far be it from me to disturb such a mood.

So just settle back and read *A Cabin in the Woods* by John Coyne. I'm sure that what happened to the hero of that story will *never* happen to you. But if you are the nervous type, perhaps you'd prefer *Bend in the Road* by Dick Beaird. If you're married, though, maybe you'll be more comfortable with *Office Party* by Mary Bradford . . .

Then there is this month's novelette, *Joe Cutter's Game* by Brian Garfield. Of course, if you worry about foreign policy it might shake you up.

Hmmm. You could always mow the lawn. But I'll take my chances with a chilling mystery story.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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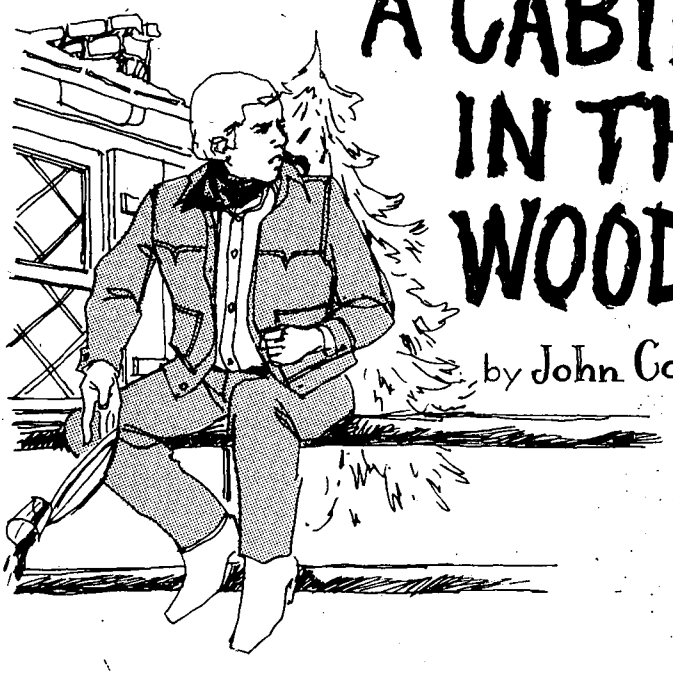
Sometimes it's impossible to escape from what you fear the most. . .

A CABIN IN THE WOODS

by John Coyne



Michael remembered clearly the first piece of fungus: a thin, irregular patch twelve inches wide, greyish, like the color of candle grease, growing on the new pine wall of the bathroom. He reached up gingerly to touch it. The crust was lumpy and the edges serrated. He pulled the resinous flesh from the wood, like removing a scab, tossed the fungus into the waste can and finished shaving.

He had come up from the city late the night before, driving the last

few hours through the mountain roads in heavy fog and rain and arriving at his new cabin in the woods after midnight. It was his first trip to the lake that spring.

Michael had come early in the week to work, bringing with him the galleys of his latest novel. He needed to spend several more days making corrections. It was the only task of writing that he really enjoyed, the final step when the book was still part of him. Once it appeared between covers, it belonged to others.

He was in no hurry to read the galleys. That could be done at leisure over the next few days. Barbara wasn't arriving until Friday and their guests weren't due until Saturday morning. It was a weekend they had planned for several months to celebrate the completion of the new house.

So while shaving that first morning at the cabin, Michael found himself relaxed and smiling. He was pleased about the house. It was bigger and more attractive than even the blueprints had suggested.

It had been designed by a young architect from the nearby village. Local carpenters had built it, using lumber cut from the pine and oak and walnut woods behind the lake. They had left the lumber rough hewed and unfinished.

The cabin was built into the side of the mountain, with a spectacular view of the lake. Only a few trees had been cut to accommodate the construction; so from a distance, and through the trees, the building looked like a large boulder that had been unearthed and tumbled into the sun to dry.

"I want the ambience *rustic*," Barbara explained to the architect. "A sense of the *wilderness*." She whispered the words, as if to suggest the mysterious.

"Don't make it too austere," Michael instructed. "I don't want the feeling we're camping out. This is a cabin we want to escape to from the city; we want some conveniences. I want a place that can sleep eight or ten if need be." He paced the small office of the architect as he listed his requirements, banging his new boots on the wooden floor. Michael liked the authoritative sound, the suggestion to this kid that here was someone who knew what he wanted out of life.

"And cozy!" Barbara leaned forward to catch the architect's attention. She had a round pretty face with saucer-sized blue eyes. She flirted with the young man to make her point. "And a stone fireplace the

length of one wall. We may want to come up here with our friends during skiing season." She beamed.

The architect looked from one to the other and said nothing.

"He's not one of your great talkers, is he?" Barbara remarked as they left the village.

"That's the way of these mountain people. They come cheap and they give you a full day's work. It's okay with me. I'd rather deal with locals than someone from the city."

Still, the cabin cost $10,000 more than Michael had expected. The price of supplies, he was told, had tripled. However, they had landscaped the lawn to the lake and put in a gravel drive to the county road. Michael said he wanted only to turn the key and find the place livable. "I'm no handy man," he had told the architect.

While the second home in the mountains was costly, Michael was no longer worried about money. When he had finished the new novel and submitted it to the publisher it was picked up immediately with an advance of $50,000, more than he had made on any of his other books. The next week it had sold to the movies for $200,000, and a percentage of the gross. Then just before driving to the mountains, his agent telephoned with the news that the paperback rights had gone for half a million.

"Everything I touch is turning to gold," Michael bragged to Barbara. "I told you I'd make it big."

What he did not tell Barbara was that this was his worst book, written only to make money. He had used all the cliches of plot and situation and it had paid off.

He finished dressing and made plans for the day. The station wagon was still packed with bags of groceries. The night before he had been too tired after the drive to do more than build a fire and pour himself a drink. Then carrying his drink, he had toured through the empty rooms—his boots echoing on the oak floors—and admired the craftsmanship of the mountain carpenters. The cabin was sturdy and well built; the joints fit together like giant Lincoln logs.

The three bedrooms of the house were upstairs in the back and they were connected by an open walk that overlooked the livingroom, which was the height and width of the front of the cabin. The facade was nearly all windows, long panels that reached the roof.

One full wall was Barbara's stone fireplace, made from boulders quarried in the mountains and trucked to the lake site. The foundation was made from the same rocks. As Barbara bragged to friends with newly acquired chauvinism, "All that's not from the mountains are the kitchen appliances and ourselves."

Michael moved the station wagon behind the house and unpacked the groceries, carrying the bundles in through the back door and stacking the bags on the butcher-block table. He filled the refrigerator first with perishables and the several bottles of white wine he planned to have evenings with his meals. His own special present to himself at the success of the book.

Packing the refrigerator gave Michael a sense of belonging. With that simple chore, he had taken possession of the place and the cabin felt like home.

He had thought of leaving the staples until Barbara arrived—she would have her own notion of where everything should go—but after the satisfaction of filling the refrigerator, Michael decided to put the staples away, beginning with the liquor.

He carried the box into the livingroom and knelt down behind the bar and opened the cabinet doors. Inside, growing along the two empty plain wooden shelves, was grey fungus. It grew thick, covering the whole interior of the cabinet, and the discovery frightened Michael, like finding an abnormality.

"My God!" A shiver ran along his spine.

He filled several of the empty grocery bags with the fungus. It pulled easily off the shelves and was removed in minutes. Then he scrubbed the hard pine boards with soap and water and put away the bottles of liquor.

It was the dampness of the house, he guessed, that had caused the growth. The house had stood empty and without heat since it had been finished. He knew fungus grew rapidly in damp weather, but still the spread of the candle-grey patch was alarming.

He returned to the kitchen and apprehensively opened the knotty pine cupboards over the counter. The insides were clean, with the smell about them of sawdust. He ran his hand across the shelves and picked up shavings. Michael closed the door and sighed.

Barbara had given him a list of chores to do in the house before the weekend. The beds in the guest rooms should be made, the win-

dows needed washing, and the whole house, from top to bottom, had to be swept. Also the livingroom rug had arrived and was rolled up in the corner. It had to be put down and vacuumed.

First, however, Michael decided to have breakfast. On Sundays in the city he always made breakfast, grand ones of Eggs Doremus, crepes, or Swedish pancakes with lingonberry. Lately Barbara had begun to invite friends over for brunch. His cooking had become well known among their friends and his editor had suggested that he might write a cookbook about Sunday breakfasts.

Michael unpacked the skillet, and turning on the front burner melted a slice of butter into the pan. He took a bottle of white wine, one of the inexpensive California Chablis, uncorked it, and added a half cup to the skillet. The butter and wine sizzled over the flame and the rich smell made Michael hungry.

He broke two eggs into the skillet, seasoned them with salt and pepper, and then searched the shopping bags for cayenne, but Barbara hadn't packed the spices. He could do without but made a mental note to pick up cayenne and more spices when he drove to the village later that morning.

Michael moved easily around the kitchen, enjoying the space to maneuver. In their apartment in the city, only one of them could cook at a time. Here, they had put in two stoves and two sinks, and enough counter space for both to work at once.

Michael glanced at the eggs. The whites were nearly firm. He took the toaster and plugged it in, noticing with satisfaction that the electrical outlets worked. That was one less problem to worry about. He dropped two pieces of bread into the toaster and then, going back to the bar, took the vodka, opened a can of tomato juice, and made himself a Bloody Mary.

He was working quickly now, sure of the kitchen. He cut the flame under the skillet, crumbled Roquefort cheese and sprinkled it on the eggs; then he buttered the toast and unpacked a dish and silverware. He smiled, pleased. He was going to enjoy cooking in this kitchen.

Perhaps, he thought, he should move full time to the mountains. He could write more, he knew, if he lived by the lake, away from interruptions and distractions. He fantasized a moment. He could see himself going down on cool, misty mornings to the lake. He could smell the pine trees and the water as he crossed the flat lake to bass fish

before sunup. He could see the boat gracefully arching through the calm water as behind it a small wave rippled to the shore. He sipped the Bloody Mary and let the pleasant thought relax him.

Then he remembered the eggs and he slipped them from the skillet onto the buttered toast, and carrying the plate and his drink walked out onto the oak deck. The deck was a dozen feet wide and built along the length of the east wall to catch the early morning sun. It was Barbara's idea that they could have breakfast on the deck.

The sun had cleared the mountains and touched the house. It had dried the puddles of rain water and warmed the deck so Michael was comfortable in shirt sleeves.

They had not yet purchased deck furniture, so he perched himself on the wide banister and finished the eggs. He could see the length of the front lawn from where he sat. It sloped gracefully down to the shore and the new pier.

The pier he had built himself during the winter. One weekend he had come up to the village, bought 300 feet of lumber, hired two men from a construction firm, and driven out to the lake in four-wheel-drive jeeps. Along the shore of the lake they found twelve sassafras trees that they cut and trimmed and pulled across the ice to Michael's property. They chopped holes in the thick ice and sledgehammered the poles into place to make the foundation. Then they cut two-by-eights into four-foot lengths and nailed them between the poles to make the pier.

Michael's hands blistered and his back ached for a week, but he was proud of his hard labor, and proud, too, of the pier which went forty feet into the water and could easily handle his two boats.

At first he could not see the pier because a late morning mist clung to the shore. It rolled against the bank like a range of low clouds. But as he sat finishing his eggs and drink, the rising sun burned away the mist and the thin slice of pier jutting into the mountain lake came slowly into view like a strange gothic phenomenon.

"What the. . ."

Michael stood abruptly and the dish and his drink tumbled off the railing. He peered down, confused. The whole length of the pier was covered with grey fungus. He looked around for more fungus, expecting to see it everywhere. He scanned the landscaped lawn, the pine trees which grew thick to the edge of his property. He spun about and ran the length of the oak deck, leaned over the railing and searched

the high rear wall of the cabin. He glanced at the trash heap of construction materials left by the builders. No sign of more mold.

Next he ran into the house and taking the steps two at a time raced to the second floor. He turned into the bathroom and flipped on the light. No fungus grew on the pine wall. He turned immediately and ran downstairs, boots stomping on the wooden stairs, and opened the cabinet doors below the bar. The bottles of liquor were stacked as he had arranged them.

Michael calmed down, gained control. He kept walking, however, through the house, opening closet doors, checking cabinets. He went again to the kitchen and looked through all the cupboards. He opened the basement door and peered into the dark downstairs. The basement had been left unfinished, a damp cellar. Still no fungus.

When he was satisfied there was no fungus in the house, he left the cabin and walked across the lawn to the tool shed and found a shovel. He began where the pier touched the shore, scraping away the fungus and dumping the growth into the water, where it plopped and floated away. He shoveled quickly. The flat tenacious flesh of the fungus ripped easily off the wood. It was oddly exhilarating work. In a matter of minutes he had cleaned the length of the pier.

He stuck the shovel into the turf and went again to the house where he found a mop and bucket, poured detergent into the bucket, filled it with hot water, and returned to the pier to mop the planks. The pier sparkled in the morning sun.

Then Michael locked the cabin, backed the station wagon out of the drive, and drove into the village.

The village was only a few streets where the interstate crossed the mountains. It had grown up on both sides of a white river, and adjacent to railroad tracks. The tracks were now defunct and the river polluted. The few buildings were weather weary and old. The only new construction was the service station at the interstate, and a few drive-ins. When Barbara first saw the town, she wouldn't let him stop.

But the hills and valleys beyond the place were spectacular and unspoiled and when they found five acres of woods overlooking the lake they decided that in spite of the town, they'd buy.

"I looked down at the pier and the whole goddamn thing was covered with fungus. It's a grey color, like someone's puke." Michael paced the architect's office. He had already told the young man about

the fungus in the bathroom and beneath the bar. And without saying so, implied it was the architect's fault.

"I'm not a biologist." The young man spoke carefully. He was unnerved by Michael. The man had barged into his office shouting about fungus. It had taken him several minutes to comprehend what the problem was.

"You're from these hills. You grew up here, right? You should know about fungus. What's all this mountain folklore we keep hearing about?" Michael quit pacing and sat down across from the architect. He was suddenly tired. The anxiety and anger over the fungus had worn him out. "That's a new house out there. I sunk $50,000 into it and you can't tell me why there's fungus growing on the bathroom walls? Goddamnit! What kind of wood did you use?"

"The lumber was green, true, but I told you we'd have problems. It was your idea to build the place with pine off your land. Well, pine needs time to dry. Still. . ." The architect shook his head. The growth of fungus confused him. He had never heard of such a thing. But the man might be exaggerating. He glanced at Michael.

Michael was short and plump with a round, soft face, and brown eyes that kept widening with alarm. He wore new Levi pants and jacket, and cowboy boots that gave him an extra inch of height. Around his neck he had fastened a blue bandanna into an ascot. He looked, the architect thought, slightly ridiculous.

"Who knows about this fungus?" Michael asked. He had taken out another blue bandanna to wipe the sweat off his face. In his exasperated state, the sweat poured.

"I guess someone at the college. . ."

"And you don't think it's any of your concern? You stuck me for $10,000 over the original estimate and now that you've got your money, you don't give a damn."

"I told you before we started construction that we'd get hit by inflation. We could have held the costs close to that first estimate if your wife hadn't wanted all the custom cabinets, those wardrobes, and items like bathroom fixtures from Italy. . ."

Michael waved away the architect's explanation. He was mad at the kid for not solving the problem of the fungus. "Where's this college?" he asked.

"Brailey. It's across the mountain."

"How many miles?" Michael stood. He had his car keys out and was spinning them impatiently.

"Maybe thirty, but these are mountain roads. It will take an hour's drive. Why not telephone? You're welcome to use my phone." He pushed the telephone across the desk.

Michael fidgeted with his key. He didn't want to let the architect do him any favors, but he also didn't want to spend the morning driving through the mountains.

"Okay. You might be right." He sat down again and, picking up the receiver, dialed information.

It took him several calls and the help of the college switchboard operator before he reached a Doctor Clyde Bessey, an associate professor at the state university. Dr. Bessey had a thin, raspy voice, as if someone had a hand to his throat. He said he was a mycologist in the Department of Plant Pathology.

"Do you know anything about fungus?" Michael asked.

"Why, yes." The doctor spoke carefully, as if his words were under examination. "Mycology is the study of fungi."

"Then you're the person I want," Michael replied quickly. Then, without asking if the man had time, he described the events of the morning.

"*Peniophora gigantea*," Doctor Bessey replied.

"What?"

"The species of fungi you've described sounds like *Peniophora gigantea*. It's more commonly called *Resin Fungus*. A rather dull-colored species that spreads out like a crust on the wood. You say the edges are serrated?"

"And it's lumpy. . ."

"Rightly so! *Peniophora gigantea*. Sometimes laymen mistake this species of crust fungi for a resinous secretion of the conifer."

"Does it grow like that? That fast?"

"No, what you've described is odd." He sounded thoughtful. "Fungi won't grow that extensively, unless, of course, a house has been abandoned. And certainly not that fast. We did have a damp winter and spring, still. . . you said the cabin was built with green lumber?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Michael glanced at the architect.

"Still. . ."

"Well, how in the hell do I stop it?" Michael was sharp, because the

laborious manner of the professor was irritating.

"I don't know exactly what to tell you. Your situation sounds a bit unusual. Fungi doesn't grow as rapidly as you've described. In laboratory conditions, we've had fungus cover the surface of a three-inch-wide culture dish in two days. But that's ideal conditions. Without competition from other fungi or bacteria. But, generally speaking, fungi does thrive better than any other organism on earth." He said that with a flourish of pride.

"Doctor, I'm sure this is all just wonderful, but it doesn't help me, you see. I'm infested with the crap!"

"Yes, of course. . . If you don't mind, I'd like to drive over and take some cultures. I'll be able to tell more once I've had the opportunity to study some samples."

"You can have all you want."

"You've cleaned up the fungi, I presume. . ."

"With soap and water."

"Well, that should destroy any mycelium, but then we never can be sure. One germinating spore and the process begins again. Rather amazing, actually."

"Let's hope you're wrong. It's a $50,000 house."

"Oh, I'm sure there's no permanent problem, just a biological phenomenon. Fungi are harmless, really, when they're kept in control. Your home will suffer no lasting effects." He sounded confident.

"Maybe you're right." Michael was cautious. Still, Doctor Bessey had eased his mind. Michael hung up feeling better.

"Do you mind if I make another call?" he asked the architect. "Our phone hasn't been installed at the cabin. . ." The young man gestured for Michael to go ahead. Actually, he wasn't that bad, Michael thought, dialing Barbara in the city.

"I'm sure it's nothing serious." Barbara said when Michael told her about the fungus. "The wet weather and all. . ." Her mind was elsewhere, planning for the weekend. "Did you have time to make the beds?"

"The whole pier was covered, like a tropical jungle. *Peniophora gigantea*. . .that's what the mycologist called it."

"The who?"

"Dr. Bessey. He studies fungi."

"Well, if it's that well known, then it can't be any problem. . . Have

you had a chance to wash the windows? Perhaps I should come up earlier. . ."

"Don't worry about getting the cabin clean. I'll do that!" Michael snapped at her. He was upset that she hadn't responded. Barbara had a frustrating habit of not caring about a household problem unless it affected her directly. "I'll clean the windows, make the beds, and sweep the goddamn floors once I get rid of this fungus!"

"And the rugs. . ."

"And the rugs!"

"Michael dear, there's no need to be upset with me. I have nothing to do with your fungus."

"Yes, dear, but you wanted the place built from our lumber, our *green* lumber."

"And you said it would make the place look more authentic."

"The lumber's green!"

"I don't see where that's my fault!"

"It might mean that we'll have to live with this goddamn fungus!" Michael knew he was being unreasonable, but he couldn't stop himself. He was mad at her for not taking the fungus seriously.

"I'm sure you'll think of something," Barbara pampered him and then dismissed the whole issue. "You'll remember the windows. . .?" She sounded like a recording.

Before leaving the village, Michael went to the general store and shopped for the week. He did not want to leave the lake again for errands. He bought Windex, the spices Barbara had forgotten, a new mop, a second broom. He bought two five-gallon cans of gas for the boats and more fishing tackle. He bought a box of lures; good, he was told by the store owner, for mountain lakes. He picked up a minnow box, a fish net and a filet knife. He would need them if he planned to do any serious fishing.

But he understood himself enough to realize also that this impulse buying was only a compensation for the upsetting morning. Now that he had the money, he spent it quickly, filling the station wagon like a sled of toys. And it worked. Driving back to the cabin, his good mood returned.

He would not clean the cabin that morning, he decided, nor would he make the beds. Instead, he'd take out the flat-bottom boat and fish

for bass in the small lagoon of the lake. And he'd pan fry the catch that evening for dinner. He'd just have the fish and some fresh vegetables, asparagus or sliced cucumbers, and a bottle of the Pinot Noir.

Michael pictured himself on the deck frying the bass. The cloud of smoke from the coals drifting off into the trees, the late sun catching the glass of wine, the pale yellow color like tarnished gold. He'd cover the fish a moment, stop to sip the wine, and look out over the lake as the trees darkened on the other shore, and a mist formed. He'd get a thick ski sweater and put it on. When the darkness spread up the lawn to the house, he'd be the last object visible, moving on the deck like a lingering shadow.

Michael turned the station wagon off the county road and onto his drive and the crunch of gravel under the wheels snapped him from his daydream. He touched the accelerator and the big car spun over the loose stones. On that side of the property the trees grew thick and close and kept the house from view until Michael had swung the car into the parking space and stopped. Then he saw the fungus, a wide spread growing across the rock foundation like prehistoric ivy.

He ran from the car to the wall and grabbed the fungus. The mold tore away in large chunks. With both hands, frantically, he kept ripping away. Now it was wet and clammy, like the soft underbelly of fish.

Michael left the fungus on the ground, left his new fishing tackle and other supplies in the car, and ran into the house. He pulled open the cabinet doors. The grey growth had spread again across the two shelves. It covered the liquor, grew thick among the bottles like cobwebs.

In the bathroom upstairs the patch of mold was the width of the wall. It stretched from floor to ceiling and had crept around the mirror, grown into the wash bowl, and smothered the toilet. He reached out and pulled a dozen inches away in his fingers. The waxy flesh of the fungus clung to his hand. Michael fell back exhausted against the bathroom door and wiped the sweat off his face with the sleeve of his jacket.

It was hot in the cabin. Michael took off his jacket and pulled off the blue bandanna ascot, then he started on the bathroom fungus. He filled five paper bags with fungus and dumped them into the trash heap behind the house. He went to the bar and removed the liquor and scraped the shelves clean again. He took the fungus to the trash pile

and going back to the car got one of the cans of gas, poured it on the fungus, and started a blaze.

The wet fungus produced a heavy fog and a nasty odor, like the burning of manure. Michael watched it burn with pleasure, but when he returned to the kitchen to put away the supplies, he found that the fungus had spread, was growing extensively in all the cupboards and beneath the sink. It even lined the insides of the oven and grew up the back of the refrigerator.

Michael needed to stand on a kitchen chair to reach the fungus that grew at the rear of the cupboards, but he had learned now how to rip the mold away in large pieces, like pulling off old, wet wallpaper. Still, it took him longer; the fungus was more extensive and nestled in all the corners of the custom-made cupboards.

He went outside and found the wheelbarrow and carted away the fungus, dumping it into the fire behind the house. The grey smoke billowed into the trees. The mountain air stank. He swept the kitchen clean and washed the cupboards, the bathroom, and the cabinets beneath the bar. It was late afternoon when he had the house finally in order and he went upstairs and flopped into bed, feeling as if he hadn't slept in weeks.

He woke after seven o'clock. It was still daylight, but the sun was low in the sky and the bedroom at the back of the cabin was shaded by trees. He woke in the dark.

He had been deeply asleep and came awake slowly so it was several minutes before he remembered where he was and what had happened. When he did remember, he realized at the same time that the fungus would have returned, that it was growing again in the bathroom, beneath the bar, and in all the cupboards of the kitchen.

But he did not know that now the fungus had spread further and was growing along the green pine walls of the bedroom, had spread over the bare oak floors, and even started down the stairs, like an organic carpet. Michael sat up and swung his bare feet off the bed and onto the floor. His feet touched the lumpy wet fungus. It was as if he had been swimming in the lake and had tried to stand on the mucky bottom. His toes dug into the slime.

He shoveled the fungus off the floor and threw it out the bedroom window. The shovel tore into the rough hewed floor, caught between the planks, and he had ruined the floor when he was done. He took a

rake from the shed and used it to pull the fungus off the walls. He cleaned the bathroom again and shoveled the fungus off the stairs. Repeatedly, he filled the wheelbarrow and dumped it outside. The fire burned steadily.

It took Michael three hours to clean the cabin and only when he was done, resting in the kitchen, sitting at the butcher-block table and drinking a bottle of beer, did he first see the fungus seeping under the cellar door. It grew rapidly before his eyes, twisting and turning, slipping across the tile floor like a snake. Michael grabbed the shovel and cut through the fungus at the door. The dismembered end continued across the tile with a life of its own.

He jerked open the cellar door to beat back the growth, but the grey fungus had filled the cellar, was jammed against the door, and when he opened the door it smothered him in an avalanche of mold.

Now it was everywhere. The cupboards burst open and the fungus flopped out and onto the counter. A tide of it pushed aside the food and shoved cans to the floor.

In the livingroom it grew along the rock fireplace and tumbled down the stairs. It spread across the floor, came up between the cracks in the oak floors. It grew around the tables and chairs and covered all the furniture with a grey dustcover of mold. It oozed from the center of the rolled-up rug, like pus from a sore. There was fungus on the ceiling, crawling towards the peak of the cabin. It was under foot. Michael slipped and slid as he ran from the house.

The fungus crawled along the rock foundation. It filled the deck, and under its weight the wooden supports gave way and the deck crashed to the ground. The pier again was covered and the grey mold came off the wood and across the new lawn, ripping the sod as it moved. It raced towards Michael like a tide.

Michael got the other can of gas from the station wagon. He went inside the house again and poured gas through the livingroom, splashing it against the wooden stairs, the pine walls. He ran into the kitchen and threw gas in a long, yellow spray at the cupboards, emptying the last of the can on the butcher-block table. When he dropped the can to the floor it sank into the thick fungus with a thud.

He was breathless, panting. His fingers shook and fumbled as he found matches, struck and tossed them at the gas-soaked mold. Flame roared up, ate away at the fungus, caught hold of the pine and oak and

walnut with a blaze. In the livingroom he tossed matches into the liquor cabinet and set fire to the bar. He lit up the stairs and the flame ran along the steps. He tore through the fungus covering the furniture and ignited the couch.

The fungus had grown deep and billowy. It was as if Michael was trying to stand on top a deflating parachute. He kept slipping and falling as the lumpy surface changed directions and expanded. The floor was a sea of mold. The front door was almost blocked from view. Grey smoke began to choke him. He tumbled towards the door and fungus swelled under foot and knocked him aside.

Michael found the shovel and used it to rip through the layers of wet mold. He cut a path, like digging a trench, to the outside. He ran for the station wagon. The fungus had reached the parking space and lapped at the wheels of the car.

Behind him the cabin blazed. Flames reached the shingled roof and leaped up the frame siding. The house burned like a bonfire. He spun the car around. The wheels slid over the slick mold like the car was caught on a field of ice, but he kept the station wagon on the gravel and tromped on the gas. The car fishtailed down the drive and onto the safety of the county road. Michael drove for his life.

"It's a total loss?" Barbara asked again, still confused by Michael's tale. Her blue saucer eyes looked puzzled.

Michael nodded. "In the rearview mirror I could see most of it in flames. I didn't have the courage to go back and check." He spoke with a new honesty and sense of awe.

"But to burn down our own home! Wasn't there some other way. . . ?" She stared at Michael. It was unbelievable. He had arrived at the apartment after midnight, trembling and incoherent. She had wanted to call a doctor, but he raged and struck her when she said he needed help. She cowed in the corner of the couch, shaking and frightened, as he paced the room and told her about the fungus and the fire.

"I tried to keep cleaning it with soap and water, but it kept. . ." He began to cry, deep, chest-rending sobs. She went quickly to him and smothered him against her breasts. She could smell the smoke in his hair, the bitter smell of wood that had smoldered in the rain.

"A smoke?" Barbara suggested. "It will calm you down." She rolled

them a joint. Her hands were trembling with excitement. It was the first time in years that he had hit her, and the blow had both frightened and excited her. Her skin tingled.

They passed the joint back and forth as they sat huddled on the couch, like two lone survivors. Michael, again, and in great detail and thoroughness, told about the fungus, and why he had to burn the cabin.

"I know you were absolutely right," Barbara kept saying to reassure him, but in the back of her mind, growing like a cancer, was her doubt. To stop her own suspicious thoughts and his now insistent explanations, she interrupted, "Darling. . ." And she reached to unbutton his shirt.

They did not make it to the bedroom. Michael slipped his hands inside her blouse, then he pulled her to the floor and took his revenge and defeat out on her. It was brief and violent and cathartic.

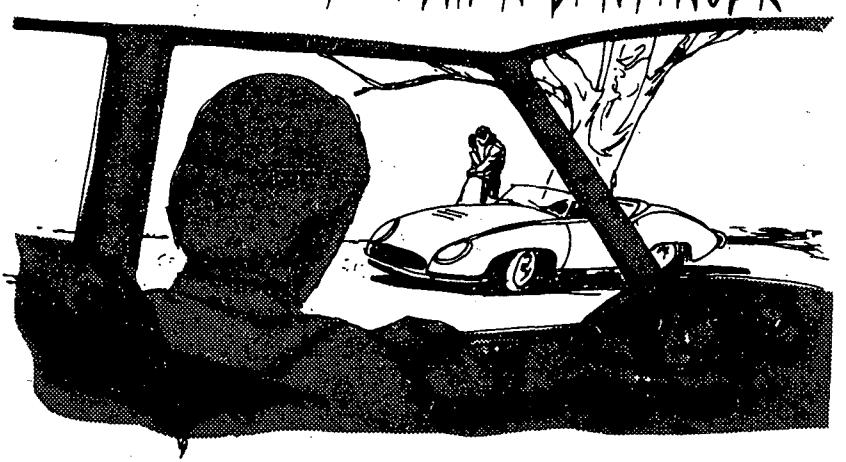
Michael held her tenderly, arms wrapped around her, hugging her to him. He turned her head and kissed her eyes. It was all right, she whispered. He was home and safe and she would take care of him.

Yes, Michael thought, everything was all right. He was home in the city and they would forget the mountains and the second home on the lake. He had his writing and he had her, and that was all that mattered. And then his lips touched the candle-grey fungus that grew in a thin, irregular patch more than twelve inches wide across her breasts like a bra.

As the poet penned, "I fear thy kisses, gentle maiden. . ."

THE JUDAS KISS

by STEPHEN DENTINGER



The big jet settled onto the runway at Heathrow Airport and braked to a stop. Gavage stared out the window for his first look at British soil and saw only the gradually lifting morning mists which had delayed their arrival for almost an hour. He passed through customs without difficulty, listing himself as a businessman on a twenty-four-hour visit. No one asked him to open his single suitcase, and even if they had there would have been no worry. The pistol and silencer were well

hidden, safe from any routine customs search. The X-ray machine at Kennedy could have spotted them, of course, but they only X-rayed carry-on bags.

He was anxious to reach the hotel, and hired a taxi for the fourteen-mile journey into London, through a misty countryside to the city's outskirts. At any other time he might have paused to examine more closely the sights of the historic city, but this time his mission was brief. He would be back in New York the following afternoon, and with luck most people would not even know he'd left.

It was still early—before ten—when Gavage checked into his hotel on Park Lane. There was no need to unpack his bag for the single night's stay, but he did take a few moments to quickly reassemble the pistol and silencer. He did not worry about taking it back through customs with him. It was on a one-way trip.

London in mid-June was a city of brightly cloudy skies and temperatures that climbed regularly into the low seventies. It was a city whose inhabitants could venture out of doors without their traditional umbrellas in relative safety, where girls abandoned their coats to reveal slim legs, and lovers strolled hand-in-hand through Hyde Park. Gavage liked what he saw.

The Spinning Wheel was only a few blocks' walk from the hotel, and he headed there after a quick breakfast of coffee and bath buns. It was force of habit that dictated his route through the narrow back streets of the city, and he found himself pausing occasionally to study the guide book he'd purchased at the airport.

Still, it was well before noon when he walked down the steps to the basement club, past a tired cleaning woman who eyed him questioningly. The main room of the casino would have done justice to Las Vegas, with a score of tables equipped for roulette, blackjack and dice. They were empty now, but as he walked between the green felt tops he saw that a light still burned over the single baccarat table at the back of the room. He pushed aside the traditional screens that granted privacy to the players and saw the big man sitting alone, counting through piles of pound notes.

"Mr. Charles?" he asked, speaking quietly.

The big man jerked nervously, his fingers almost going for a button at the table's edge. "How'd you get in here? Who are you?"

"I walked in and my name is Gavage. You sent for me."

"Oh." The man rose from behind the table. "Excuse me. I was running over last evening's receipts. I'm Chester Charles. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Gavage." He frowned a bit. "I suppose I was expecting an older man."

"There are no older men in this business," Gavage said. He pulled one of the chairs out and sat down. "I'm only here for a day, so it'll have to be tonight. Can you fill me in on the details?"

Chester Charles moved slowly, carrying the stacks of banknotes into the cashier's cage where he locked them away in an outsized wall safe. Then he came back to the table where Gavage waited and resumed his seat. "I want you to kill the Irishman," he said simply.

"The Irishman?"

"A fellow named Ernie O'Bern. He has some gambling interests here. You needn't know any more."

"Will he be available tonight?"

Chester Charles nodded. "I can tell you where to find him."

Gavage watched the man light a cigarette. He didn't smoke himself. Cigarette butts could be dangerous in his business. "Why did you bring me over for it?" he asked.

"Safer than somebody local," the Englishman told him. "Besides, I found something ironic in it. Back in 1920 the Irish imported Chicago gummen to assassinate English magistrates and policemen. They came by ship in those days, and were paid anywhere from four hundred to one thousand dollars. You come by plane, and pick up five thousand for killing an Irishman."

"I'm not a Chicago gunman," Gavage said quietly. He didn't share the Englishman's amusement. "Where will O'Bern be tonight?"

"Let's see. . .this is Tuesday. He'll be collecting, over at Battersea."

"Battersea?"

"The Fun Fair at Battersea Park, across the river. He gets a cut out of the penny gambling machines."

"That must add up to a lot."

"You'd be surprised. Sometimes those kids'll play by the hour." He paused to consider this. "And for me they're tomorrow's customers. I don't knock 'em."

"How will I know him?"

Charles sighed. "That's a problem. Here's a snapshot, but it's not

very good." He passed over a blurred photo of a nondescript man standing beside a mini-skirted blonde girl. "Could you recognize him from that?"

Gavage thought about it. "Not in the dark. And I work best in the dark." He took a slim tube from his inside pocket. "Will you be seeing him today?"

"The Irishman? I could arrange to."

He held up the tube. "Just a dab of this on his skin. It's invisible by daylight, but it has a nice glow in the darkness."

"How about on his coat? It would be easier."

"He might change his coat for tonight," Gavage said. He didn't like to take chances. "The skin is better. This stuff won't wash off right away."

The Englishman sighed. "All right, I can do it that way if you insist."

"And I'll want to see the area around Battersea. I doubt if you want to be seen in the area, but perhaps you have an assistant."

"Yes, yes." Now his hand did go to the button. He pressed it and they waited. Almost immediately a large man with a neatly trimmed beard appeared. "Send Jenny in," Charles told him, and the man retreated without a word.

Presently the screen was pushed aside once more and a girl with shoulder-length blonde hair joined them. Gavage didn't need any introduction to know it was the girl in the photo with Ernie O'Bern. She was young and handsome, with high cheekbones and a mocking sort of smile that played constantly about her lips. "You wanted me?" she asked, though Gavage judged she was in the habit of being summoned.

"Yes, Jenny. Mr. Gavage, meet Jenny Hampton, one of my employees." Gavage nodded, acknowledging her presence but not bothering to rise. He wasn't being paid to wonder about their relationship, but he speculated anyway.

"Pleased to meet you," the girl said. She might have meant it.

"Jenny will take you over to Battersea Park, show you exactly where he parks his car and picks up the money."

"You know the route?" Gavage asked, meaning more than he said.

"I know it. I've been the route with that Irishman."

Chester Charles picked up the tube of phosphorescent dye. "Could she put a bit of this on her lips?" he asked Gavage.

"I suppose so, if she's careful not to get it in her mouth. And puts

something like cold cream underneath so it'll come off easily afterwards." He didn't ask what the Englishman had in mind.

"Fine." Charles handed the tube to the girl. "You know what to do."

"I'll feel like Judas."

Charles gave a snort. "The Irishman is no Christ, believe me! You should know that better than any of us." He passed around some cigarettes from a crumpled pack, but Gavage declined. "Now drive this gentleman over to the Battersea Fun Fair and show him around. There can't be any mistakes."

Gavage blinked and stood up. "I don't make mistakes. Deliver the money to my hotel in the morning. I'll be on the noon plane for New York.

They shook hands. The Englishman's hand was cold and unfriendly.

"Your first trip to England?" the girl asked as she wheeled the little Vauxhaul around a corner.

"My first."

"Do you handle this sort of thing often?"

"What?"

"I mean—is this the way you make your living, back in America?"

He smiled a bit. "Sometimes I rob banks."

"No, seriously. I've never known anyone like you before."

He'd heard that same line from the first girl he ever had, a tired brunette on the fifth floor of a Brooklyn walk-up. "Haven't Charles or the Irishman ever killed anybody?"

"Not like. . .this." She headed across Albert Bridge and turned left into the green expanse of Battersea Park. "Only in the war. Everyone killed people in the war."

"The war was a long time ago." He stared out the window. "This is the place?"

"This is it." She pulled into a parking place. "We walk from here."

"This is the closest you can park to the Fun Fair?"

"Yes."

"So the Irishman will have to walk here with the money."

"That's right."

They strolled like lovers past the fountains and wading pools, down the flower-lined paths till they reached the turnstiles that marked the entrance to the amusement area. "Not many people," Gavage said.

"It'll be crowded tonight. You can see what it is—all wild rides and fun houses and bumper cars. With coin machines that take mostly pennies. Like any amusement park."

He nodded, inspecting a complicated dog-race device that took a sixpence and paid off handsomely. "Back in the States we wouldn't allow gambling. Something about the corruption of youth. But if this is legal, why does O'Bern get a payoff?"

"Heavens, it's nothing crooked! He just owns part of—how do you say it?—the action."

"How much money will he collect tonight?"

She gave a little shrug. "Ten, twenty pounds. It isn't a big thing."

"But big enough to make it look like robbery if the money's taken," Gavage commented.

"You're clever. Chester wouldn't have thought of that."

"He's paying me to think for him. What about the glow stuff? Can you kiss him easily, without suspicion?"

"Of course."

"While it's still daylight, so he won't notice the glow."

"Yes." She led him by the office, showed him where the Irishman would pick up his share of the take. "Sometimes he goes on one or two of the rides," she said. "He's just a big kid."

"And he'll walk along this path back to his car?"

"He always does."

Gavage glanced up, searching among the leafy branches for the streetlight he knew would be there. He glanced both ways on the path, making certain no one else was near. Then he slipped the silenced pistol from his jacket and fired a quick shot, almost without taking aim. The overhead light shattered with a tinkling of glass.

"You plan ahead," Jenny remarked.

"I have to." He was satisfied now. The area would be dark, with only the glow on the Irishman's face to identify him and serve as a target.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"Yes. After you kiss him, get out of the area. I don't want to shoot you by mistake."

"Don't worry."

She drove him back to the hotel and dropped him off. It was still only mid-afternoon, and he had some time to kill. He strolled along

Piccadilly, glancing in the shop windows, giving little thought to the night's activity. It was just another job for him, unique only because it had brought him to a foreign country.

Ernie O'Bern would emerge from the office at the Fun Fair around ten P.M., walk down the darkened path to his car, and find Gavage waiting. The glowing spot on his face would identify him, and a quick shot with the silenced pistol would finish it. Then to remove a few pounds from his wallet, and walk away quickly. Armed robbery was rare in London, but he knew the police would accept the obvious. They always did. And he would be on the noon plane.

He considered the strong possibility that the Irishman himself would be armed, but there would be no danger. He would be in darkness, while the Irishman would be a glowing target. Nothing could go wrong. Nothing? Well, she might kiss the wrong man—but that didn't bother him. He'd killed the wrong person before in his lifetime. That part was the girl's worry. The streetlight? It would be reported broken, but they certainly wouldn't get around to repairing it before the following day.

Gavage strolled over as far as Trafalgar Square and stood in the June sun watching the pigeons. He stood there for a long time, even after the sun had vanished behind fluffy layers of cloud.

Because he was a man who didn't take chances, Gavage followed Jenny Hampton from *The Spinning Wheel* to the Battersea Fun Fair early that evening. He parked his car beneath some trees, and watched from a distance while she met a dark-haired man with whom she talked for several moments. Then she kissed him quickly on the cheek and returned to her car. Gavage couldn't see clearly, but he was certain it was the Irishman.

The man waited till Jenny had driven away, then locked his own car and started up the path to the Fun Fair. The time was just after eight o'clock, and it was still daylight. There were too many strollers about for Gavage to risk a shot. He would have to wait till after dark as planned.

He followed along through the thickening crowd of young couples and teenagers, past girls with swinging hair and occasional old men who seemed lost and out of place. Now the lights were going on, brilliant colored lights to compete with the cloudy evening sky, reflecting

off pink-cheeked youths and sailors on shore leave. It might have been Palisades or Coney Island.

The Irishman went into the office—early, ahead of schedule—and stayed there a long time. The silenced pistol was hot and heavy against Gavage's ribs as he waited. The thing was reminding him now of a job he'd done up in Westchester once, at Rye Beach. He wasn't using a silencer in those days and he'd had to wait until a fireworks display covered the sound of the shots. He'd thought it must have been a good way to go, seeing all those blazing colored lights and sparklers and then—nothing.

Finally the Irishman reappeared and walked slowly among the booths, patting his breast pocket lightly. He had the money. He paused to roll a few balls, won a coconut and told them to keep it. Finally he entered one of the darkened wooden buildings, riding in a little car that promised a trip around the world. Gavage followed in the next car, and sighed with relief when he saw the glowing spot leap into brilliance on the darkened face before him. Jenny had done her job well.

They rounded a corner in the dark, rolled past a lighted panorama, and Gavage slipped the gun from under his coat. Here, now, a quick shot at that glowing spot, and it would be all over.

But then it would be a planned killing, obvious to anyone. Later, on the darkened path, it could still look like a robbery and a nervous trigger finger. He slipped the gun back under his coat.

Presently the Irishman left the car and walked through an indoor arcade past lines of coin machines and tattered fortune-telling gimmicks. There was another entrance ahead, something called the Cave of the Winds, and Ernie O'Bern entered it. Gavage followed close behind, aware only of the crowds and the colored lights that seemed to surround him.

He remembered the Cave of the Winds from that afternoon. It had an exit on the path leading to the parking lot. The Irishman was on his way home by a shortcut. The cavern itself was a combination of rock and papier-mâché, with ultraviolet lighting and long stretches of strolling in darkness past dripping waterfalls. It was a place for lovers or small children.

Gavage glanced at his watch. Now it was five minutes before ten. When O'Bern stepped out of this place, onto the darkened path, he

would fire. He slipped the gun out once more, holding it close to his side. There were few people in the cave, and by the time they had reached the end there were only the two of them. The Irishman must realize now that he was being followed, for the glowing spot on his cheek kept bobbing as he turned. But no matter—when they stepped outside, Gavage would be hidden by the darkness. O'Bern would never get a shot off in time.

There was a sort of curtain, a thick drape, at the end of the concession, and his target disappeared through it. Gavage knew it had to be now, because the Irishman might be waiting for him. He crouched down and went through the drape at a run, feeling the cool outer air on his face.

It was still daylight.

The Irishman fired once and Gavage felt the hot burn of pain through his guts. There weren't even any fireworks.

The Spinning Wheel closed at three, and Chester Charles was alone with Jenny in the office when the Irishman entered. He held his own gun in one hand, and the American's silenced pistol in the other.

"What. . . ?"

"Surprised? You two should be. You can see I'm still alive."

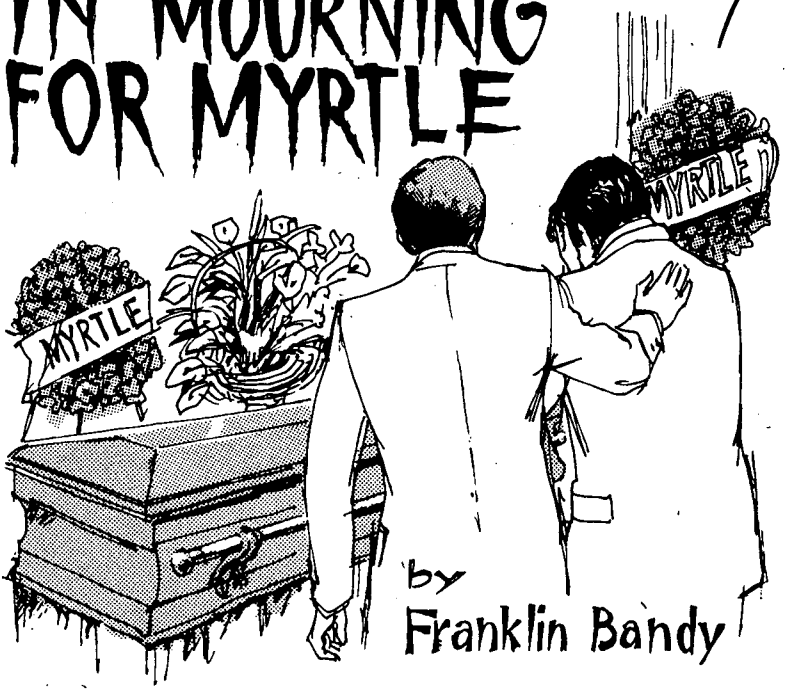
Jenny went to him but he slashed her away with the gun. "Foolish, importing an American gunman to kill me. Should have done the job yourself. Jenny kissed me, like in the poem, and left a little glow on my cheek—but your gunman was still back home in New York. He didn't know that London is eleven degrees latitude north of New York. In mid-June, it's daylight here till after ten."

"What are you going to do?" Charles croaked.

The Irishman only smiled. It seemed as if he'd been waiting for this a long time. When Charles made a move for his desk, he squeezed both triggers at once.

All he had wanted was to be left alone. . .

IN MOURNING FOR MYRTLE



by Franklin Bandy

If you're a Rhodesian Ridgeback you may look pretty cute to some dog lovers and other Ridgebacks. If you're a human and you not only look like a Rhodesian Ridgeback but you think you're cute, you have a problem.

Myrtle Grenfall Loomis had this problem most of her thirty-nine years. She now lay in her coffin while her husband, Jack Loomis, wept. He was inconsolable, having just inherited eight million dollars.

Jason Grenfall, Myrtle's brother, put his arm around Loomis's shoulder and squeezed sympathetically. "I know how you feel, Jack, but try to pull yourself together, eh?"

Loomis sobbed louder. He was a handsome slender man, almost ten years' Myrtle's junior. He had widely spaced blue eyes, close-cropped black hair edged with premature grey, and a big friendly mouth that smiled at the slightest excuse. Now the big mouth was twisted, emitting sounds that might have come from a fretful baby.

Embarrassed, Jason gave Loomis a final pat and moved away to speak to those who had come to pay their last respects. Jason himself had the Ridgeback look. It is said that humans are attracted to animals they resemble, and this was certainly true of Jason. One of his hobbies was breeding Rhodesian Ridgebacks on his estate in Connecticut. Jason's Ridgeback looks were no handicap, however. As chief custodian of the Grenfall assets, reputed to be in the neighborhood of a billion dollars, he was considered acutely handsome by a great many women.

After the funeral, Jason persuaded the weeping Loomis to retire to his own apartment. Their two apartments occupied the entire floor of a luxury cooperative on Fifth Avenue overlooking Central Park. The Grenfalls had fifteen rooms, and Loomis six. The apartments shared a long terrace but Jason could not lead Loomis home via this route because Myrtle had constructed a thick barrier of potted evergreens to provide privacy for their portion.

Jason settled the distraught Loomis into a comfortable chair, poured him a stiff Scotch, murmured some more words of sympathy and returned to the guests who had accompanied them back to Jason's apartment from the funeral.

Alone, Loomis's grief whimpered to quick silence. He got up and paced the spacious living room, pausing at the open terrace doors to listen to the voices, some high-pitched, some rumbling, coming from the terrace beyond the evergreens. So far, so good. The autopsy had revealed nothing, as his research had indicated would be the case. He could think of nothing more to fear from the police, as concerned as they might be at a comparatively penniless real-estate salesman with an ugly but rich wife becoming a widower worth eight million dollars. There was no other woman in Loomis's life. He had been known to be a devoted husband.

He had plenty to fear, however, from Jason Grenfall. It was no secret that one of the many Grenfall companies had close ties with organized crime. If Jason suspected him, Loomis could end up six feet under a pile of chicken manure on a remote Jersey farm.

Jason was not an easy man to read. He apparently suspected nothing, and accepted Loomis's grief as genuine. Loomis decided his mourning period would be long and circumspect. No girls, no fun. Black armbands on all his jackets. Church frequently to pray for Myrtle's soul. Sober sorrow would be the image for a full year.

Jack Loomis had been content with Myrtle, and had even been faithful to her. In their bedroom, in the dark, she performed with strenuous adoration, and he was not conscious of her being ugly.

It was only when she began to threaten his way of life that Loomis began to be tempted. His needs were simple, but he was unshakable in his determination to protect them. He had gone through school at the top of the list of outstanding non-achievers. To say he lacked drive was a kind overstatement. He had never even had his ignition turned on.

To compensate for these negative qualities, he had been endowed with personal charm, good looks, reasonably high intelligence and an outstanding talent for lively conversation.

His job as a real-estate salesman suited him perfectly. Each morning he sauntered from home to office, drank coffee and read the newspaper, then passed the time of day with the other salesmen. If a customer came in and it was Loomis's "up," that was fine with him. He liked passing the time of day with customers. He enjoyed showing apartments, demonstrating his expertise in discussing neighborhoods, large center halls, walk-in closets, the necessity of two and a half baths, the size of a kitchen, the superiority of a dishwasher, the uses one could make of a tiny terrace. If a customer was in the mood, Loomis could proceed from apartment problems to politics, sports, space travel and the dangers of monosodium glutamate. His job gave him ample time to read *The Times* from cover to cover. He had little ambition, but he was certainly well informed.

Occasionally he sold a condominium and made a good commission. But he was by no means a star salesman. Some months he barely justified his desk space. Loomis loved talkative customers. He was willing to chat for an hour, even when experience told him in the first five

minutes that he had a shopper who was merely killing time.

Myrtle threatened to change all this. She insisted that he step into a rightful position in the top echelons of the Grenfall conglomerate. After all, six million of their assets were tied up in the Grenfall enterprises, and he should be interested enough to watch over them, nurture them, fertilize them and make them grow. When you are guardian of a considerable fortune, it is your duty to expand it.

This philosophy was incomprehensible to Loomis. With two million dollars in tax-free bonds yielding about ten thousand dollars a month income, he couldn't understand why she worried about the other six. Let Jason worry about it.

Myrtle nagged him for months. She interfered with his favorite TV programs. The beer he liked to drink with his programs even began to give him acid indigestion. Myrtle would pace the living room, distracting him, then whirl at him.

"You do love me, don't you, Jack?"

"Of course I do, dearest!"

"Then why won't you? People say you just married me for my money."

Leering, he said, "You know better than that, you gorgeous sexpot."

Being an old-fashioned heiress, Myrtle blushed. "But people think—"

"Myrtle, look. Jason's businesses are Greek to me. I wouldn't know the difference between a tax shelter and a parameter."

"You'd learn. You're very bright."

Loomis had nightmares about profit centers, short-term bills, gold futures, tax carrybacks and tax carryforwards, profit-taking, materials shortages, market momentum and interest rates. He could see himself becoming another Jason, bringing home an attache case filled with work every night. It was either give up Myrtle or adjust to a future that took all the joy from his life. He decided to give up Myrtle.

He had meant to give up Myrtle in a perfectly straightforward way, returning to a studio apartment in keeping with his erratic income. Then the opportunity to give up Myrtle in an unorthodox way presented itself. Her doctor had prescribed a drug which could be dangerous if not taken in the exact quantity indicated. Since it was eliminated quickly from the system, an autopsy could not determine the exact amount taken. In short, an extra pill crushed and stirred up in Myrtle's whisky sour would enable him to give up Myrtle without

giving up her assets. At the time he had completely forgotten about Jason Grenfall's remote link with organized crime.

As the days passed, although Loomis did not find his mourning duties onerous, life had become intolerably boring. After a respectable week of absence he returned to his job where, after accepting the condolences of his co-workers, he hoped to relax and enjoy some good talk. The good, carefree, rambling conversations he had anticipated did not develop. They had read about Myrtle in the newspapers. He was now a man worth eight million dollars. They fawned over him, flattered him, bored him. He was getting so much respect that no one could let down his or her hair in talking to him.

To make matters worse, a reporter tracked him down and wrote a feature story about the unassuming multimillionaire who preferred to continue in his job as a real-estate salesman earning less than fifteen thousand dollars a year.

After the story appeared, many of his "customers" turned out to be people anxious to dip into his eight million. Inventors, producers, stockbrokers, representatives of charitable institutions, even men with maps indicating the exact location of sunken treasure paraded in to look at apartments. Along about the second bathroom they would begin their pitch.

One evening he sat on his terrace, enjoying a balmy fall evening between favorite television programs. On the other side of the evergreen shield between their apartments he heard Jason talking to his wife Samantha.

"Old Jack is still taking it pretty hard."

"Yes," said Samantha. "Who would have dreamed Myrtle could inspire such devotion?"

"Myrtle had good qualities," said Jason. He sighed deeply. "At least we won't have the problem of taking Jack into management. That would be some chore."

"I can imagine."

"Not that he's stupid. He just lacks motivation."

Samantha said, "He must be lonely, poor boy. He used to be fun at parties."

Jason grunted. "I still can't understand how it happened. Dr. Jones said the chances of the prescribed dosage having that effect are one in a million."

"Maybe she popped two pills absent-mindedly," said Samantha. "She always took *two* aspirin, *two* vitamin pills, *two* tranquilizers."

Jason cleared his throat. "I don't see her doing that. She knew this drug was very dangerous."

Loomis crept back to his apartment, trembling.

As a matter of fact, Myrtle had been supercareful about this medication. The doctor's warnings had made her nervous. One evening she had dropped the pill bottle. It bounced on the carpet, spilling a few—four to be exact. Jack had scooped up the bottle and picked up the pills, holding them in his palm.

"Throw them away," said Myrtle.

He headed for the wastebasket next to the tall glass-fronted secretary.

"Flush them," said Myrtle. "They're too dangerous to leave around."

On the way to the bathroom the idea was born.

Now Jason's remarks unnerved him. He went to one of the large bedroom closets and lifted a dusty hatbox from the top shelf. It had once contained a Borsalino, purchased during a week of affluence. The hat, long out of style, had gone to whatever charity Myrtle contributed clothes that were no longer needed.

Loomis untied the thick black cord and lifted out a small brass mortar and pestle. The very fact of his owning them was ridiculous, and he cringed as he recalled the circumstances leading to their presence. One night when he thought Myrtle was sleeping he tried to break up one of her pills by cutting it into small pieces. It was granite-hard. Finally it had cracked, half of it skittering into the wet sink. He had put a second pill into a cup and tried to break it up with the handle of a heavy silver table knife. After several whacks it broke, along with the cup. The noise had brought Myrtle to the kitchen. He hastily swept up the pieces and dumped them into the garbage can.

"Broke a cup," he said.

"It sounded like you broke it four times," said Myrtle.

"It bounced."

The next day he had passed an antique store on Madison Avenue and saw the mortar and pestle in the window. He paid forty-five dollars for them and smuggled them into the apartment under a raincoat draped over his arm.

Once the pill was successfully powdered, he planned to dump the mortar and pestle down the garbage shute. The basement compacter would package them neatly in a solid block of garbage. Unfortunately, the compacter had broken down, and the part needed to repair it was not easily obtainable. The building employees were shoveling the garbage out into big green plastic bags. Loomis was afraid they might notice, even retrieve the mortar and pestle.

He had decided he would take them over to the East River. There were spots along the promenade above the FDR Drive from where, at night, he could toss them in the water without being noticed.

It was a tiresome walk to the East River. If he went by cab there would be a record of it. He could go by bus, but he had to have the proper change and he wasn't sure whether the crosstown bus ran on 72nd Street or 79th Street. So temporarily he had hidden the mortar and pestle in the Borsalino box. Every night he resolved that the next day he would take them to the East River.

Now he stared at the gleaming brass with the realization that hiding them was evidence of guilt. As with *The Purloined Letter*, they should be in the open, in some perfectly natural place. He found a spot on the bottom shelf of a glass cabinet in the dining room which contained a jumble of collector's items—Georgian silver mugs, Royal Doulton figurines, Steuben glass sculptures and other less recognizable pieces.

Tomorrow he would definitely take them to the East River.

A few days later Samantha came to visit him. She was Jason's second wife, some fifteen years younger than he, and still in her twenties. Her long golden hair gleamed and, being related to the Grenfalls only by marriage, she had none of the Rhodesian Ridgeback look. She was, however, leading a sleekly groomed Ridgeback.

"Her name is Anastasia. She's one of Iphigenia's litter," Samantha said. "Jason thought she might be company for you."

Loomis patted Anastasia, who growled threateningly. "That was very kind of him."

"She's a little touchy," said Samantha, "but adorable."

"I can see that."

"When she gets to know you, she'll love you. You won't find a more devoted animal."

Loomis said, "She's beautiful."

Samantha unhooked the leash and tossed it on a chair.

"Would you care for a drink?" Loomis asked.

She glanced at her watch. "Thanks, no time this trip. We're off to the theater."

Loomis saw her to the door. When he returned, Anastasia leapt to one of the sofas and crouched, staring at him resentfully. She was, Loomis noticed, occupying Myrtle's favorite seat.

He'd have to lay in some dog food. Loomis had no servants. The Grenfalls' maids cleaned the place, and Loomis and Myrtle had never had a cook—Myrtle preferred to do her own cooking. Since her death, Loomis had eaten his meals in a nearby restaurant, sidestepping Jason's suggestion that he hire a cook. He was not yet accustomed to being a multimillionaire. The thought of paying someone two to three hundred dollars a week just to cook for him appalled him. He could eat in a good restaurant for less and not be tied down to set hours and displays of temperament from a servant. His larder contained nothing but beer, instant coffee, cheese, cold cuts, crackers and potato chips.

He looked at Anastasia on the sofa and wondered if she had been fed. He went to the kitchen and put some bits of cheese and salami in a bowl, then poured himself a glass of beer. Anastasia followed him, watching as he placed the bowl on the floor. She sniffed the salami and cheese, then turned away and began to whine and paw his leg.

She reminded him so much of Myrtle! Myrtle had loved beer. He selected another bowl and half filled it with beer. Anastasia lapped it up eagerly. When she finished, she trotted back to the sofa, belching softly on the way.

Later Loomis was awakened from a deep sleep by nibbling on his ear lobe. Some nights the woman was insatiable, but Jack was not a man to let a girl down. He reached sleepily for Myrtle. His hand encountered thick pelt, a furious growl, and snapping teeth.

He exploded from the other side of the bed, banging his ankle against the night table. Hopping around, wringing his nipped hand, he finally found the light switch. Anastasia was ensconced on Myrtle's side of the bed. She was glaring at him indignantly and emitting low-throated growls.

He looked at his hand. She hadn't broken the skin but it felt like it.

"Come on, get out of my bed, damn it," he said.

She stared at him, growling.

He slept the rest of the night on the studio couch in his den.

In most ways Anastasia was reassuringly like an ordinary dog. She brought him her leash and begged to be taken for a walk. Outside she darted here and there delightedly sniffing lamp poles, trees, fire hydrants and interesting bits of debris. Definitely not Myrtle.

But back in the apartment she became more like Myrtle every day. She completely took over his bed, consigning him permanently to the studio couch in the den. The couch was not comfortable.

He tried tactfully to return her to Jason, pointing out that he was gone all day and Anastasia would be happier in a place where she had more companionship.

Jason was offended. "You don't *like* Anastasia."

"On the contrary," Loomis said, panicky, "I love Anastasia. I just want to do what's best for her."

Jason said, "The servants are around during the day. They play with her and take her for walks." The subject was closed.

That evening Loomis's mind raced, considering his alternatives. He could rent another apartment and pretend to live in this one, appearing briefly in the evenings only long enough to feed Anastasia and take her for a walk. No good. The Grenfalls' servants and the apartment staff were a nosy, gossipy bunch, particularly the doorman. Jason would soon know he was actually living somewhere else and would assume he had taken up with a girl friend.

Suppose Anastasia met with a fatal accident? Say she jerked the leash out of his hand and ran out into heavy traffic, chasing a squirrel? Jason would be furious, but then accidents did happen.

Come on, he told himself, Anastasia was nothing but a dog. She needed affection. He baby-talked to her soothingly and tried to pet her. She bit him hard, drawing blood.

Loomis washed the wound, sprayed it with antiseptic and applied a band-aid. He went to bed apprehensively. Myrtle had tasted human blood. Suppose she went for his jugular some night while he was sleeping?

The next evening he took Anastasia some distance from the apartment, unfastened her leash and waited until a string of green lights had traffic roaring past on Fifth Avenue. He darted some ten feet into the street, turned and ran back, almost getting hit.

Anastasia sat on the curb watching him with interest.

He walked on up Fifth Avenue, Anastasia following closely. Central Park was just across the street. If a squirrel appeared, Anastasia might forget herself. At 105th Street he was held up by a seedy-looking man in dirty clothes who carried a sparkling clean knife. While he was checking Loomis's wallet Anastasia strolled over and licked his hand.

The next day at the office Loomis was unusually silent. He was becoming a nervous wreck, imagining a situation that just couldn't be. Anastasia was a dog. He would not be intimidated by a dog. Aside from the minimal attentions she required, he would simply ignore her existence. And he would keep her the hell out of his bed. It was ridiculous, his having to sleep on a lumpy, uncomfortable couch when his own bed was so comfortable.

On his way home he bought a sturdy chain-link leash.

When they returned from their walk that evening Loomis did not unfasten the new leash. He led Anastasia over to Myrtle's sofa and secured the end of the leash tightly around the sofa leg. A monstrous Victorian piece, it weighed at least five hundred pounds. Seventy pounds of dog could not drag it far.

Although he was ordinarily a moderate drinker, Loomis celebrated his new policy by drinking Scotch instead of beer with his TV programs. When Anastasia growled and barked to distract him, he yelled at her to shut up and went over and swatted her with a rolled-up newspaper.

After six sturdy drinks he grew tired of television and turned it off. Smirking, he waved goodnight to Anastasia and headed for the bedroom, *his* bedroom. Anastasia barked indignantly.

She had left quite a bit of hair around. Loomis changed the sheets and crawled into what was now a truly luxurious bed. Sighing contentedly, he let his mind go blank.

He had hardly gone to sleep when he felt nibbling at his ear lobe. He leapt up and turned on the light. Anastasia was lying on the bed growling at him. She had managed to squeeze her head through the collar.

Loomis went wearily to the living room and poured himself another large Scotch. Anastasia followed him, her lips curled back over her large incisors. He watched numbly as she began to pace the floor slowly, just like Myrtle.

She stopped to bark at him.

"Sh, Myrtle, for God's sake," he said.

Anastasia continued to pace.

Loomis said, "Myrtle, I just want you to know I'm sorry."

Anastasia barked.

"I wouldn't have done it if you'd only let well enough alone."

Anastasia paced, growling angrily.

Loomis poured himself another drink. "I loved you, Myrtle. Don't blame me. You brought it all on yourself."

Anastasia crept toward him on her belly, growling.

Loomis got up and, staggering slightly, went to the kitchen. He returned carrying a large butcher knife. "Myrtle, I swear to God if you bite me again, I'm going to *kill* you," he said, enunciating each word carefully.

Anastasia went back to her sofa.

He dozed in the chair until morning, waking frequently, once in a cold sweat, having dreamed that Myrtle was leaping at his throat. Anastasia slept soundly.

In the morning Loomis went to work dry-mouthed and hungover. He was beginning to hate his job and the day went slowly. Finally, about midafternoon, he left the office and went to the bar of an expensive hotel a block away.

When the big, Stetson-hatted Texan on the next stool began to talk to him, Loomis listened with skeptical courtesy. The man claimed to own the mineral rights for a field that tests had proved conclusively to be rich in oil. All he needed was two or three hundred thousand dollars to bring in the first well and make him even richer than he already was. He was a handsome, charming man in his late fifties and immaculately groomed. He laid his fawn-colored Stetson on the bar and said, "My name's Carruthers P. LeBow, son. Can I buy you a drink?"

"You're on," Loomis said, "thank you."

"Jack Daniels and branch for me," said LeBow to the bartender.

"Grants on the rocks," said Loomis.

Alone in the city, at loose ends between business appointments, LeBow was delighted to have company. "Bein' semi-retired, I have a lot of time on my hands," he said, and described some of the things he did to occupy his days back home. As an honorary deputy sheriff, he spent a lot of time chasing flying saucers. There had been numerous

sightings around Amarillo, not so many in recent years of course, but in the early days he had had some hair-raising experiences.

Loomis listened, fascinated. He had read everything he could get his hands on about flying saucers. He was convinced the government was holding back information, to keep people from panicking. "Go on," he said.

"I had the old Benz up to a hundred and twenty," said LeBow, "and let me tell you, that thing got away with *incredible* speed. A big ship with lights shinin' from oblong windows one minute, a couple of seconds later it was nothin' but a pinpoint of light in the sky."

Loomis mentioned several cases he had read about which seemed irrefutable, the observers having been highly intelligent, experienced pilots.

"An' you haven't read *half* the story," LeBow said, ordering another round.

Over fresh drinks, he explained that his experiences with flying saucers had led him to a study of the occult, psychic phenomena, extrasensory perception, clairvoyance and telepathy. He conversed regularly with his dead wife through a medium in Houston. Lately he had begun to develop the power himself. On two occasions she had spoken to him through their cook, who was a completely illiterate woman with a very small vocabulary. It was his wife's voice, without the slightest doubt.

Loomis was ecstatic. LeBow was a great drinking companion.

"I feel I have this power to become a medium myself," LeBow added, "an' I intend to cultivate it."

"That's fascinating," Loomis said. "You know, my wife is gone too, and I have this problem. I think her spirit has taken possession of my dog. I think she's trying to tell me something." It occurred to him in a blurry sort of way that what Myrtle was trying to tell him was not for public consumption. Nevertheless it was too interesting a phenomenon not to tell his new trustworthy friend. He described how Anastasia went around the apartment behaving like Myrtle. He was sure it wasn't just his imagination.

LeBow was wide-eyed with interest. "Son, this is really *somethin'*. Here you are right now involved in a psychic phenomenon! I must see that dawg!"

Loomis shrugged. "Maybe it is just my imagination."

LeBow shook his head. "Don't you believe it for a minute, son. I can sense that we're onto somethin' big here."

They took a cab to Loomis's apartment. Loomis opened the door and clicked on the lights.

"She probably won't do anything while you're around," he said, "but there she is, sitting in Myrtle's favorite seat, glaring at us."

Anastasia growled from deep in her throat.

LeBow went over to examine her close to, a bit unsteady on his feet.

"Careful, she bites," said Loomis.

LeBow backed away.

The front door chimes sounded.

Loomis lurched back to the door and opened it. Jason entered, carrying a manila folder.

"Hi, Jack," he said. "I saw your lights reflected on the terrace. I need your signature on a couple of papers."

Loomis backed away, blinking. He turned to LeBow. "Carruthers, this is my brother-in-law, Jason Grenfall. Jason, this is Carruthers LeBow."

They shook hands. "Jason Grenfall," said LeBow thoughtfully. "Grenfall Industries?"

Jason smiled. "LeBow Petroleum?"

The two tycoons eyed each other, pleased at their mutual importance.

Loomis poured drinks. A stiff bourbon for LeBow, hearty Scotches for himself and Jason.

Sipping his drink, LeBow explained the reason for his visit to Jason, glancing curiously at Anastasia frequently as he spoke.

Jason lit a cigarette. "This is fascinating, Jack. Why didn't you tell me?"

Loomis shrugged. "It seemed so silly. I can't be sure it's not my imagination."

Jason chuckled. "So that's why you tried to give Anastasia back to me."

LeBow said, "I would like to try my powers as a medium to get to the bottom of this situation."

Jason said to Loomis, "You think Myrtle is trying to communicate with you through Anastasia?"

LeBow held up his hand. "Please," he said, "quiet. I feel the power

creepin' over me. I must reach out for Myrtle." He breathed deeply. "Fetch me some favorite possession of hers."

Loomis stared blankly at Jason.

Jason snapped his fingers. "The Steuben fish. She loved it." He hurried to the dining room.

In a moment he was back, carrying the gleaming crystal fish in one hand. In the other he held the brass mortar and pestle.

LeBow said, "Quickly. I'm slippin' away."

Jason handed him the fish, which LeBow cradled on his lap. Almost instantly he was snoring softly.

Jason turned to Loomis. "Where in hell did these come from?" he asked, thrusting the mortar and pestle at Loomis.

Loomis shook his head. "How should I know? Myrtle must have bought them. I don't recall ever seeing them before."

Jason said, "I doubt that very much. That cabinet was especially reserved for antiques and expensive things *I* bought Myrtle."

Loomis peered at them unconvincingly. "They look antique."

"The hell they do," said Jason.

Loomis shrugged helplessly.

"I think *you* bought them. You bought them to crush that extra pill you slipped her."

"No!"

"I think we'll find your fingerprints on them. And I think when we check them we'll find the store where you bought them and the date of sale."

Loomis's cheeks, flushed from the heat of too many drinks, paled.

Jason wrapped a clean white handkerchief around the mortar and pestle and walked to the door.

"I'll sue you for slander!" Loomis shouted with bravado.

Jason left, slamming the door.

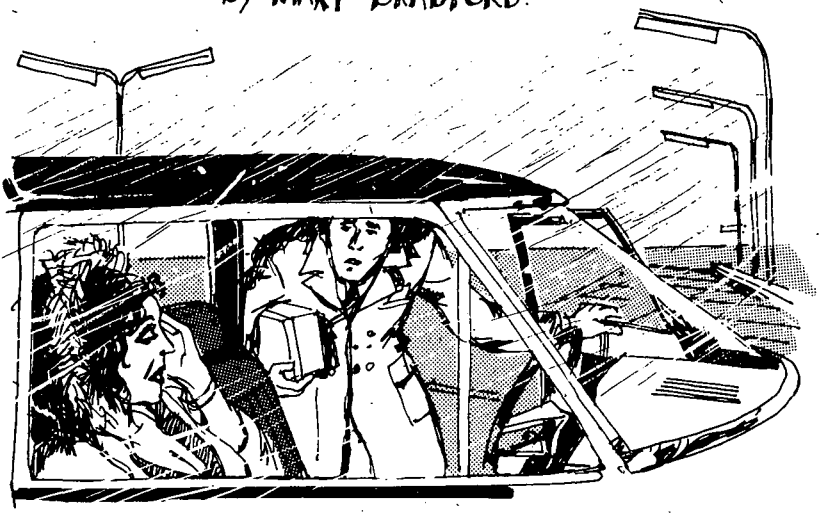
Now the only sound in the room came from LeBow, his snores like the soft put-put of a dying lawnmower.

Loomis sat back and reviewed his options. And of the few he had, only one seemed to have any foundation in reality. He sighed and decided to make friends with the idea. There could be compensations in prison life, after all—a good night's sleep, no competition and no pets allowed.

Holiday cheer can lead to a dismal aftermath. . .

OFFICE PARTY

by MARY BRADFORD



Everett Willis left the main entrance of the industrial controls department at dusk after the Thanksgiving party at the office. He had hated being there, but it was the annual turkey-and-basket-of-cheer raffle and he had to oversee it. He had tried to stop the practice this year but everyone protested. Now the party was over—but the night wasn't.

It was sleeting a fine coat of ice on the vast parking lot for three hundred company cars. Everyone else had gone home. Willis stayed to

the end to make sure no one had passed out behind the Xerox machine. It was always a little lonesome finding your car the only one left, he thought, and a little eerie. His car was parked in the middle of the lot.

But one thing had been a master stroke this night. He smiled to himself. And it was all wrapped up inside the small grey cardboard box he was carrying close to his side. The box contained the kickback payoffs from the shipping crew he had caught selling company goods after circumventing inventory records. The office party had been the perfect night to split the cash he knew they'd received that afternoon. Now he could meet his new car payments and the mounting credit card bills that snowballed in each month.

The sodium lights cast a strange pall over the lot as he hurried toward his car. He waved goodnight to the security guard as he passed by the old man whose head was bundled up in a scarf against the biting cold. It would be three-quarters of an hour before he got home where his wife was waiting dinner and his eldest son was waiting impatiently for the car.

His son would leave early and after dinner his wife would walk the two blocks to Walnut Lane to baby-sit for her sister for a few hours. His two younger children, as usual, would be glued to the TV set in the family room. Willis would put the money in the metal box in the locked cabinet above his tool bench in the basement.

He opened the door on the driver's side, placing the box carefully on the back seat. He started to slide into the seat when he noticed a large woman slumped on the passenger seat. Startled, he jumped back out.

"For God's sake, who are you? What are you doing here?"

The woman pulled herself up to a sitting position. She had wild, unkempt black hair and was wearing a green polyester pantsuit which she overflowed like molten lava. She had on a green parka jacket with a hood of ratty-like fur framing her face. She was very, very drunk. "You take me where I want to go or I'll scream. I'll scream that Everett Willis attacked me in the plant's parking lot and the security guard'll come running."

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded, getting back into the car out of the hard-driving sleet and wind.

"Who am I? That's a good question. Whom am I?"

She turned full face toward Willis who recoiled from smell of cheap alcohol.

"I don't know who I am. But I know where I want to go. Mr. Boyd of marketing put me in this car. Mr. Boyd said you were a great guy and would see that I got home. That was not a nice thing to do," she broke out tearfully. "He should have taken me home himself, he should have. You take me to Mr. Boyd's house and we'll tell him so himself, the two of us."

Willis swore under his breath—Stan Boyd, the office clown. He'd get even with Boyd if it was the last thing he did. My God, he thought, of all nights for this to happen. He had the box with him. He had to get it home. And now that clown, Boyd, had dumped this on him.

"Why didn't someone take you home? What happened?"

"We were having a party like yours in Building A, waiting for the raffle drawing and some drinks were passed around. You know how it is at those parties. And they had the raffle and you know I never won anything in my whole life, not even when I was a kid, and you know what, Mr. Willis of industrial controls? Yes, I know you. I read the employees' newsletter faithfully, *very faithfully*. You are in charge of shipping, you coach a Little League baseball team, you're on the industrial controls bowling team, and you're a Sunday school teacher. You have a wife and three children—one, two, three—and you have been with the company for ten years—one, two, three, four. . ."

Willis exploded. "Okay, you know all about me. What about you? I don't remember seeing you around, Miss, or is it Mrs.? What's your name and why did that clown, Boyd, bring you here?"

"I was telling you. I had never won anything in my whole life and you know what—I had to win that damn turkey! Now what the hell do I want with a twenty-pound turkey. I live alone. I don't need a twenty-pound turkey. I need. . ."

She tossed her head back and laughed. "You know I left that turkey on top of the file case and after this three-day holiday it will be a little ripe, don't you think so, Mr. Willis of industrial controls? Say, let's go get him. Let's go get Mr. Boyd of marketing. Now, let's go now. If you don't, I'll scream. You want to hear me? I can scream good and loud. I've had lots of practice."

Willis sat back in the seat and rubbed his face in his hands. He felt hot and his throat was dry. The sleet was coming down heavier and the

windshield was icing up. He started the car to defrost the windshield.

"No cabs," she said. "Don't go back and call me a cab. Take me to Boyd or I scream."

"I don't know where the s.o.b. lives! And I'm expected home by six o'clock!"

"I know where he lives. It's in Lakewood at the corner of Mulberry and Vine."

It was hot and oppressive in the car. The alcoholic fumes and the stale aroma of cheap perfume were overwhelming. God, what can I do, he wondered. I could take her up to the night watchman but I don't want this to get around. No, it's up to me to take care of it. I'm the senior official. It's my responsibility. If I take her to Boyd's, it will embarrass his family. His wife and mine are good friends.

"Look, I'll take you to Boyd's. But you stay in the car. I'll do the talking. Is that understood?"

"Yeah, let's go to Boyd's." She had a self-satisfied smile on her face and she sunk lower in the seat. Willis opened the window on the driver's side. The cold, biting air felt good against his hot, dry skin and the dryness of his throat.

"Remember, you stay in the car," he ordered.

She looked at him through half-closed eyes.

"You know, Mr. Willis of industrial controls, I'm a woman who was never meant to be a career woman. I liked being a dumb housewife. Yeah, you're looking at a liberated woman, Mr. Willis. I've got a lot to thank women's lib for. My husband liberated me. He didn't want to stand in the way of my development.

"That Boyd is a so-and-so. He had no right to put me in your car. I thought he was taking me home. I guess I got a wee bit drunk—or stoned—and I was slumped against the file case and when he was closing up the place he found me. He was really swearing. He picked me up and brought me outside and I thought he was going to take me home. That's what I thought, Mr. Willis. That he would take me home. But, instead, he put me in your car and drove off in his own. And that was not a nice thing to do, was it?"

Willis drove the streets of Lakewood through the northwest residential section. He came to the corner of Mulberry and Vine. It was an area of large, pleasant homes. Boyd's house was a two-story brick with green shutters and a two-car garage. It was handsome and impressive.

Willis got out of the car. The sleet was coming down hard now and he moved slowly across the slick flagstone walkway. The woman remained inside.

Boyd's wife came to the door and invited him in. "No," Willis said evenly, "if Stan could just come to the door, please. I have something to discuss with him."

Boyd wasn't home. Willis swore under his breath. What am I going to do now, he thought grimly as he returned to the car.

"Now what?" he said to the woman. "He's not home. Now, look, whoever you are. This is not my fault. I have nothing to do with this. I should be home right now, not driving around with a. . .I've got to take you home or someplace. Do you live in an apartment, a house? Just tell me. Do you have any friends you could go to?"

She sank farther down in the seat. "I'm gettin' cold. Let's stop at Marty's Coffee Shop and get some hot black coffee."

The coffee shop was empty except for two men at the counter sitting on stools. A young waitress slowly wiped off the table tops of the booths. Willis guided the woman into a booth where she wedged herself into the corner. She seemed to be a little more manageable. The drunkenness was wearing off a bit, he hoped fervently.

The waitress brought them mugs of hot, black coffee. The woman sipped the coffee slowly, much to Willis' relief.

"Look, I've got to call home. I'll be right back," he said. The phone booth was at the front of the coffee shop. He saw the woman get up and go to the ladies' room at the back of the shop. He put the box of cash beside the telephone.

His wife's voice was frantic. "Where are you? What's happened?" She listened attentively and patiently, as he knew she would. He explained slowly and carefully all that had happened. She was understanding but apprehensive.

The woman was sitting in the booth when he came back from the phone. She had straightened up considerably. She seemed much younger. Her hair was combed, her face freshly made up, and the dark green print scarf at her neck was tied in a fashionable bow.

She lit a cigarette and looked evenly at Willis.

"I do a pretty convincing drunk, don't I? I've had enough practice. I can also be a salesclerk, a garden club president, a mother-in-law waiting for her kids to show up, and a new clerk in the accounting di-

vision of a large company. I'm one of twelve women in this state licensed to be a private investigator. I'm fifty-five years old, a grandmother, and being an old lady is no stumbling block in this work."

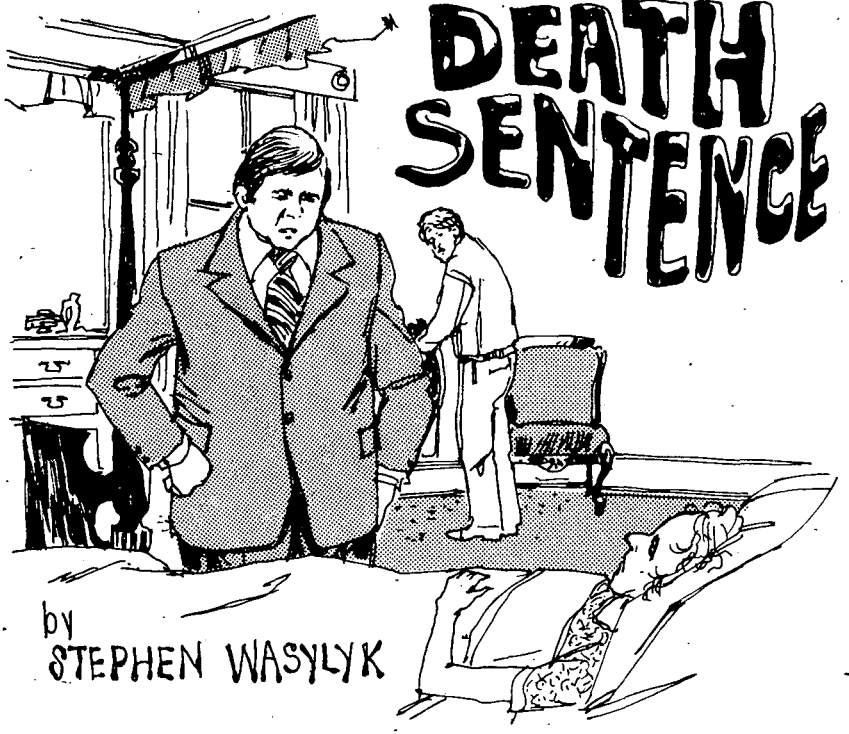
Willis' face had gone ashen white.

"That box you have with you, Willis. Mr. Boyd and another company man are coming in the front door now. And if it's cash payments for all those company machines and supplies you and the shipping crew have been funneling off on the side, you'll have to explain it to them."

Her face was calm and serene—and smiling. Now she looked like what she really was—somebody's sweet old grandmother.

Sometimes revenge becomes a kind of cruel justice. . .

DEATH SENTENCE



by STEPHEN WASYLYK

The day was dark. Low fast-moving clouds brushed damp, disrespectful tendrils across the statue of the city's founding father atop City Hall.

The grey light filtered down to the elongated rectangular windows of the bastionlike row homes lining the narrow streets, and the man peering through the living room curtains of the three-story brownstone felt as though the gloominess of the day had permeated his soul until he

smiled wryly, realizing that the source of his depression was not the day but the passenger descending from the cab that had just pulled up at the curb.

The man at the window was slight, his face shrunken by sixty years of never-easy living into a symmetrical assemblage of creased and wrinkled skin, prominent cheekbones and a too large nose. His hair was grey and sprouted in unruly tufts, his eyes surprisingly blue and gentle.

He wiped his hands thoughtfully on the laundry-worn, soft-collared shirt, hitched up his baggy trousers and turned to the woman standing with folded arms behind him, ignoring the disapproval etched into her face.

"He's here," he said.

"Damn him."

"Look," he said. "He is the old woman's nephew, her only living relative. If she wants to make her will in his favor, it is not our business."

"It *is* our business," she said. "We've watched over her and taken care of her for more than twenty years. She owes us something."

"There will be something for us," he said. "She told us so."

"Something," she said bitterly. "What? What could be left? It's not as though she has a million. What little there is would be just enough for us to live out our lives. A small part of it means nothing. Damn him and damn her."

"Hush," he said. "That's no way to talk."

"No way? Look at us." She spread her arms wide. "Look at me. This dress is ten years old. It is a wonder it still stays together. The shoes are so old the leather is cracked. Look at my face. She is eighty and I am sixty but I have as many wrinkles as she does and my hair is ugly." She brushed angrily at her eyes. "Ugly. What did twenty years of working for her get us except old?"

The doorbell rang.

"I'll let him in," said the man.

"Sure," she snapped. "Let him in. Let him take everything. We don't need it. We're both young and healthy enough to go out and get nice jobs, find a nice expensive apartment to live in." She folded her arms. "Let him in, you old fool, and then call the welfare office so that we will be prepared when she dies."

The man left the living room and walked out into the foyer. Through the frosted glass of the door he could see the bulking shadow of the man from the cab.

She's right, he thought. We've worked twenty years for nothing.

He pulled back the double bolts on the heavy door, unfastened the chain, and swung the door open.

The shadow on the glass had indicated a big man but it had not shown that the bigness was soft, a protruding belly straining the expensive sport coat, the jowls of a round, fleshy face sagging. In his mid-forties, the man appeared successful and sure of himself, used to living well; but there was no pleasant, disarming smile when the door opened, only a flat look from expressionless eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You are Kimball Haworthy?" asked the old man.

"Who the hell do you think I am? A bill collector?"

"I'm Glinkos. I sent you the letter. Your aunt asked me to write it."

Haworthy pushed past him into the foyer, his eyes scanning the time-darkened interior of the house, seeing the once polished walnut trim, the scarred floors and the threadbare carpets.

"What a dump," he said. He stepped into the living room, eyes flicking from furniture to walls, from ceiling to floor, appraising and calculating and indicating they found nothing of value.

"This place is one step away from being an indoor junkyard," he said. "I've never seen so much crummy furniture in my life."

Resentment narrowed the woman's lips. "Never mind the furniture," she said.

Haworthy looked her up and down. "Who are you?"

"She is my wife," said Glinkos.

"That figures," said Haworthy.

Anger flickered in the woman's eyes. "Would you like to go up to see your aunt?" she asked tightly.

"What's the rush?"

"She is old and sick and looking forward to seeing you."

"Is she going to die within the next ten minutes?"

Mrs. Glinkos blinked.

"I just traveled a thousand miles and I need a drink," said Haworthy. "Is there anything in this dump?"

"There is an old bottle. . ." said Glinkos.

"Get it," said Haworthy. His mouth twisted in distaste as he looked around the room.

Glinkos brought a bottle of bourbon and a glass. Haworthy poured himself a drink, parted the curtains, peered outside and then turned to face Glinkos.

"I remember this place from forty years ago," he said. "I was five years old but I still remember. It was nice then."

Glinkos shrugged.

Haworthy downed the bourbon and laughed harshly. "That's what stayed with me. How nice it was. I thought of how much money it would be worth. I didn't expect this. Half the homes on the street are boarded up and the rest have been turned into rooming houses. There isn't a blade of grass left on any of the front lawns and there is more trash than shrubbery out there. The one thing you've got plenty of is graffiti. I've heard how the money people took off from some of these fashionable city neighborhoods but I never expected them to leave this one. This place can't be worth a dime. Your letter said she made me her heir. How much can she be worth, living in a place like this?"

Mrs. Glinkos leaned against the wall, her face impassive.

"Dumb," said Haworthy. "I'm just plain dumb. All I could think of was that she had all the money in the family because my grandfather kicked my father out and left everything to her. Now it will all be mine, I thought, but from the looks of the place, she doesn't have a cent. Or maybe she still has it all because she never spent any of it. Is that it, Glinkos?"

He poured himself another drink and downed it. He placed the glass on the table. Mrs. Glinkos glided forward, lifted it quickly and wiped the polished top carefully.

"All right," said Haworthy. "I'll ask the old bat. Maybe she can tell me."

Mrs. Glinkos led him up the dark angled stairway and down a small hall to a bedroom door at the front of the house, tapped gently and pushed it open, motioning Haworthy into the room. He stepped through the door.

The bedroom was big but seemed crowded because of a huge canopied four-poster bed. The coverlet, the sheets and the woman in the bed were different shades of white; the woman's skin pale, almost transparent, hair snowy and sparse, lips colorless. The effect was re-

lieved only by the dark eyes that fastened intently on Haworthy.

"You are Kimball," she said weakly.

Haworthy moved to the side of the bed. "You sent for me, Aunt Galatea," he said. "After forty years, why bother?"

"I wanted to see you."

"There was no need."

"You are my heir," she said. She waved a feeble hand. "Everything in the house will be yours."

"This junk?" asked Haworthy. "Is there anything besides this?"

"Only a little," she said.

"What happened to all of the money grandfather left?"

She sighed. "I don't know. The man at the bank talked about stocks and recession and inflation. I didn't understand any of it."

"So it's all gone?"

"Not all. There is still some left. He sends me money each week."

"How much?"

"Enough for us to live on. But there is still the house for you."

"Damn the house," said Haworthy. "Do you have anything worth money?"

The woman's eyes rolled upward and she gasped.

Mrs. Glinkos pulled savagely at Haworthy's arm. "Get out!"

Haworthy allowed himself to be pushed into the hall. Mrs. Glinkos closed the door behind him. He stared at the door resentfully, passed a hand over his face and went downstairs.

Glinkos watched him pour a big drink and down it. The young people had an expression, he thought. What was it? A *monkey on his back.* Something like that.

Mrs. Glinkos followed ten minutes later.

"Did she die?" asked Haworthy.

"No," said Mrs. Glinkos. "You had no right. . ."

"Never mind my rights," said Haworthy. "I didn't come here because of any love for that old hag upstairs. I came because I need money and I thought I could get it from her, an advance on the estate, something like that. Do you know what I do for a living? I'm a gambler. I bet on things. I play cards. Sometimes I win and sometimes I lose. The other night I was in a game with a very bad man. A *very* bad man. I should have had enough sense to stay away from him but I felt lucky. I thought I could take him but it didn't work that way. I lost.

Twenty thousand dollars. And I gave him my marker. Do you know what a marker is? It's a promise to pay. Except that the marker is no good because I can't pay and he's going to be looking for me. Do you know what he'll do to me when he finds me?"

He poured another drink and gulped it down.

"I need that money," he said. "And I need it fast or I'm a dead man."

He moved toward the door. "I have to talk to her again."

Mrs. Glinkos barred his way. "She's resting," she said. "I gave her one of her pills."

Haworthy looked down at her. "When can I see her?"

"She can't help you," said Mrs. Glinkos. "She made you her heir but there is no money here. She has no bank account."

"She said the bank sends her money each week."

"It is only a small trust fund," said Glinkos.

"She has no cash?"

"No cash," said Mrs. Glinkos.

"God," said Haworthy. "There must be something."

"There is nothing," said Mrs. Glinkos. "Why don't you go? Whatever the estate is worth, the lawyers will send it to you."

"Don't you understand?" Haworthy almost screamed. "I need it *now*!"

"It *can't* be now! If there was something, you couldn't have it until she is dead and the lawyers said it was all right for you to take it."

"There has to be something," said Haworthy, his eyes roving around the room as if he hoped to discover an object of value; but the furniture, though well polished, was old and the paintings on the wall seemed worth little.

"Go," said Mrs. Glinkos.

"No," he said harshly. "I won't go. I can't go. Get me something to eat."

"I am not your servant," she said.

He clenched a fist and held it up. "Listen, old woman. It wouldn't take much for me to smash you because I feel like hitting someone anyway. Now do as you're told. Get me something to eat."

"There is something to make a sandwich," said Glinkos quietly. "Will that do?"

"I wouldn't expect prime ribs in this place," said Haworthy.

He sprawled out in an overstuffed chair that protested with a weary sigh, his hands over his eyes.

The couple went into the kitchen.

Mrs. Glinkos pulled a loaf of bread and a small package of sliced meat from the refrigerator, slamming them down on the counter top.

."He's hungry," she said. "Hungry. I know what I'd like to feed him. Rat poison. That's what I'd like to feed him." She glared at her husband. "He was going to hit me and you did nothing."

"He's upset," said Glinkos. "You heard what he said about the money he owes."

"Do I care about that? That's his problem, not ours. He got himself into it. Let him get himself out. What do I care about him?"

She slapped a sandwich together, found a knife in the drawer and sliced it in half.

"Damn," she said. She drove the knife point violently down into the counter top and it stuck there, the handle swaying back and forth slowly.

"Now look what you've done," he said.

"It's only the counter top," she said. "I wish it was his heart."

"Wishing him dead means nothing," he said. "Wishing has never killed anyone yet. All you're doing is upsetting yourself for no good reason."

"There's good reason," she said. "I was thinking of the will. You know she explained it to us when we didn't know if the lawyers would find him or not. She said that if he was dead, we would get everything."

"But he isn't dead. He's alive."

"Suppose he was dead," she said quietly. "Suppose we helped him to be dead."

Glinkos' face hardened. "I don't want to hear talk like that. We aren't much but we don't kill people for money like some bum slinking through the streets. There is too much of that in this city."

"Big man," she said. "Think of your future before being so righteous. Think of the opportunity we have to get rid of him."

"You talk as if it is something easy to do. You know that isn't so."

"Not for you. You have let people walk over you all your life. Whenever something has to be done in this family, I have to do it."

That really wasn't true, thought Glinkos. It was just that his methods

weren't as direct as hers. She had always been brash and impulsive, quick to raise her voice, quick to move. Many people found her personality abrasive but he had learned to live with it and still love her because she could be kind and gentle, too, and no one could have taken care of the old woman better than she had.

"And then what would you do?" he asked. "How would you explain it? He would be dead and what would we do with the body? Do we bury him in the basement like they do in mystery stories? That is not the way in real life."

"Easy," she said. "I would stick the knife into him and dump him into the street after dark. In this neighborhood, it could happen to anyone stupid enough to walk alone, especially someone as well dressed as he is."

He shook his head. "And you think they would not come back to us? The lawyers knew he was coming here. They would ask questions. The police would ask questions. Do you think they are stupid? You are letting your emotions run away with you. You are not thinking. If you were, you would realize he is younger and stronger. Do you expect him to sit there and let you kill him?"

"Still. . ." she said, her fingers caressing the handle of the knife.

"Still nothing," he said. "We are caught. We worked for the old woman and thought she would take care of us but she decided to give everything to her nephew. That is her right. There were no promises made or promises broken. All we can do is care for her until she dies and then we will move on. We will find something."

"Yes," she said. She waved a hand. "The world is waiting for us. It can't wait until we get there. There will be a good job and plenty of money and a nice place to live."

She smiled. "You are a bitter old woman."

"And you are a fool."

He picked up the sandwich plate. "Yes," he said. "I am a fool because there were many roads I could have taken when I was younger but I took this one, so now I must live with what must be because I am too old to change anything."

He walked slowly into the living room with the plate in his hand. Haworthy wasn't there.

Glinkos heard a noise and followed it into the adjoining dining room. Haworthy had found an old silver chest and was fingering through its

contents. "What are you doing?" asked Glinkos.

"What are you doing?" asked Glinkos.

"This is silver, isn't it? It has to be worth something."

Glinkos put the plate down on the table. "I just told myself I was a fool but you are a greater fool than I."

Haworthy glared at him. "Watch your mouth."

"You said you owed the man twenty thousand dollars." Glinkos indicated the silver. "How much can that be worth? A few hundred? Do you think that will satisfy him?"

Haworthy let a set of forks clatter to the table and rubbed a hand across his face. "You're right. This stuff is chicken feed. It isn't going to help me at all."

"Eat your sandwich," said Glinkos.

"I can't believe that all her money is gone," said Haworthy. "I just can't believe it."

"You don't want to believe it," said Glinkos, "because you expected to walk in here and get twenty thousand dollars and now you see there is nothing here for you. Even if your aunt was still wealthy, if the house was worth a fortune, if she had a million dollars in securities, none of it would do you any good. First, you would have to wait until she dies. Then you would have to wait until the will is probated. It would take months before you received a penny. Like the rest of us, you are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps you would be better off somewhere else."

Haworthy's teeth tore at the sandwich, his eyes fixed on Glinkos. He swallowed and pointed a finger. "You and your wife seem very anxious to get me out of here for some reason. Why?"

"There is nothing here for you," said Glinkos. "There was always the thought that you might make your aunt's last days easier but that is not so. You are interested only in yourself. You have no feeling for her at all. You need money and there is none here. Why should you stay any longer?"

"I can't believe it," repeated Haworthy. He gulped down the rest of the sandwich and reached for the bottle. "She had plenty of money forty years ago. It couldn't all have disappeared."

"Forty years is a long time," said Glinkos. "Things happen. All stocks do not increase in value. Corporations go out of existence. Look at manufacturers of automobiles. How many are left? Look at the railroads. What has happened to their stocks? It takes great skill and good

luck to increase your money. Your aunt is not a financial expert and the people she had advising her were incompetent. Then there is her illness and the medicine and the hospital bills and the doctor bills. She should really be in a hospital right now but she would be in a ward and she will not stand for that. There is also inflation. The money that was enough years ago is no longer sufficient. And there is more, perhaps the most important of all. Your aunt is old and dying now but once she was young and beautiful, yet you do not ask why she never married."

"Some women are like that. So are some men. You don't see me with a wife."

"Yet I am sure there was once a woman you were interested in."

Haworthy cursed. "Yeah. She took me for plenty before I found out about her."

"Your aunt had something similar happen. Perhaps it runs in the family. There was a man. She gave him money, almost two hundred and fifty thousand dollars over a period of time to help him in his business but he did not put the money into the business. He set it aside and when he felt there would be no more, he disappeared with another woman."

Haworthy stared at him. "Two hundred and fifty thousand?"

"She would listen to no one. She loved the man and trusted him."

"That's a lot of love and trust."

Glinkos shrugged. "It is too late to worry about it now. The lawyers wanted her to go to the police but she would not do that."

"Stupid old broad," said Haworthy.

"So you see, there is no help for you here. If you are in trouble, look elsewhere for relief."

Haworthy stood up, a hard gleam in his eyes. He drank deeply from the bottle. "No," he said. "I have nowhere else to go and I still think the money is here. I'm a gambler and no man is a good gambler unless he can sense when he has a winning hand. I want to talk to her again."

Mrs. Glinkos came in, her eyes flicking from the silverware to Haworthy, her mouth twisted in distaste.

"I see your friends are here," she said. "I suppose you'll ask them in but I'll tell you now, there is no more food or liquor."

Haworthy stiffened. "What friends?"

"Two men," she said. "They are outside. They do not belong in this neighborhood and they can only be friends of yours."

Haworthy half ran to the window and parted the curtains carefully. "Oh, God!" he said. "They've found me already."

Glinkos looked over his shoulder. Two men leaned against the shining big black car parked beneath the lifeless tree at the curb; incongruous in that neighborhood where most of the residents drove old cars, battered cars, cars pockmarked with body rot, cars that were transportation and no more than that. It was the kind of car that, if left there for any appreciable time, would either disappear or be stripped. Yet Glinkos knew no one who seeing the two men leaning against it would consider touching the car. One man was big, one was small, both dressed conservatively even though young, perhaps in their late twenties, and Glinkos was aware of an aura of menace surrounding them.

"Who are they?" he asked.

"The man I told you about," said Haworthy. "They are his collectors. He wants his money. They won't leave until they get it."

"How could they know where you went? How could they follow you to a place a thousand miles away? Did someone tell them?"

Haworthy let the curtain drop. "No one could have. I told no one where I was going and I took no luggage because I didn't want anyone who saw me to know I was leaving town." He slapped his forehead suddenly. "Your damned letter. I left it in my room. I should have known they would search it."

"Call the police if you are afraid of them," said Mrs. Glinkos.

"What can the police do? They have broken no laws." He took a deep breath. "Now I really have to get that money somehow. If I don't have it when I leave here, they'll kill me." He put the bottle aside, his voice low and resigned.

Glinkos looked at him. Haworthy's face was as white as the old woman's upstairs, perspiration beaded on his forehead and jowls, and Glinkos almost felt sorry for him.

Haworthy started for the door.

Mrs. Glinkos folded her arms and blocked his path. "You are not to go upstairs."

Exploding in a sudden fury, Haworthy pinioned her arms and threw her aside. She stumbled and almost fell. "Get out of my way and stay out of my way!"

He went up the stairs fast. Rubbing her arms, Mrs. Glinkos followed. Glinkos hesitated, then went after them.

Haworthy roughly pushed open the door to his aunt's room and strode to the bed, looking down at her. The old woman's eyes were closed and she breathed evenly.

Mrs. Glinkos pushed close to him. "Leave her alone!" she said fiercely.

Haworthy shoved her away and leaned over, shaking his aunt's shoulder. Her eyes opened, focused on nothing, dead pools that slowly became alive and found him.

"Can you hear me?" asked Haworthy.

Her head moved slightly.

"Then listen." Haworthy pointed toward the window. "Right now, out there, two men are waiting to kill me. Can you understand that?"

The head moved again.

"All I need to stay alive is a little money," said Haworthy. "Not after you die. Not next month, or the month after that or whenever your lawyers get through settling your estate, but *right now*! Is that clear to you?"

The woman nodded.

"Then help me," pleaded Haworthy. "I know you must have money. I know you must have something more than this old house and this old furniture. There was too much to begin with for it all to have gone. There has to be some left."

The woman's lips parted. "How much?" she whispered.

"Twenty thousand dollars," he said.

Her lips curled. "Money," she said. "Is that all men care about?"

Haworthy's hands clenched. Glinkos felt a touch of panic. Haworthy was a violent man balanced on the edge of disaster, frightened so badly his fear could be felt in the room. If he put those hands on the old woman, Glinkos would have to do something and Glinkos didn't know what to do.

"Listen," said Haworthy hoarsely. "I can kill you with one hand, old woman, and I'll do it if you don't help me. I don't care about your will or this house or anything else. I want what is due me *now*!"

The old woman sighed, the dark eyes fixed on the ceiling, the voice soft. "I don't like you. I had hoped you were something more than your father, but you are not. He was a weak man and you are a weak man. Still, I should have helped him. I always felt guilty about that. I would like to help you now to make up for it but I have no money."

Haworthy's hands curled and reached out toward the old woman's throat. "Don't lie to me! You must have something!"

Mrs. Glinkos angrily pulled at his arm. "Leave her alone and get out!"

Haworthy whirled and slapped her, knocking her against the wall. The old woman in the bed tried to lift herself when she heard Mrs. Glinkos' sharp little cry, her eyes angry. Haworthy spun back to her.

"Stop it!" said Glinkos sharply.

Haworthy turned to face him, breathing hard, and Glinkos felt a small touch of fear at the unreal light in his eyes.

Glinkos stepped forward. "Give him the jewels," he said to the old woman.

Mrs. Glinkos, her hand caressing her cheek, said, "No!"

The old woman's eyes fastened on Glinkos, studying him, then gradually softened, almost smiling. "Yes," she said. "Give him the jewels."

Mrs. Glinkos placed her hands on her lips defiantly. "You said you would never part with them as long as you lived."

"I do not need them now," said the old woman.

"Don't let him threaten you. They are yours until you die. Let him wait. We will call the police. . ."

"*Give him the jewels.*" The authority in the old woman's voice was unmistakeable.

Mrs. Glinkos crossed the room to a high, multitiered dresser. She opened a door, reached inside, pulled out a large, old-fashioned jewel chest and carried it to Haworthy. She placed it on the bed and glared at her husband.

Haworthy drew his breath in, placed a trembling hand on the chest for a long moment as though he was afraid to open it, then snapped the catch. The front fell forward as the top rose, a series of black-velvet-lined trays fanning backward, exposing the contents. The trays held rings, bracelets, pendants, necklaces, all studded with stones that caught the light in the room, sparkling joyfully as if happy to be free of their dark prison.

Haworthy let his breath out. "I knew it," he whispered. "I knew there had to be something." He closed the chest quickly and glared at Mr. and Mrs. Glinkos. "You heard her," he said. "She gave them to me."

"You stole them," said Mrs. Glinkos. "You forced her to give them to you and that is stealing. You can't take them. I won't allow it."

Haworthy raised a fist. "Shut up! I've had enough of your big mouth!" He spun to face Glinkos, his jaw set, his eyes narrowed. "I'm taking these," he said. "Don't give me any trouble, old man."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Glinkos.

Haworthy slid by him to the hall, the chest under one arm, seemingly half afraid that somehow the slight old man would take the chest from him. He reminded Glinkos of a starving animal slinking away with a morsel of food that meant the difference between life and death, ready to kill if someone made a move toward him.

Haworthy backed toward the stairs, then turned and ran. Glinkos moved to the front window and looked down into the street in time to see Haworthy run from the house. The two men stiffened, alert and deadly. Haworthy talked rapidly, holding the chest before him like some sort of offering. The three stepped into the car. Glinkos watched it go down the street and turn the corner, leaving tracks in the light rain that had started to coat the asphalt. He watched until the rain obliterated the tire marks and it was as though the car had never been there at all.

It is over, he thought.

He looked at the old woman in the bed. She had closed her eyes again, a slight smile on her face, and she was breathing evenly as if she had forgotten her nephew already. He motioned to his wife to follow him out of the room.

In the hall, his wife said, "I hope you're proud of yourself. If you hadn't told him about the jewels. . ."

"He would have killed somebody," said Glinkos. "He was crazy."

"I should have killed him. I told you I should have killed him before it went this far."

"And I told you," said Glinkos. "That was no solution."

"He hit me," she said angrily. "And you did nothing. You are an old fool and a coward."

"Well, I am an old fool," said Glinkos. "That much I admit. And if preventing someone from being killed is being a coward, then I am a coward. And it only appeared that I did nothing."

He went down the stairs, moving slowly, feeling tired. She followed. He went into the living room and sank into a chair, closing his eyes.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "It only appeared that you did nothing? What kind of fairy tale are you telling yourself?"

He opened his eyes and rubbed his prominent nose with a finger. "There was a time about a year ago," he said slowly. "When she first went into the hospital. You will remember that the lawyers called and I went to their offices. They told me there was no more money, that the trust fund had run out. What was there to do? Sell the house, they said. I said that wasn't very practical. It wouldn't bring much money and it would leave us no place to live. She needed someone with her and if it wasn't us, she would have to go to a home. She wouldn't do that. The house had to be kept so that you and I could take care of her. Sell the furniture, they said." He chuckled. "Can you imagine? Sell the furniture?"

"She wouldn't have allowed that," said Mrs. Glinkos. "She'd never let her precious antiques go. She spent too many years collecting them. A year ago she was still active, polishing and dusting them every day. The antiques were the children she never had. She would have noticed if just one piece was missing and it would have broken her heart."

"That fool Haworthy thought it was all junk," said Glinkos. "The lawyers didn't tell him so he didn't know."

"Still," she said bitterly. "What difference does it make now? It will all be his anyway. At least the money will be. It should have been ours. The furniture would bring just enough so that you and I would not have to worry any longer."

"You have forgotten the will," said Glinkos. "If he dies before the old woman, we are the heirs."

"That means nothing," she said. "You let him walk out. He is alive, thanks to you."

Glinkos shook his head. "Wait. I was telling you about the lawyers. She is a proud woman and stubborn, I told them, and there had to be a way to make her think the trust fund still had money so that she could live out her last days peacefully and quietly and happily. They were in favor of that, they said. All right, I said. It was impossible to sell the furniture so that she wouldn't know but there was one other thing. Something we could sell and pretend the money still came from the trust fund and she would never know." He leaned back, a smug look on his face.

Her eyes opened wide. "The only other thing she owned was the jewels," she said. "But the jewels were there. I don't know how many times I saw her examine them during the last year. I guess she liked to dream of when she was young and could wear them."

"Glass," said Glinkos. "Paste. We took the real stones while she was in the hospital and sold them and replaced them with worthless imitations. Haworthy may know nothing about jewels but even if he did, he didn't take time to look because he was so sure he had found what he had come for. When he gives them to that man, the man won't be so anxious. He'll examine them and I don't think he will be in any mood to listen to any explanations. I've heard of people like that. He will kill Haworthy for welshing on his debt and for trying to fool him. We will then be the heirs."

Anger came to her voice. "You never told me!"

"Blame the lawyers. They wanted no one to know because disposing of the old woman's property and concealing it is not exactly ethical, no matter how good the motive."

"And the old woman never knew?"

Glinkos pulled at his lower lip. "I didn't think so but her illness has affected her body, not her brain. She is a smart one and it is possible she realized what had happened and said nothing because she trusts us. The look she gave me. . ." He shook his head. "Yet I don't know if she could sentence her nephew to death."

"But you could, Mr. Self-righteous, after telling me in the kitchen that you are not the type to kill for money."

Glinkos left his chair to turn on an old floor lamp. The yellow light flooded the room, holding the greyness outside at bay, and the furniture was no longer dark and old fashioned but handsome and gleaming. There was a warmth in the room that came from years of tranquil living, of understanding and of love.

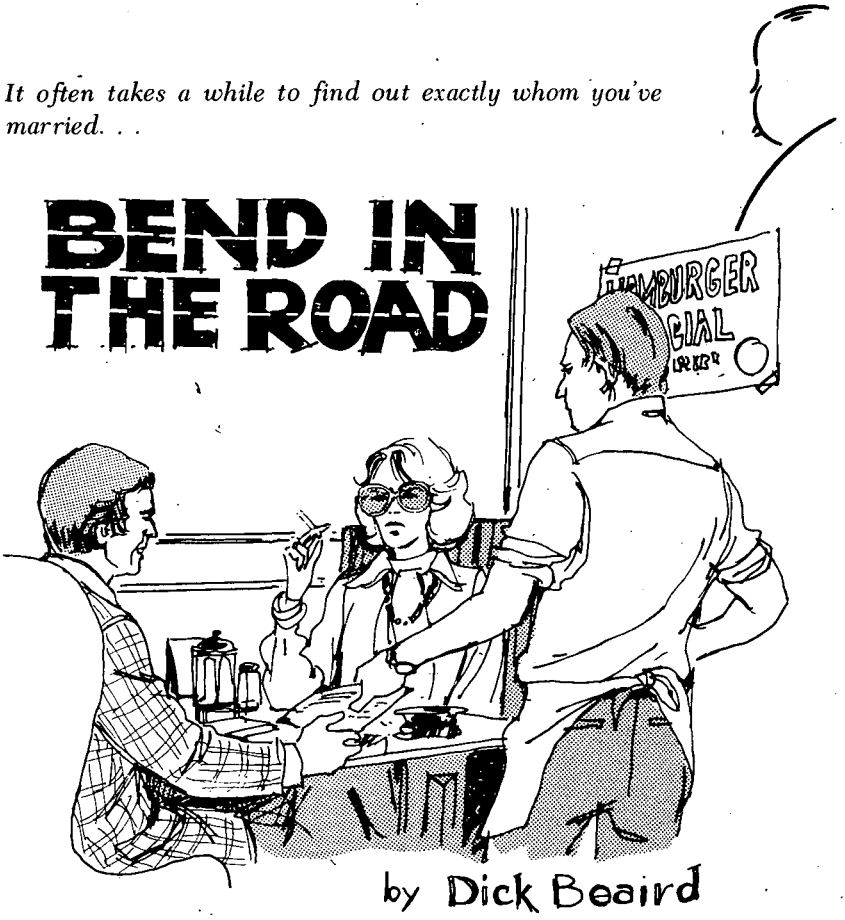
"That's still true," he said. "When I suggested that he take those worthless jewels, the money never entered my thoughts."

"What other reason could you have, you old fool?"

Glinkos reached out and touched her lined cheek tenderly. "The man came in here, insulted us and threatened the old woman. Those things I could forgive because he had a problem, but then he struck you. That was when I made up my mind." Glinkos drew himself up. His voice was firm. "For that he had to be punished."

It often takes a while to find out exactly whom you've married. . .

BEND IN THE ROAD



by Dick Beaird

Lenore Forrest sat stiffly, staring out the window, as the big car sped through the bright hot morning. They were going too fast, she knew, and it frightened her. Another time she would have enjoyed the green, rolling countryside, but not now. After a while she lit a cigarette with trembling fingers.

What had gone wrong, she asked herself for the hundredth time, glancing at the man beside her. Why had he become almost a total

stranger? Once, certainly, he must have loved her, but now things had changed; he had become quick-tempered and moody and sullen.

Hunched over the wheel, Paul Forrest drove as if all other cars on the road were personal enemies to be outwitted at any cost. He had dark hair and a rugged profile—though perhaps a trifle weak around the mouth—and he was vain about his husky, broad-shouldered build. He was a sometime painter when he felt in the mood, which wasn't often. He had never held any job more than a short time, but Lenore didn't care about that; it wasn't, after all, as if he needed to work.

Nervously, she touched his arm. "Paul, are you sure we took the right road back at the last turn? I really don't think this is it."

Paul frowned over at her. "Relax, Lenore, I know what I'm doing! I told you I was going to take a shortcut to bypass all that road construction. I hate those muddy detours. So just sit tight and we'll get there in plenty of time."

Biting her lip, Lenore said nothing more. Paul had been so different from what she had hoped he would be. Had he grown tired of her? Could it be another woman? God knows she did her best. . . expensive facials and elaborate hairstyles, and she was always careful to be dressed up when Paul came home. . . when he bothered to come home. But nothing seemed to help much anymore.

Fearfully, she began watching the countryside. It looked different now, alien, as the narrow road plunged through rugged hills, sweeping valleys, and endless forests. There were no longer many farm houses, or any evidence of civilization; they seemed to be driving deeper into some nameless backwoods country, a land with no people, no cities, nothing but wilderness. It was as if they were the only two people left in the world, and were doomed to ride forever in a sort of timeless limbo.

But, of course, that was silly; they were only a day out of San Diego, and on their way to a kind of second honeymoon. At least that was how Lenore preferred to think of it, but she was no longer sure about Paul.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to try to go back, back to a happier time, to the lovely little seaside resort that had meant so much at the beginning of their relationship. She had clutched at the idea like a drowning person. But maybe, like they said, you could never go back. So far the trip had not worked out well; Paul had been morose, silent, driving too fast and drinking heavily when they stopped. He kept a

bottle in the glove compartment, too, she knew, but she didn't dare say anything about it.

Lighting another cigarette, Lenore shivered as she watched the thick, dark forests speed past the car. Uneasily, she turned to her husband again. "Darling, I really do think we're lost. This road seems to go on forever and we're not getting anyplace."

Ignoring her, his foot pressed down heavier on the gas pedal. They were already doing well over seventy, she saw, and the big car dipped and swayed alarmingly. Forcing herself to keep silent, she twisted her hands in her lap.

Lenore Forrest: slim, quick and blonde; a taut nervous way of moving; too small in the bust and too narrow in the hips; and pushing forty. Lately she had noticed the lines around her eyes becoming deeper, more pronounced, and she had begun to avoid mirrors whenever possible and to wear huge dark glasses.

Abruptly there was a sharp bend in the road and Paul swore and twisted the wheel hard. The narrow road straightened out after that and plunged down into a valley as trees and brush gave way to a small, rural town. A battered sign, as they entered, read: Herkeyville. Pop. 1,200.

The main drag was little more than a rundown general store, a gas station with one pump, an implement store, drug store, post office, and a ramshackle bar; dingy buildings squatting in the bright summer sun like a low-budget movie set.

Abruptly Paul pulled over and stopped. Dust swirled around the car and heat waves danced on the road.

"May I ask why you're stopping here, of all places?" Lenore asked irritably.

Paul gripped the wheel tightly. "Because I happen to be hungry, Lenore. You see that sign over there? It says Bar and Grill and I figure that means they serve meals. Also I happen to like small-town cooking. So I'm going in there to eat lunch—that is, if it's all right with you."

Forcing a smile, she put a hand on his arm. "Paul, must we go on like this? Couldn't we declare a truce? At least until the trip is over? I want us to have a good time."

"Sure," he said, grinning coldly. "Why not? It's your vacation, Lenore, and your money. So I guess you're entitled to enjoy it."

"For God's sake, Paul," she said, her voice rising, "it isn't just my money. It's our money. I thought we had agreed on that. Someday your paintings will sell, I know they will. And then the money won't matter anymore."

"Sure," he said icily. "Someday."

He got out of the car and stalked across the dusty street toward the bar. Lenore had to hurry to keep up. The name over the place read: Tuttle's Bar and Grill, and a neon beer sign flickered in the dust-streaked window. Inside it was dim and smelled of greasy cooking and stale beer. There was an L-shaped bar in front and some high-backed booths in back. An ancient juke box sat against the wall, looking like a fat, green Buddha, and thumping noisily. When they took a booth near the bar, a thin man in a rumpled apron came over, almost reluctantly.

"What'll it be, folks?" he drawled, wiping his hands on the soiled apron.

"Two beers," Paul said. "And some menus."

When the bartender came back with the beer, Paul studied the greasy menu with interest.

"How about a steak, Lenore? Sounds good to me."

She touched the menu distastefully. "I'm not very hungry. Perhaps just a hamburger."

Paul gave the order, selecting a huge steak and french fries.

"Real cozy," he said, smiling at Lenore. "Haven't been in a hick-town place like this in years."

He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, she noticed, partly because she obviously was not. He went over to the juke box and slowly fed in quarters. Restlessly, Lenore looked around. She saw that there were four men at the bar and several couples in the booths in back. One of the men at the bar was huge, with heavy shoulders and massive arms. Greasy hair grew long over his ears. He stared at Lenore, his gaze boring steadily at her, a tiny smile on his thick lips. There was something odd about his pale eyes, she decided, trying to ignore him.

When the order came, she picked at her hamburger while Paul wolfed down his steak. She was uncomfortably aware of the big man still watching her.

After she finished eating, she got up and hurried to the ladies' room at the back. As she applied fresh lipstick, she forced herself to look at

her face in the mirror. The light was very poor, the mirror streaked, but the face that looked back at her was not the one she had started out with. Somewhere along the way something had gone wrong. This face was tired, lined, almost middle-aged. She realized suddenly that she was frightened; whatever she had been running from so long wasn't too far behind. . .

Shivering despite the heat, she combed her hair carefully and went back to the booth. When she saw that Paul was gone, she felt panic. Could he simply have driven off and left her here? The last thing in the world she could bear was to be stranded in a miserable, backwoods town like this. Taking a deep breath, and trying to appear calm, she sat down and lit a cigarette with shaking hands. She felt that everyone in the bar was looking at her. She felt their stares on her like a physical force.

When she saw Paul come through the door, she breathed a sigh of relief.

She frowned at him. "Where did you go, darling?"

He took out a cigar and unwrapped it slowly. "They didn't have my brand. So I got some from the car."

"Yes, you do prefer the expensive kind, don't you?" she said pointedly. She immediately regretted her sharpness, but could think of no way to undo it. She looked nervously around the bar. "Paul, I want to get out of here now!"

He puffed on the cigar. "What the hell's got into you, Lenore? You've been edgy since we left San Diego. This whole vacation thing was your idea, so why can't you just relax and enjoy it?"

"How can I relax? There's a man at the bar who's been staring at me since we came in. He just sits there nursing his beer and looks at me. And smiles. . .like he knows something! How can I relax when the man is practically attacking me with his eyes?"

Paul turned around and then shrugged. "Tough-looking guy. But you can't arrest a guy for looking. Maybe you should be flattered."

"Thanks," she said. "But it's not just him. The others have been watching us, too, like we were some sort of foreigners. I can hear them whispering about us."

"Small towns are like that. Sort of closed up and unfriendly. People from out of town stick out like a sore thumb. I should know—I was born and raised in a hick town like this one."

Lenore stubbed out her cigarette angrily. She was a product of the big city and out of her element here.

"Just the same, I want to leave, Paul. I'll feel a lot better when we're a long way from here."

Paul leaned back, draping his arm over the booth. "No hurry. We have lots of time. That resort will still be there, won't it? And you'll have even more money; they compound interest daily now, don't they?"

As if to defy her, he ordered another beer, then went to feed more coins into the juke box. The others pretended not to notice, but Lenore knew she and Paul were being watched closely. The big man was still at the bar and she could feel his eyes like fat slugs crawling over her body. Wouldn't he ever stop staring; hadn't he ever seen a woman before, she thought. She struggled to keep calm.

When Paul returned, she impulsively put her hand over his. He didn't move it, but his hand was cold and she could feel nothing. It was the hand of a stranger.

He drank two more beers and finished his cigar, then smiled at her as if he'd proved something. "Okay, let's hit the road, Lenore."

Gratefully, she followed, not daring to look back. They got in the car and Paul fumbled with the key, turning it impatiently. The engine whirred drily. He paused, frowning, then tried it again, but it wouldn't start, not even on the third try.

Swearing softly, Paul slammed his hand on the wheel. "Damnit, you might know something like this would happen! Probably no mechanic around for miles, either."

A tiny knot of fear began to grow inside Lenore, and she looked around frantically. "I saw a gas station back up the street. Surely they would have someone there who could help."

He shook his head. "I doubt that. Maybe a gas-pump jockey who fixes flats. But I'll give it a try."

Slamming the car door, he hurried back up the dusty little street. Lenore sat in the sweltering heat and stared through the dirty windshield. Along the street nothing moved. In the distance a tall mountain range bulked against a slate blue sky, so far off and remote it was part of another world. The car was stifling. It was as if something was conspiring to keep them here, she thought; they were not going to be able to just drive off because that would be too easy, too simple.

Something would surely happen to prevent it. High overhead an unseen jet laced the sky with a ribbon of sound. It was funny, she thought, to be here in a sleepy little town out of the past and hear a modern jet.

The door of Tuttle's Bar opened suddenly and the big man with the strange eyes came out. Leaning against the building, he hooked his thumbs in a wide, brass-studded belt and grinned down at Lenore. His tight Levis were stained and dirty and he wore dusty, run-down cowboy boots. Chewing lazily on a toothpick, he regarded her fixedly. She tried to look somewhere else, but her eyes kept returning to his and she thought of his hairy hands touching her and felt ill.

After an eternity, Paul came back and with him was a stocky man in grimy coveralls. The man wore a baseball cap backwards, and had a greasy face. Lifting the hood, he bent over the motor, fiddled with it briefly, then signaled Paul to start up. But the engine continued to grind futilely. After more adjustments, he signaled again, but it was no good; it would not start. It just would not start. Lenore's shiny new car had failed her.

The man shoved back his cap and scratched his head. "Dunno, folks. Have to check her over better to find out what's wrong. You want me to get the tow truck and haul her to my place?"

Paul nodded grimly. "Have we got a choice? But make it snappy, will you?"

"Do the best I can," the stocky man said pleasantly, then ambled slowly back up the street.

Paul began laughing. "That joker doesn't look like a guy you can hurry much, so why don't we go back to the bar? At least we can get in out of the heat."

"I don't think it's funny," Lenore said. "And that man standing by the door is the one who was staring at me in the bar. Paul, I'm frightened."

Paul looked up, then shook his head. "There's no one there, Lenore."

When she looked again, she saw that he was gone. . .almost as if he had never been there at all. She prayed he would not return.

This time Paul insisted they sit at the bar, much to Lenore's distaste. The mirror in back of the bar was cluttered and dirty, but at least she could watch the room in it. She nursed a beer while Paul and the bar-

keeper talked baseball. With a huge mental effort she tuned them out, thought instead of the resort they were headed for. They would have the best room this time, she decided. No expense was too much. She had been looking forward to sun-filled days at the beach and exotic floor shows and dancing. She and Paul had been so happy there once, even though they had not had much money then. That had been before Daddy's death, the will, the unexpected inheritance. Now she wondered if it was too late. Had they already drifted too far apart? Had the money bruised his ego? He frequently made sarcastic remarks about it, but he did not seem to mind the things that could be bought with it—the big car, the new house and expensive clothes, the gold watch she had bought him for his last birthday. He didn't mind spending her money, especially for liquor.

In the mirror she saw the garage man come through the door of the bar. He walked over to them, stood behind Paul, wiping his hands on an oily rag.

"Got some bad news, folks," he announced. He sounded almost cheerful.

Paul turned around and frowned. "What's the problem?"

"I can't fix your car without a new rotor is the problem. Have to order one from Centerville. But they can't get it here 'til tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Paul snorted. "What's wrong with today?"

The stocky man shrugged. "Have to call up and order it, you know. Don't stock them myself. And the parts house don't deliver no more today. It'll be tomorrow before I can get a new one."

Paul swore softly. "Why can't you just fix the old rotor?"

"Well, because there ain't none," the mechanic said smugly.

Lenore felt an icy hand close around her heart. The room seemed to tilt and spin. This was impossible, something that simply could not happen. . .a horrible dream. Another twenty-four hours in this godforsaken town was unthinkable.

Paul said hotly, "You mean someone stole the rotor?"

The mechanic shoved back his cap. He looked slowly from Paul to Lenore. "Mebbe. All I know is she's gone. Car won't run nohow without a rotor, so I guess you folks will just have to wait here until tomorrow."

Lenore turned to Paul, her lips trembling. "I couldn't stand it here all night. There must be something else we can do."

Paul shrugged. "You heard the man, baby. What choice have we got? We got exactly nothing to say about things."

He turned to the mechanic. "Okay, pal, get the thing ordered. Can you have it ready to roll by tomorrow noon?"

The man smiled crookedly. "Mebbe. I'll get right on it first thing in the morning. Do my best."

As the man strolled out, Lenore stared at his back; with him went her last hopes. It was the town, she thought; they didn't want them to leave. Someone had stolen the part from the car so they would be forced to stay. Maybe the garage man was in on it, too. But why? Why were they doing it?

Paul motioned to the bartender, threw down a bill. When the change came, he asked if there was someplace they could stay overnight.

The barkeeper gave them a wise look, as if he'd known all along they would be staying. "Why, sure thing, folks. There's Millie's place. Millie rents rooms. She could fix you up easy. Her place is just up the street. Got a sign in the front yard so you can't miss it."

Paul nodded and went out to the car to get their luggage. Lenore watched his reflection in the mirror as he left. Then she nearly gasped when she saw that the big man had returned and was sitting at the bar. She had not seen him come in. Wordlessly, he put his hands on the polished wood and, as if at some silent signal, the bartender brought him a beer. The big man found Lenore's eyes in the mirror. His pale gaze seemed to mock her, as though he could read her innermost thoughts, could sense the fear in her. Her skin crawled and she felt as if she were suffocating.

Finally Paul came back with two small overnight bags and she hurried outside, clutching his arm as they walked up the street. She felt other eyes watching them, unseen eyes staring down from the windows of the huge old houses. Millie's place turned out to be a three-story affair with white shingles and dormer windows, something that should go with pink lemonade and long summer nights on the front porch and band concerts in the park. It was almost as if they had stepped back into the past. As they approached the old house a cold wind touched her, a premonition of evil, and she shivered.

The front door had real stained glass windows and the woman who opened it was matronly, with a beaming, moon-shaped face. She dried

her hands on a flowered apron and smiled brightly at them.

"My brother called. Said you folks would be along soon."

"Your brother—that, of course, would be the bartender," Paul said.

The woman nodded. "Yes. I'm Mrs. Powell. We're all sort of, well, related here in Herkeyville. My cousin Jed, he runs the garage down the street. My other brother is the postmaster." Behind thick glasses her eyes darted like goldfish. "I'm sure you folks will like it here. Room's this way."

The room was on the second floor and an enormous double bed dominated it. An ancient vanity and two overstuffed chairs in flowery patterns completed the furnishings. A big tree grew outside the window, scraping at the side of the house in the wind. It was simple and homey and stifling.

"If you folks need anything just holler." Mrs. Powell smiled. "We're like one big happy family here, you know."

Thanking her, Paul paid for the night and at last, still beaming, she clumped back downstairs.

Lenore threw herself on the bed and kicked off her shoes.

"Boy, this is just great," Paul said. "How can you beat a place like this? We can sit and count the stripes in the wallpaper."

Lenore said nothing. Everything was going from bad to worse.

"I'm going to take a shower," she said. "If they have one."

They did, at the end of the hall, the fixtures ancient and temperamental. Afterward she put on her new green dress and sat on the bed and tried to read a magazine. Paul was asleep, stretched out on the bed with his clothes on, and she was glad because then they didn't have to try to find something to talk about.

The afternoon dragged. It was very hot in the room. Finally Paul woke up, stretched, and went to the window, standing there a long time looking out.

"I'm going back to Tuttle's," he said after a while. "This room is driving me crazy."

"You're going by yourself I take it."

"I didn't figure you'd want to come. You said you hated the place."

"I do. But I hate it here, too."

Paul swore softly. "Well, then make up your mind. Are you coming with me or not?"

She pulled her knees up to her sparse chest. "Must you go? I don't like being left alone here."

"Then come along."

"No. I couldn't stand that place again. The stares and the whispering. . .and that man with the queer eyes."

"Lenore, for the last time, will you cut this nonsense out? I've been willing to play along up to a point, but this is too much. You can stay here if you like. I'm going."

"Paul, I'm afraid."

He turned from the window and his eyes were cold. "All right. Then I have the perfect solution." He went to his suitcase and groped under the shirts. When his hand came up it held a small snub-nosed revolver. The gun looked cold and deadly, like a cobra. She hadn't known about the gun; she wondered if she really knew her husband at all.

He checked the gun, spinning the cylinder expertly.

"Do you know how to use one of these?"

She nodded, staring at the gun as if hypnotized. Because Daddy had wanted a son, he had taught her about guns. . .had often taken her hunting.

Paul tossed the gun casually on the bed. "This ought to relieve your fears, baby. Keep it handy. I'll lock the door when I leave so you got nothing to worry about."

She stared at the gun and shuddered. "Please don't be late, Paul. And try not to get drunk this time."

"Just don't wait up for me, Lenore," he said testily, and stalked out, fumbling briefly with the lock as he closed the door.

Lenore thrust the gun under a pillow and then tried to read. Outside the window the tree scraped, tossing back and forth. Otherwise the old house was very quiet, as darkness slowly deepened. Once she dozed briefly, then jerked awake, listening to the whispering of the wind, the only sound in the vast night silence.

She got up and went to the window. The lawn outside was silvered with moonlight. Still, she knew *they*, the townspeople, were responsible for what had happened. They wanted to keep her and Paul here, all of them, the whole sinister ingrown little town. Suddenly an unpleasant thought intruded itself in her mind: what if she never left here? What if she died here in Herkeyville? But, of course, that was absurd. It was all her imagination, wasn't it? If she did not get control

of herself Paul would soon become disgusted with her and everything would be ruined.

Curling her legs under her, she tried again to concentrate on the magazine. She had read the same page over three times without understanding a word of it when she heard something. A small sound in the huge ocean of silence. But something.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

She put the magazine down and sat up straight. Mrs. Powell coming up to visit? It seemed hardly likely. She hoped not; she couldn't stand to listen to the woman's chatter; she was too uptight for that.

The footsteps came to the top of the stairs, then down the hall. They were not Paul's. . .his would be quick, purposeful. These were slow, almost cautious.

Her breath caught in her throat and she felt her heart race. Outside a dog barked once and the wind rattled stiff branches at the window. As she watched in horror, the doorknob began to turn. The door opened slowly.

But Paul had locked the door, she thought. Or had he?

She tried to move, but could not—her legs were frozen.

He wore the same dirty Levis, and the light splintered off his huge brass beltbuckle. He stood in the doorway. There was a smile on his face and his eyes glistened wetly.

Her mouth open to scream, Lenore's hand crept under the pillow and closed around the cold steel of the gun.

With a slow, hitching walk, the man came into the room. In his hand was a hammer. Lenore's arm came up instinctively and the gun was there and then her finger was pulling the trigger.

A tiny round hole appeared on the front of the man's shirt, and he stared down at it, his mouth working, as if he was trying to say something, but no words came out. Then, gradually, he crumpled to the floor. He twitched once, then lay still, his pale eyes open and staring up at her.

Screaming, Lenore ran downstairs and into the night. . .

The big car raced down the highway, going too fast, and Paul glanced briefly into the rearview mirror. He could still see Herkeyville, but very soon it would disappear behind a bend in the road, as if it had never existed.

He started to speak, then caught himself and chuckled. He looked over at the empty seat beside him; for a moment he'd almost forgotten that Lenore wasn't sitting there anymore.

Reflectively, he wondered if she would find the tiny cell any less dreary and confining than the room at Millie's place had been. They had arrested her, of course, and charged her with murder; he had paid little attention to the legal details in his hurry to get away from Herkeyville.

It had all worked out fine, he thought. Sending the village idiot up to her room to hammer down a loose board, telling him to walk right in, had been an inspiration—after all, the guy did do odd jobs for beer money, and everyone in town knew he was harmless, wouldn't hurt a flea. And the poor fellow had been related to almost everyone in town. All the guy did was sit and stare at people, especially women, but he never did anything about it.

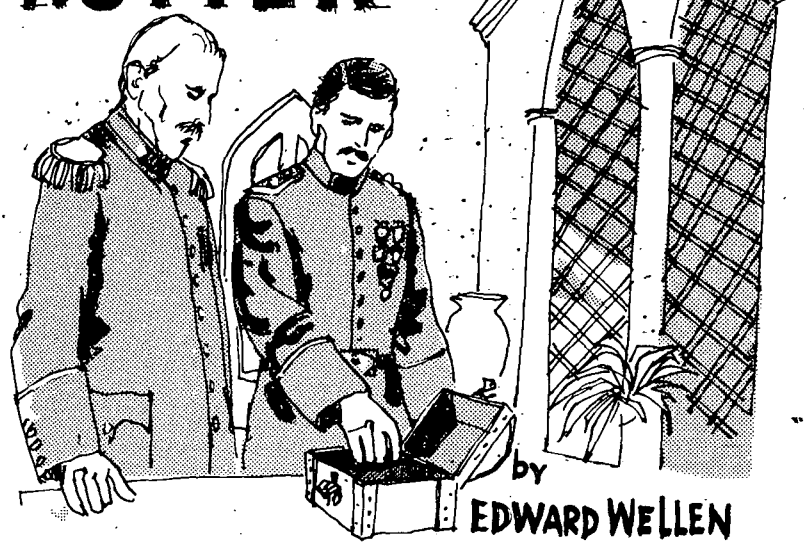
He had decided that, one way or another, the problem of Lenore was going to end in Herkeyville. Removing the rotor from the car had been easy, and giving Lenore his gun was a stroke of genius. Small-town justice being what it was, Lenore would certainly remain in jail a long time waiting for her trial and, after that, even with a decent lawyer, she would probably be out of circulation for quite a few years.

He smiled as he thought about all the money Lenore had insisted on putting in a joint account. He decided the first thing he would do when he got back to San Diego was to trade off her big, black sedan and get a sports car; something low slung and flashy to suit his new mode of living.

The next time he glanced up at the mirror he could no longer see Herkeyville. Patting the empty seat beside him, he began to hum tunelessly to himself.

"I have eaten your bread and salt, I have drunk your water and wine. . ." Never was Kipling quoted more aptly. . .

THE PERFECT ROTTER



by EDWARD WELLEN

I've never kippled, but I know a character straight out of Kipling when I see one. The ruddy beefeater complexion, the stiff upper lip that mustered a military brush, the whole bearing of an officer and a gentleman, all bespoke long service in Her Majesty's Army of the old days.

Our encounter came when we took hold of chairs at the same time and stood staring across the empty table at each other. He leaped to the attack.

"My table, I believe."

I believed otherwise, this being my usual table at the West End establishment I favored whenever I came up to town. But before I could splutter to this effect he had dismissed all argument with a disarming wave of the hand.

"Not to worry. We'll share it, shall we?" He thrust out his hand. "Colonel Sir Robert Fredericks, late of the Fusiliers."

I gave my name in return, and a wince.

We seated ourselves and Colonel Fredericks frowned roundabout.

"Where's the waiter? Never around when you want them." He winked at me, then gave a parade ground shout—"Service here!"

A waiter quickly appeared and snapped to. Colonel Fredericks grimaced disparagingly at the bill of fare but ordered heartily. I don't have that ruddiness to maintain, yet I could not but respond to the challenge by making my side of the board equally groan.

He turned out to be a pleasant chap as well as a good trencherman and, as we dug in, a good conversationalist. Anyone who draws me out about myself is a good conversationalist. I have a lot to be modest about; it grew embarrassing to expand on my few accomplishments.

"But what about yourself, Colonel? I can tell you've led a full life. You must have many fond memories of the service, for example."

He gazed back across the years and smiled. "Fond ones and, well, not so fond." He frowned suddenly, then cleared his brow.

"Something has come to mind?"

"Matter of fact, yes." He fetched up a sigh from the deep well of his being. "This happened long ago, and I'll name no names, so I think it's all right if I tell you."

I leaned forward. "It will go no further, sir."

His eyes were suddenly shrewd. "I'm sure of that, sir. I pride myself on being a good judge of character." He beckoned the waiter over and obtained a cheroot to his liking and got up a good head of smoke. "Well, sir, this took place in one of the, shall we say, *crucial* states bordering the Persian Gulf or Arabian Gulf—depending on who you side with. Anyway, it was a dusty outpost of Empire, a port town that was the flyspeck capital of an oil-rich stretch of sand. I don't care to pin it down any closer because of the circumstances."

He lifted an eyebrow, I nodded, and he went on to tell me the circumstances.

"There was this dashing young officer bloke, a subaltern, who served as regimental paymaster. He had just taken over from the regular paymaster, who departed on home leave thanks to fever. Three days before his first go at payday, the subaltern dashed in to see his superior officer. All in a flap, he reported that the lock on the pay chest showed signs of tampering with.

"Together they opened the pay chest. It was empty.

"Absolutely shattering. First time in the long and honorable history of the regiment anything of the sort had happened: one of its own robbing the till. For it could only have been an inside job.

"The commanding officer pulled himself together. The hair of his flesh settled down and he did first things first. No pay—even with the pay small and little to spend it on—meant muttering if not mutiny. The regiment's morale would sink even more if the men went payless. He got off a cable and the War Office flew in another pay chest.

"The same plane brought in an Intelligence sergeant. For a full day—after looking the empty chest over and politely questioning the subaltern—he nosed about town. He prowled the cafes, the bank, the jetty. The only thing he seemed to get was a sunburnt nose.

"But by the time he returned to regimental headquarters he had got more than that. He had forearmed himself with a list of the serial numbers of the currency stolen from the first pay chest. And he had traced a fresh five pound note from the mutton butcher who had deposited it to the man who had bought fat sheep of him for a feast. The man who had bought the sheep ran a gambling den in a back room of the rug bazaar. The gambler, washing his own hands of theft, had named the British officer who had paid gambling debts with the stolen currency. The British officer he named was the subaltern who was serving as regimental paymaster.

"The subaltern at first denied his guilt. He stood ready to swear on a tower of Bibles—or Korans—that he had not stolen it, including an unmistakable thumbprint of the subaltern's.

"When he saw there was no way of getting round the evidence, the subaltern tried to take the attack. He put the blame on the Army for sticking him in that hellhole and placing temptation in his path.

"That turned even the few willing to make allowances for him against him. They said the rotter lacked the decency to own up to his misdeeds and face the consequences. He had let down the regiment.

"They locked him in the orderly room while they set about deciding what to do about him. The senior and junior officers gathered in the mess hall, cleared all the servants away, and talked it over. The consensus was that it would be best not to hold a court martial. That would lay the regiment's disgrace open to the world. There was only one honorable way out of the whole unpleasant affair for all concerned.

"The subaltern's best friend loaded one bullet into a revolver, unlocked the orderly room door, put the revolver on the desk, then went out, leaving the subaltern once more alone in the room. There had been not a word between them during that poignant interlude, but there had been a world of understanding.

"Waiting outside in the hallway, the officers listened while trying to seem not to be. An agonizing minute passed. Then the shot sounded.

"After a decent interval, they tried to open the door. It would not give. While they were busy battering down the door, which the subaltern had propped shut with desks and file cabinets, the subaltern had popped out the window and dashed down to the waterfront and got under way in a dhow.

"The dhow quickly lost itself among the many vessels on the Gulf—Persian or Arabian, as you please." Colonel Sir Robert Fredericks smiled sadly. "That was long ago as time flies. From time to time one or another of his old messmates runs across him here and there around the world. But if they see him they don't *see* him, if you get my meaning."

I blinked. "But the shot?"

"Ah, yes, the shot." The Colonel dealt with the heeltap in his stinger glass. "The subaltern used it to blast the padlock off the second pay chest. Made off with the replacement payroll." Silence for a while made me aware of the surrounding clatter and chatter. He looked past me thoughtfully, then stirred himself. "Pardon me for a moment, old man, but duty calls. Be back straightaway."

"Of course, Colonel."

His "straightaway" stretched out. Just as I began to tire of waiting the waiter came and presented me with the discreet reverse of the bill. I turned the bill over and stared at the bottom line.

"What's this?"

"The gent what left said you was taking care of the bill."

I was fit to kipple.

A cry for help can be nonverbal and very indirect. . .

PIERCED WITH MANY SORROWS

by CHARLENE WEIR

Bright sunshine angled through the window and bent the bars in shadow across the bare wall. Martin Kellman shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The boy aroused a vague sense of inadequacy and the irritation that resulted made him speak patiently. "Why did you send for me? I'm a minister. What you need is a lawyer."

"I didn't kill him," Joe said. He flung the words out with an arrogance that seemed to defy Martin to believe them.

Unexpectedly this attitude made the words seem true in a way that a quiet statement would not. Martin looked at him. Joe couldn't be more than twenty and seemed even younger. Wearing a denim jacket and faded jeans, he sat cross-legged on the bunk in the cell. Bony, bare ankles stuck out from the cuffs.

With a short jerk, he tossed brown hair back from his face. Dark eyes returned Martin's look with an angry challenge that couldn't quite cover the fear. "I might have known," Joe said bitterly. "You're just like all the rest. Because we're strangers. Anything bad that happens, it must have been us, right? It couldn't be any of these good people around here. None of them would murder a man and steal his money."

" 'Judge not,' " Martin said dryly, " 'that ye be not judged.' "

For an instant Martin thought a spark of delight flickered behind the eyes. It was gone before he could figure out what it meant.

One corner of Joe's mouth lifted in an odd, twisted smile. "You saying I'm just the same as they are? Maybe. But I'm in here and they're out there."

"Joe," Martin leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his chest, "why did you want me to come here?"

"Honesty. Good, old-fashioned honesty. Sincerity. Things you don't find any more. You're a preacher. Aren't you supposed to help people?"

"I'll help you in any way I can. But I can't arrange to have you released from jail." What did the boy want from him, Martin wondered. He was a bright, sensitive young man, but just when Martin was on the verge of liking him, Joe said something to annoy. He didn't seem to do it deliberately. It was more as though he couldn't stop himself.

Joe Paletta and his young girl friend had caused a flurry of scandal and resentment among the parishioners by buying the old house on the property adjoining the church grounds. The pair had then developed a disrupting habit of playing loud, rumbling music during church services. Martin had twice spoken to Joe about it. Both times, just when Martin felt he was beginning to understand and could like the boy, Joe made a sharp comment that offended. And both times Martin had gotten the feeling that Joe was somehow disappointed in him. Martin had the same feeling now.

"I wasn't thinking very clearly, was I? I can see that now." Joe jumped off the bunk and went to the door, clutching the bars with his

hands. "There's not much you can do, is there?" He turned and his mouth hardened into a sneer. "But pray."

"It's something I do quite well."

For a moment Martin thought Joe would smile. But he simply threw himself down on the bunk.

Martin ran a hand up his forehead and over the bald spot on the top of his head, then rubbed the fringe of grey hair at the back. "I knew Edward Tomlin for a long time." With an effort Martin kept his voice flat. "He was an elder and one of the Sunday school teachers. He was a fine man."

"Yeah, I'm sure he was. He wasn't very smart though. Anybody that goes around with a billfold full of money is asking for trouble."

"There must have been a reason for your arrest." Martin glanced at his watch and noted that he must leave soon. "Weren't you at Barney's cafe Saturday night?"

"I was there." Joe swung his legs over the side of the bunk and sat up. His hands gripped the edge of the mattress. "Do you know how boring natural foods get after a while? I had a bowl of chili. Best thing I ate in weeks."

"Who else was there?"

"Barney was. He's probably the one that did it. That cafe isn't doing very well, you know. He needs money."

"Nobody else?"

"Who's that old guy that always wears the long, black overcoat that almost drags on the ground? He was there."

"Carl Gebhardt," Martin said.

"That's him. You got some weird characters around here. He looks like the type that hangs around school yards and offers candy to little girls."

"He does that quite often," Martin said. "He also dresses up as Santa Claus at Christmas and visits the children in the hospital. Every month he drives over to the home for retarded children with huge birthday cakes and paper hats. His only child died when she was eight."

"Oh." The tense face softened and showed the pure sympathy of a young child. "I didn't know that." Joe looked away and down at the floor. "Well, he was there. And one other guy, about my age. Doesn't your bible say something about envy?"

" 'Thou shalt not covet,' among other things."

"Man, did I covet. This guy had a jacket like I've never seen before. It was black, the background. With squares and triangles of all different colors all over it. I thought of asking him where he got it, but since I couldn't afford one anyway, I didn't bother."

"Why were you arrested?" Martin asked.

"I told you. Because it's a good way of clearing everything up. It takes care of a killer and gets rid of me all at the same time."

Martin suppressed a sigh. He said gently, "Just what is it you want me to do?"

Joe shrugged. "Look, why don't you take your bible and go on back to your pulpit. I'm sorry I bothered you." Turning his back he curled up on the bunk with his face to the wall.

Martin was uneasy as he walked away from the cell. On occasion he had been the object of sarcasm or insults. Sometimes his patience had been snapped by brief anger. But it didn't bother him any more than it did any other man whose profession was to deal with people. But Joe was baffling. There was something here Martin couldn't understand.

He glanced at his watch. It was almost ten. He had told Mrs. Tomlin he would see her this morning to discuss the funeral service. Later he had an appointment with the treasurer to go over the church's financial report. And with two people scheduled for counseling in the afternoon he felt the usual pressure of time.

At least his problems were reduced in number. Joe wouldn't disturb the service next Sunday. A twinge of guilt plucked Martin's conscience. Wasn't that exactly what Joe had claimed? A neat tidying up.

Martin stopped and looked back. Through the bars he could see Joe sitting on the edge of the bunk. There was no arrogance about the boy now. He slumped in a state of despair, an expression of fear on the unguarded face.

" 'And by chance'," Martin quoted to himself, " 'there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.' Am I getting so old I've forgotten the parable of the good Samaritan?"

He turned and went down the hallway to Lieutenant Decker's office where stale cigarette smoke mingled with the smell of new paint. The lieutenant tipped back his chair and swivelled it to the side. He

motioned to the wooden chair by his desk. "Well, Pastor, make yourself comfortable."

"Good morning, Johnny. You look tired." Martin sat down and took off his glasses to polish them.

Pushing a thatch of dark hair away from his lean face, John Decker scraped a finger over his long jaw. "Yeah, well, I haven't gotten much sleep the last two nights. This kid isn't one of your people, is he?"

"He isn't a member of the church, if that's what you mean. You want me to pontificate about all people being God's people?"

Decker grinned. "Spare me."

Replacing the glasses Martin nodded. "Besides, they've told me, Joe and his girl, that they're against organized religion. Can you tell me about this?"

"I don't see why not." Decker lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the newly painted ceiling. "They've caused you some trouble, haven't they?"

"There's been some conflict with the congregation, yes. We've been thinking about expansion for some time now. The property next to the church is ideally suited for our purposes. But a parish can't be hurried. 'He that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly.' By the time our decisions were made, Joe had bought the property. That upset people. And, of course, Joe and the girl are not married. That added an element of righteous wrath. Then there's this matter of playing music that doesn't blend well with hymns."

"Well, I don't suppose the girl will stay on now. So it looks like it'll all work out."

"I'll have to admit, Johnny, that it would be a relief to preach a sermon and not have to worry whether the latest singing group will accompany me. What makes you think Joe is guilty?"

"They need money, Martin. A payment is due on the house. God knows how they've managed to live this long. You know Barney's cafe out on Fifth Street on the edge of town?"

"Of course."

"It's open until midnight on Saturdays and Edward Tomlin drove out there about 11:30 to buy cigarettes. He had a wallet full of money but nothing smaller than a fifty. Barney doesn't keep much there that time of night. He's afraid of robbers and he doesn't have that much business anyway. He couldn't make change so he told Edward to pay next time.

Ed had a cup of coffee and talked with Barney awhile and left."

"And he was attacked in the parking lot."

Decker nodded. "Struck on the head going to his car. We haven't found whatever was used. Probably a wrench, jack handle, something like that. We did find the billfold. Lying by the road like it was tossed from a car window."

"You think whoever killed him was in the cafe? Why? Why not someone who just happened to be in the parking lot?"

"Not likely," Decker said. "That parking lot is on the side of the cafe. There's a fence around the side and rear and Barney keeps a big shepherd dog in back. If anyone had come over the fence he would have barked. *And* there was someone watching the cafe from the street."

"Who?"

"Carl Gebhardt had a fight with his wife. He put on his overcoat and stomped out of the house saying he was going to get drunk. He got in his old pickup and drove to the cafe early in the evening. Sat there drinking until it closed at midnight." The lieutenant laughed. "He had three beers. Mrs. Gebhardt went after him. She parked out on the street and waited for him to come out."

" 'An angry man stirreth up strife and a furious man aboundeth in transgression'," Martin said. "Then Mrs. Gebhardt saw what happened?"

Decker shook his head. "From where she sat she couldn't see the parking lot. Only the front of the cafe and the driveway going up to it. But she kept an eagle eye on that and nobody went in or out that she didn't see."

"So it had to be somebody already at the cafe."

"Right. Joe Paletta was there. And Carl, sipping his beer. And another kid, Don Redding. That's all. Nobody else."

"Redding? I don't believe I know him. Was he just passing through?"

"Visiting his mother." The lieutenant crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "The woman Bob Whalen married a few months back. First time he's been here."

"Who found Edward?"

"Barney did. After he closed the cafe. Edward wasn't dead, but close to it. We got him to the hospital, but he died about thirty minutes later. At 12:52 to be exact."

"What makes you think Joe killed him?"

"Edward said so."

"He told you Joe hit him? What exactly did he say?"

Decker stared at Martin. "You don't think he's innocent, do you?"

"I'm trying to understand what happened."

"Tomlin was conscious just before he died. I've got a tape here of what he said. I'll play it for you."

The lieutenant fiddled with the tape recorder on his desk and pressed a button. The reels spun with a quiet hum for several seconds. Then the quiet voice of John Decker was heard. "Mr. Tomlin, can you hear me? Can you understand what I'm saying?"

Martin strained to hear. There was a groan, barely audible. And a mumble that sounded like Edward was trying to speak. Another groan that ended with a soft hiss. It may have been a yes.

"Do you know who it was, Mr. Tomlin? Do you know who hit you?"

A long pause. A moan and the sounds of labored breathing. Then a word that ended with s. More clearly, a yes.

Seconds passed. The breathing became harsh as though Edward struggled with great effort to gather strength. A mumble and then, "Joseph." Faint, but understandable.

Decker pressed another button and pushed the machine to the edge of the desk. "He died a short time later, but it's clear what he said."

"I certainly seems so. What did the boy have to say?"

Decker grunted. "He says his name is Joe. Nobody ever calls him Joseph."

Martin got to his feet. "Thank you, Johnny. I appreciate it. I know you're busy. When I talked with him, I got the feeling that boy was telling the truth. Maybe my judgment isn't so good any more." He shook his head. "Now I have to go see Dorothy Tomlin."

Mrs. Tomlin sat on a gold couch in the livingroom. Blue curtains had been drawn to shut out the sunlight. A variety of foods brought by friends covered the diningroom table. The neighbors, there for help or comfort, had withdrawn to the kitchen. An odor of freshly perked coffee hung in the air.

"If only he hadn't gone out." Dorothy's round face had a dazed expression and one plump hand plucked absently at the skirt of her grey dress.

"He was going over his lesson for Sunday school the next morning," she said. "He always did that on Saturday night. Look. I'll show you."

Martin followed her short, stout figure into a small office off the livingroom.

"He was working right there," she said. "Just twenty minutes, he told me. That's all he'd be gone."

A bible lay open on the desk. Next to it, a spiral notebook. Written across the top of a page was "Genesis 37." Jotted under this, "Jacob's favorite son. Two dreams. Sent to visit brothers who planned to kill him. Saved by Reuben. Sold to Ishmeelites."

Mrs. Tomlin gave a choked sob and Martin took her elbow and drew her back to the livingroom. Easing her down on the couch, he brought her a glass of water. In his forty-six years of ministry, this situation had always been the most difficult. To console the grieving after what seemed a senseless death.

They discussed the arrangements for the funeral service. Then Martin said a prayer for Dorothy and the family, a plea asking for support and help in their suffering.

Back in his car an elusive thought nagged at Martin's mind. He went over everything he had heard from Joe and Johnny Decker. Martin examined the conversations word for word as nearly as he could remember, searching for whatever it was that bothered him. Something Johnny had said?

Finally he had it and he sighed. Such a small thing.

He looked at his watch. Already late. But he had better see Barney.

The plate glass window across the front of Barney's cafe spilled sunlight on the scratched lineoleum floor. A small place with a long counter on one side and a row of booths on the other, it reeked of recently fried hamburger. Barney wiped vigorously at the counter as Martin came in.

"Hello, Reverend." A smile split Barney's wrinkled face and a cigarette bobbed in his mouth as he spoke. "What can I get for you?"

"A cup of coffee will be all." Martin slid onto a stool. "I actually came to ask you some questions."

"Fire away." Barney placed a heavy mug of steaming coffee on the counter and turned to fill another one.

"It's about Saturday night."

Barney took a noisy sip of coffee. "I sort of figured that's what it'd be. I tell you, Reverend, it's getting so a man isn't safe anywhere. I've even got lights in my parking lot, for God's sake. And still it happens." He put the cup down with a thump. "Wasn't much going on Saturday night. Not many customers, I mean. Carl Gebhardt came in about eight and sat in that booth by the window until I threw him out to close up. Drank beer."

"When did Joe come in?"

Barney squinted his eyes as he thought. "Well, Carl was my only customer until about eleven, I'd say. That's when this Paletta kid came in. Ordered a bowl of chili. A few minutes later, maybe five or so, another kid came in. Cheeseburger and fries."

"That was Don Redding? Do you know him?"

Barney shook his head. "Never saw him before. Drives one of them sports cars. Looked brand new. Came to visit his mother, way I understand it. Bob Whalen's wife."

"And you had no other customers that night?"

"Nope, that's all there was. Edward Tomlin came in about 11:30 to buy cigarettes. He had some coffee and we talked a few minutes and he left. That must have been about quarter to midnight."

"Then what happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"I meant, who left after Edward," Martin said.

"Oh. Nobody but Carl. Paletta left about ten minutes before Edward. And the other kid, Redding, left right after Paletta."

"I see," Martin said. "So Joe left first and then Don Redding and then Edward and then Carl Gebhardt."

"That's right."

"And it was you that discovered Edward had been attacked?"

"Right again. This Buick was still in the parking lot after I closed up. Edward's, of course, and I couldn't figure out why it was still there. I went out to take a look at it. That's when I found him. Lying by the car on the driver's side. The car was parked next to the fence. You couldn't see him unless you walked around on that side of the car."

Martin finished his coffee and reached into his pocket for change to pay for it.

Barney waved a hand. "That's all right. The coffee's on me. I figure I need to score some points for credit . . ."

As he drove to the police station thoughts skittered through Martin's mind like leaves in the wind. Unpleasant, discouraging thoughts. For the first time, he wondered if he should retire.

Lieutenant Decker sat at his desk eating a sandwich. Tearing off a hefty bite, he chewed and swallowed before he said, "What's up, Martin? You look worried."

"I'm troubled," Martin said as he sat down next to the desk. "I've discovered I've forgotten to listen for cries from the soul."

"What?"

"This boy. Joe Paletta. He isn't a vicious boy. He isn't insensitive, or a deliberate trouble maker. Why did he disrupt the church services? I've been very stupid, Johnny."

Decker tore another chunk from his sandwich. "I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

"Joe was unhappy. Asking for help. That was the reason for the music. To get my attention. I didn't think of Joe as Joe. I was only concerned with the noise and what to tell my people when they asked what I intended to do about those kids."

"And what was he so unhappy about?"

Martin shook his head. "I don't know. I've been so dull-witted about this I hesitate to guess. I think he's unhappy with his life. He's looking for something, although I don't believe he knows it, to convince him to make changes. I don't quite know what to do. I'm going to have to be 'therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.' One thing, I believe he enjoys a sparring partner."

"Well, I don't think you need to worry. Changes are going to be made for him."

"Oh, that." Martin brushed that aside. "That's what I came to tell you. Joe didn't kill Edward."

"What?"

"I'm sure of it, Johnny."

"Of course, he killed him. He's guilty as hell. Weren't you listening? I—" The lieutenant stopped and looked at Martin's steady, blue eyes.

Martin nodded.

After a moment Lieutenant Decker sighed. "What makes you so sure? Who's guilty if Paletta isn't?"

On the following evening Martin was in his office preparing for an

elder's meeting when Joe Paletta came. He hesitated in the doorway. "They let me go this morning. Decker told me it was your doing."

"Come in, Joe. Have a seat."

Joe sat uncomfortably on the leather chair. "I think. . . Yesterday I said some things. . ." A sullen, mulish expression settled on his face. "I suppose you think you've got a right now to tell me what to do. When I can listen to music."

"Joe," Martin said with reproach. "I don't think I have a right to tell anybody what to do."

"Anyway, I just came to say thanks."

Martin smiled. "I should thank you."

Joe gave him a suspicious look. "Why?"

"When a minister is too busy to help people in trouble, it's time for him to retire. You reminded me."

A blank look crossed Joe's face, and then he seemed almost pleased.

Well, Martin thought, have I finally said something he approves of?

"Decker said if I wanted to know anything I should ask you," Joe said. "How did you know who killed Tomlin?"

"Did you ever go to Sunday school? Learn any bible stories?"

"Sure," Joe said. "Years ago."

"Do you remember the stories about Jacob and his sons? Jacob had a favorite son and the others were jealous."

Joe slid back in the chair and crossed his ankles in front of him. "Joseph, wasn't it? Something about Potiphar's wife?"

"That came later. The brothers hated Joseph. When he came out to where they were looking after the sheep, they cast him into a pit. Later they sold him to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver."

"I remember. Vaguely. What's that got to do with Tomlin's murder?"

"That story was being taught in Sunday school last week. Edward was a teacher," Martin said. "He was reviewing the story Saturday night before he was killed."

"When Tomlin said I hit him he was thinking about that story? It had nothing to do with the murder?"

"He was thinking of the bible story, certainly. But he was also trying to say who hit him. He was very badly injured, close to death. He'd been given some drugs and it must have been difficult for him to think, and even more difficult for him to speak."

"So?"

Martin picked up the bible lying on the corner of his cluttered desk and handed it to Joe. "Find Genesis 37, verse 3."

With a puzzled look Joe opened the book and turned pages until he came to the right place. He real aloud. " 'Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colors.'

"So that's it." Closing the bible with a snap Joe replaced it on the desk. "Tomlin meant the guy who hit him wore a coat of many colors. That jacket."

Martin nodded. "Don Redding's jacket. Edward didn't know Don's name."

Joe put his hands behind his head and gazed at the ceiling. "Am I glad I told you about that. Why did Redding kill him? For the money I suppose."

"That's what Johnny told me. There's a payment due on Don's new car. That's why he came to see his mother. He wanted to borrow the money from her, but she couldn't give him any. She didn't have any to give or she would have. She's always given him what he wanted, apparently. Johnny found the money. Also the weapon. A jack handle. It was in the trunk of Don's car. He tried to clean it off but it still had traces of blood. Don didn't mean to kill Edward. It was only when Edward turned and saw him that Don panicked and hit hard enough to kill."

"Even I know the quotation that fits here," Joe said with a quick smile. " 'Love of money is the root of all evil.' Right?"

" 'Which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows'."

"Okay, so I didn't know the rest of it. But I don't have to worry about sorrows any more. You don't know how scared I was."

"Joe," Martin said. "How would you like to take over Edward's Sunday school class?"

Joe darted a quick look at him. Amusement danced in his eyes. "If I'm here, I won't be home playing records?"

"That's the general idea, yes."

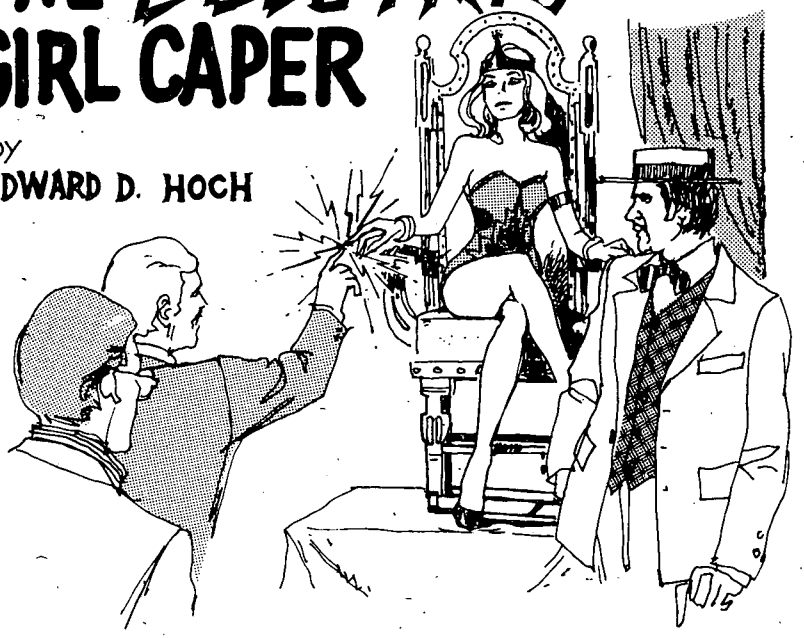
Joe grinned. "I suppose you have some quotation for this too."

Martin smiled. " 'There's more than one way to skin a cat'."

Thomas Edison was too inventive to have been surprised but we doubt if he would have approved. . . .

THE ELECTRIC GIRL CAPER

by EDWARD D. HOCH



Her name was Madge August, or at least that was the name she'd taken at the age of seventeen when she got her first job dancing in a topless bar downtown. It was a pretty good name, and it stuck. She'd wanted to break into show business ever since a boy in high school told her she looked like Marilyn Monroe, and if topless dancing in a cheap bar was a route to success, she was more than willing to follow it.

Now, eight years after the topless bar, Madge August was not yet

the toast of Broadway or of Hollywood. Instead, she was the Electric Girl at the state fair, a position which brought her one hundred fifty dollars a week. All she did was sit in a chair eight times a day while the suckers paid their money to see sparks leap from her fingertips. She'd hoped for something better by her mid-twenties, something better than sideshow atmosphere and one-night stands with crusty carnival workers.

The man who employed her was named Tommy Small, though it appeared nowhere on the outside of the tent. She received the top—and only—billing: *See the Electric Girl! She Makes the Sparks Fly! You Won't Believe Your Eyes! See Her! Touch Her! IF YOU DARE!* At most shows, every single one of the men dared.

This night, at the end of a hot Labor Day weekend when the entire fair was drooping just a bit, she sat in her chair and stared out over the audience and prepared to be electrocuted for the last time. Tommy Small adjusted the wires, pulled the switch, and shouted, "There she is, ladies and gentlemen! Thousands of volts of electricity are passing through this girl's lovely body at this very moment!"

There was a low murmur from the crowd, as always, and Tommy hurried on. "Let me prove it to you! Electric Girl—raise your right arm!" Madge August obeyed him without a word and he placed a long blue mercury arc tube against her skin. The tube lighted instantly, and a gasp ran through the crowd.

"Another test," he said, attaching a piece of cotton to the end of a wire. He dipped it into a bottle of gasoline and then touched her hand with it. She always hated this part, and had to control herself to keep from yanking her hand back when the cotton burst into flame. Finally Tommy came to the climax of the act, when the audience was invited to file past Madge and touch her hand. There were always a few who went for her spangled breasts instead, but the result was the same—a sharp shock, with sparks leaping from her body to theirs.

This night, though, one man was different. She'd noticed him in the crowd during Tommy's spiel, standing near the back, but with a well-groomed casual air that one rarely saw at a state fair. He was more the country club or stock-exchange type, and her contact with that sort was limited. Later, when he came forward to touch her hand and feel the spark of electricity, he didn't jump like the others, or make some bawdy comment. Instead, their eyes met as if they shared some private

secret. She would remember this man, and perhaps that was what he wanted.

After Tommy Small closed the tent show and paid her the money she'd earned, Madge hurried across the hard-trodden earth toward the parking lot where she'd left her car. As she reached it a shape materialized out of the darkness at her side, and a hand closed gently over hers. "What the hell!" she gasped, ready to scream.

"Don't be frightened. I want to talk to you." His voice was soft and calm, and even in the dark she recognized the well-groomed man from the last show.

"I saw you inside," she said. "You were watching me."

"Wasn't I supposed to?" he asked with a grin. "You're quite pretty in that spangled costume."

"What do you want?" she asked, though she thought she knew.

"The fair is closed. If you're unemployed, I could offer you a temporary job. Can we go someplace and discuss it?"

"All right." Why not, she decided, there'd been a lot worse-looking guys than this in her life.

He was driving a rented car, and he led the way to a nearby bar that had enjoyed a boom during the week of the fair. She parked her dented VW next to his car and they went in together. He steered her to a booth in the back and ordered a couple of drinks.

"My name is Byrd," he said with a smile. "Ulysses S. Byrd. I'd like to hire you for a few days' work, doing pretty much what you did at the fair."

"How much?"

"What did Tommy Small pay you?"

She was surprised he knew Tommy's name. "Two hundred a week," she said, adding fifty to the true amount.

He nodded. "How about ten times that for half the work? Two thousand dollars for three days."

"Sure," she replied, trying not to seem too eager. Maybe this guy Byrd wasn't an ordinary trick at all. Maybe he had a legitimate occupation. Maybe he was even in show business.

"First you'll have to explain how this Electric Girl gimmick operates, so I can get the necessary equipment."

"That's easy. My chair is on a little platform, and hidden underneath is something called a Tesla coil or Tesla transformer. It produces high

voltages of high-frequency alternating current, but the current is low in amperage and lacks any destructive power. A wire runs from the transformer up the hollow chair leg and attaches to a metal plate in the arm of the chair. When I press the plate with my arm, current flows through me but I hardly feel it. The mercury arc lamp lights because it's designed for high frequency. An ordinary incandescent bulb wouldn't work." She didn't fully understand the explanation she gave, but that was how Tommy Small had explained it to her. It worked, so she didn't ask questions.

The man named Byrd listened closely, making a few notes on a paper napkin. "No problem," he assured her. "I figured it was something like that."

"Tommy's always hard up for money. With the fair closed, you could probably rent his equipment."

"Good idea," Byrd agreed.

"Just what does this work involve?"

He signaled for another round of drinks and began to tell her what would be expected.

The next day he made the arrangements with Tommy Small, and phoned her by noon to tell her everything was set. "Meet me at the Southview shopping plaza at two this afternoon," he instructed.

"I'll be there."

When she pulled her car into a parking space at the shopping center, she saw that Byrd was already there waiting. She locked her own car and hurried over to his. "Here I am!"

"Get in—and fasten your seat belt."

As he started the car she glanced sideways at him and said, "I've been asking around about you, Byrd."

"I hope you didn't tell anyone about our little venture."

"No, no! I just asked a couple of friends if they'd ever heard of you."

"So?"

"You've got quite a reputation. The Early Byrd, they call you."

"Sometimes," he admitted. He slowed to turn in a side street.

"They say you're a con man, but not the ordinary sort."

"We'd better talk later," he advised. "This is the street, and her car should be coming along any minute now."

"This part scares hell out of me."

"Relax." They sat and waited a few moments in silence with the car's motor running. Then suddenly Byrd said, "Here she comes—hang on!"

A tan sedan with a black top had turned into the street, and Byrd shot his own car forward to meet it. The front fenders came together with a crunch. Madge was thrown forward as the seat belt tugged at her middle. "God, Byrd!"

"You all right?"

"I think so."

He didn't wait to see. He released his own belt and hopped from the car, running over to the tan sedan. "Are you all right?" he asked the woman behind the wheel.

Madge wanted to get out too, but he'd instructed her to stay in the car. She sat still and listened.

"I think so," the woman said, getting out to inspect the damage to her car. "I didn't even see you coming." She glanced in Madge's direction. "Is your passenger all right?"

"It's my wife—are you sure you're not hurt?" he called.

"I don't think so." On cue Madge unstrapped herself and got out, holding onto the car a bit unsteadily. "I'm just a little shaken."

"My home is just down the street," the woman said. "Do you want to bring her in and call a doctor?"

"I'll be all right," Madge insisted. "If I could just sit down. . ."

"Could we trouble you?" Byrd asked. "While she's getting herself together we can exchange insurance information."

Byrd helped straighten the woman's fender so she could drive the car into her driveway down the street. The house was large and old, shielded from the street by a row of hedges. In a middle-class neighborhood, it gave the impression of special status. The inside was modestly furnished, but with a few touches—a lighted oil painting, a bar—that hinted at recent affluence.

And piled high on two card tables against one wall were booklets, folders, envelopes. "A political campaign?" Madge asked innocently.

The woman smiled. "No, that's the fan club. I really should introduce myself, I suppose. I'm Florence Pregger, president of the Hard Starr fan club."

"Hard Starr?" Madge oozed as instructed. "He's my favorite rock singer! I have all his albums!"

Florence Pregger smiled. "Then you should join the fan club."

"What do you do? Could I actually get to meet him?"

Through it all Byrd kept a tolerant smile on his face, like a loving husband humoring his immature wife. Florence Pregger produced pamphlets and autographed photos and even a brief authorized biography of the 23-year-old recording and concert star. Madge pored through it all with interest, seeing mostly a long-haired youth with an electric guitar and skin-tight spangled pants, bare-chested, looking like a performer in some sort of male burlesque house. It was not her idea of show business, but she kept up her act.

"He's performing here in town this weekend," Florence Pregger said. "The entire club is going."

"Oh—could I go too? Or are they mostly teenagers?"

"Do I look like a teenager, honey? We have women of all ages, and a few men too. My husband Sloane helps me run it." She produced a pile of mimeographed sheets. "I'm just getting out this month's newsletter to members. Look at some of these reviews for Hard's new album! *They're* by male reviewers!"

"Oh, I wish I could meet him!" Madge gushed. "It must have been fate that brought me to this house!"

A car had pulled up in the driveway and they could see a husky man heading for the door. "That's Sloane," the woman explained. "I'm glad you'll have a chance to meet him."

Sloane Pregger was a hard-eyed man with a deep voice and a bone-crushing handshake. Madge saw Byrd wince a bit and withdraw his hand as the big man said, "Glad to meet you. What's this about an accident?"

Byrd gave his explanation of how it had happened, while Madge continued to look through the fan-club newsletters. "Guess what, Sloane!" his wife said finally. "The Sparrows are fans of Hard Starr!"

It took Madge an instant to react to the name. Then she remembered that Byrd had introduced them as John and Mary Sparrow, the name on his faked driver's license.

"*Are* you?" Sloane Pregger said. "Then you must join the club!"

"How much does it cost?" Byrd asked.

"Only ten dollars a year, and that includes a free Hard Starr album, an autographed photo, a subscription to our monthly newsletter, and discount tickets to any local concerts by Hard. Last year he played here twice."

Madge had discovered another box on the car table. "What about these scarves and charm bracelets?"

"Oh, we sell a number of Hard Starr items to club members, all priced quite reasonably."

"Could we come back again?" Byrd asked. "I know my wife loves to talk about Starr." He reached for his wallet. "And of course we'll want to join. In fact, give us two tickets to this weekend's concert while we're at it."

"Oh, John!" Madge squealed, feeling like an idiot.

When they were alone in Byrd's car, Madge asked, "You're going to rob those people, aren't you?"

"I've never robbed anyone in my life. I'm simply going to take what they give me—what they urge upon me, in fact."

"They don't seem like bad people."

"They're not, really. No worse than me, I suppose. In this life, Madge, everybody has a con game. Theirs happens to be the fan club, taking ten bucks at a time from a bunch of kids, and then selling them a lot of junk besides. And Hard Starr has his own con too, earning close to a million dollars a year from records and concerts and television. People pay to see him take off his shirt and to hear deafening amplified music. He and the Preggers work their con and I work mine."

"I don't know," she said, staring through the windshield. "It still seems wrong."

"You're getting two thousand dollars. Isn't that enough?"

"Oh, of course it's enough! I even lied to you about how much Tommy was paying me! But. . ."

"Don't think about it so much," he advised. "Come on, we have to talk about Friday."

And there was much to talk about. The first part of Byrd's plan had gone well, but Friday would be tricky. Madge could think of a dozen things that might go wrong, starting with the obvious fact that Hard Starr simply might not find her attractive. Byrd laughed when she voiced this objection. "Don't worry about that," he assured her.

"But he has all those groupies hanging around him."

"All the more reason why he'll go for you."

"And what about the rest of it?"

Byrd smiled. "You leave that to me. You just act your part."

"I always wanted to be in show business," she mused.

"Well, now you are! In fact, Friday you'll be on stage."

Byrd was busy Friday afternoon, and when Madge met him in front of the Memorial Auditorium he wore a broad grin. "It went like clockwork," he told her. "There are so many electricians working in there, nobody noticed one more."

"I'm still worried."

"You were worried at the accident. You were probably worried every night during Tommy's act."

"I was," she admitted.

"Did you phone Florence Pregger?"

"Yes. I did it just like you said. She promised we could meet Starr before the show."

The Preggers arrived promptly at six-thirty, and Sloane Pregger took charge at once. "You know this is most unusual. We rarely get to see Hard ourselves, and we never take other fans backstage. I had to call and clear it with him." Pregger gave Byrd a little smirk. "Of course when I told him what a charming little wife you had, he was all for meeting you."

A few fans had already taken up positions by the back door of the auditorium, but the guard let the Preggers and their guests enter. Obviously they were expected.

"I'm so excited," Madge babbled.

"You never thought you'd really meet him," Byrd said.

"He's a great guy," Pregger assured them. "You'll love him."

They passed through an outer phalanx of business managers and assorted hangers-on before finally being ushered into the presence of Hard Starr himself. He rose from his dressing-room table and eyed Madge with open admiration through eyes just the least bit glassy. "Well! This is really something!"

"Mary Sparrow, and her husband John," Florence introduced them. "Mary is a great fan of yours."

Hard Starr leaned against his chair. "Sparrow. A real cute little bird, huh?" He chuckled and tossed the long hair from his eyes, and Madge realized that he was high on something. Had Byrd counted on that? she wondered.

"So pleased to meet you," she mumbled.

He grinned foolishly and gave her hand a little squeeze. "I'll dedicate a song to you tonight."

"Your manager says you've got another sellout," Pregger said. "Our fan club took twenty percent of the seats."

"And don't think I don't appreciate it," Starr said, but his eyes hadn't left Madge's face. He might have been thanking them for her rather than the ticket sales.

She managed to glance at Byrd and saw his barely discernible nod. "I'd love to see your guitar," she said.

"Sorry, pet," Starr said, "it's already on stage, hooked up to the juice."

She had to admit he was handsome close up, and the drugged look in his eyes gave him a sleepy sensuality that young girls especially might find hard to resist. "Couldn't I see it anyway?" she pleaded. "I'd love to be on stage with you and pretend we were performing together."

"We could pretend lots more than that," he said, grabbing her hand. "Come on!"

Byrd lingered behind, and Madge heard him say to the Preggers, "Look at her! She's having the time of her life!"

The auditorium stage was in darkness except for an upright worklight that glowed at one side. The guitars and drums for Hard Starr and his backup trio were all in place, wired to the amplifiers that would soon deaden or delight the ears of the paying customers. "Wonderful!" Madge said, running her fingers gently over Starr's guitar.

"Here! Let me show you!" He flipped a switch and began grinding out a familiar melody. Byrd and the Preggers were watching from the side of the stage, and a couple of stagehands worked above, securing some flats of scenery.

Madge threw back her head and gave a few bumps and grinds in time to the music, to Starr's obvious satisfaction. After a few moments he put down his guitar and came to join her.

"Here, baby," he said, and that was when she made her move.

She moved against him, with his body party shielding her movements from the Preggers. Then suddenly she moved backward, pulling him along. She broke free, seemed to trip over a cable, and went down in a shower of sparks. She screamed once, turned over and lay still.

"My God!" Byrd shouted, running across the stage ahead of the others. "What happened?"

"I. . .I don't know," Hard Starr said, holding onto his forehead as if he couldn't believe it.

Byrd felt for Madge's pulse and sparks shot to his fingertips. "She's being electrocuted! She's on a live wire!"

"Do something!" Sloane Pregger shouted. His wife screamed, and now stagehands and musicians came running from the wings.

Moving quickly as the sparks continued to play about Madge's limp body, Byrd grabbed at the nearest stagehand. "Kill the power out here! All of it!"

The lights went out and instantly the sparks stopped their crazy dance. The men pulled Madge free of the entangling wires and then as the lights went back on Byrd rushed to her side, pushing Starr away. "Haven't you done enough already?" he growled.

"I just. . ."

"Somebody call an ambulance!" Florence Pregger shouted.

Byrd knelt to feel her pulse. "She's alive, but just barely." He rose to direct his full fury at Starr. "Damn it, what were you trying to do to her?"

Starr's business manager had appeared from somewhere. "We've got a show to put on! What's happening here?"

"There'll be no show tonight," Byrd told him. "My wife may die, and if she does Hard Starr killed her!"

"No! I. . ."

The Preggers were in on it too now. "This auditorium's sold out! You can't cancel the show now. Think of the fans!"

"Think of the money!" Byrd snorted cynically. "Here—someone has to get her breathing again." He dropped down next to Marge and began administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

He was still at it ten minutes later when the ambulance arrived. As Madge was being lifted onto the stretcher, Byrd resumed his attack. "I'm holding you personally responsible," he told Starr. "I'm suing you for one million dollars!"

"On what grounds?" his manager stormed.

"He was attempting a sexual assault on my wife when the accident occurred. And there can't be any doubt that his equipment and wiring were faulty."

"I been all over it," one of the stagehands grumbled. "I can't find what caused it."

They were still arguing when the attendants carried Madge out to the waiting ambulance.

The doctor was just completing his examination when Byrd appeared in the doorway of the emergency-room cubicle. He straightened up with a smile. "Your wife will be all right, sir. She's a very lucky girl, from what I hear."

"She's all right?"

"Oh, she complains of a little pain, and there are some visual hallucinations, but that's normal after electric shock. It'll pass. The important thing is that her vital signs—heart, breathing, pulse, blood pressure—are all normal. There's not even any sign of skin burns. I think she was mostly frightened when it happened."

"Then she can go home?"

"Perhaps we should keep her overnight, just for observation. She can leave in the morning."

When the doctor had left them alone, Byrd gave Madge's hand a squeeze. "Need I tell you you were great?"

Madge hunched herself into a more comfortable position. "Too great, I guess. I don't want to spend the night in this place."

"You have to. The Preggers will surely phone about your condition. If you were out of the hospital they might tell Starr to stop payment on his check."

"Check?"

Byrd smiled. "He just insisted I take money for your hospital expenses and everything."

"How much money?"

"Twenty thousand."

"You're kidding!"

"I guess I was causing such a scene they thought the show would be cancelled. When the paying customers began lining up outside, they came around quickly enough. I signed a release absolving them of further damages. The check is made out to you, and when you sign the endorsement on the back you'll be releasing them from further claims too."

"But twenty thousand dollars!"

"I was hoping for at least twenty-five, but I didn't want to press my luck. And you'll get the two thousand, just like I promised."

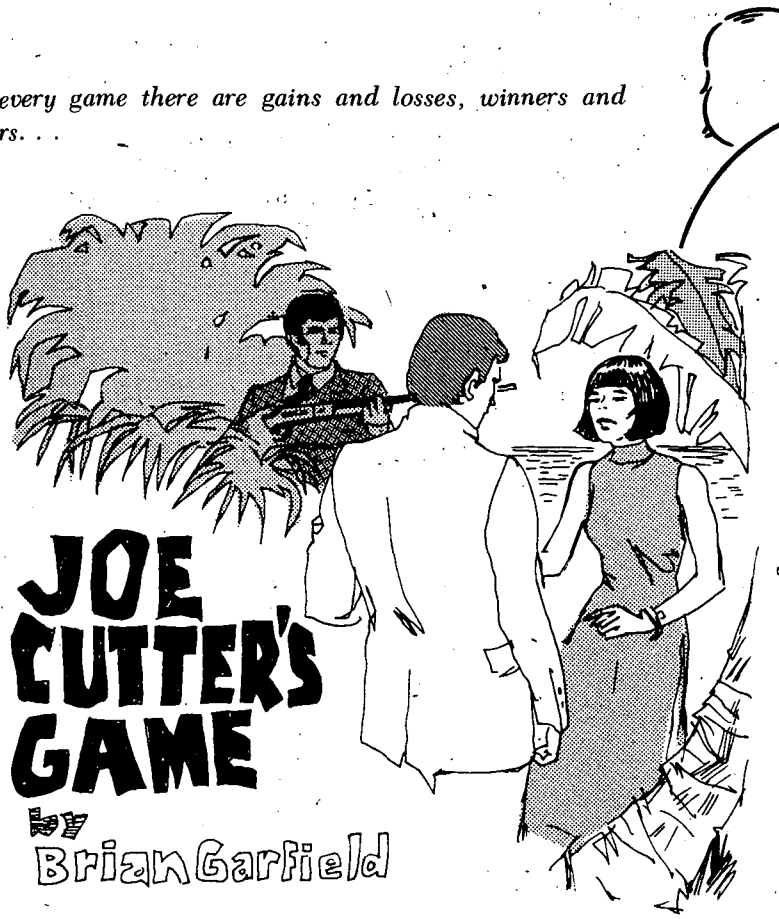
"What about the Tesla coil?"

"You hit the metal plate perfectly when you fell. After I had them kill the power, I simply unplugged it and stuffed wires, coil and metal plate under my coat. When I followed you to the ambulance I dumped the whole thing in a trash barrel, then went back and retrieved it later. Tommy can use it in his act again."

"You're really something, Byrd!" she said with admiration. "What time will you cash the check?"

"They have Saturday banking hours here. I'll be there when the place opens tomorrow. They don't call me the Early Byrd for nothing."

In every game there are gains and losses, winners and losers. . .



JOE CUTTER'S GAME

by Brian Garfield

Myerson looked up from the desk. "Hello, Ross."

Ross shut the door. "Where's Joe?"

"Late. As usual."

As far as Ross remembered there'd been only one time when Joe Cutter had been late arriving in this office and that had been the result of a bomb scare that had grounded everything for three hours at Templehof. Myerson's acidulous remark had been a cheap shot. But

then that was Myerson.

Myerson pretended to read a report in a manila file. The silence began to rag Ross' nerves. "What's the flap?"

"We'll wait for Joe." Myerson didn't look up from the file.

The room was stale with Myerson's illegal Havana smoke. It was a room that always unnerved Ross because among Myerson's varied and indeterminate functions was that of hatchet man. Any audience with him might turn out to be one's last: fall into disfavor with anyone on the Fourth Floor and one could have a can tied to one's tail at any time, Civil Service or no Civil Service; and as very junior staff Ross had no illusions about his right to tenure.

But Myerson didn't seem to be in a savage mood right now. The rudeness was all right—that was what passed for amiability with Myerson.

Finally Joe Cutter walked in, lean and dark with his actorish good looks and the cold eyes that concealed his spectacular shrewdness.

"You're late."

"Okay." Joe Cutter glanced at Ross and tossed his travel coat across a chair. No hat; Cutter seldom wore a hat.

Myerson folded the file shut. "That's all you've got to say to me?"

"Would you like a note from my mother explaining my tardiness?"

"Your sarcasms seldom amuse me, Joe."

"Then don't provoke them. We were in the holding pattern over Dulles International." Cutter sat down. "What's on?"

"We have a signal from Arbuckle." Myerson tapped the file with a fingertip.

"Where's Arbuckle?"

"East Africa. You really ought to try and keep up on the postings in your own department, Joe." Myerson lit a cigar, making a smug ritualistic show of it.

Cutter's amused glance bounced off Ross. Myerson, puffing smoke, said, "In Dar-es-Salaam."

Ross' impatience burst its confines. "What's the flap, then?"

"I do wish you'd learn not to repeat yourself, Ross. And it distresses me that you're the only drone in this department who doesn't realize that words like 'flap' became obsolete long ago."

Cutter said, "If you're through amusing yourself maybe you could answer Ross' question."

Myerson squinted through the smoke and after a moment evidently decided not to be affronted. "As you may know, affairs in Tanzania remain sensitive. The balance is precarious between our influence and that of the Chinese. It would require only a slight upheaval to tip the bal—"

"Can't you spare us the tiresome diplomatic summaries and get down to it?"

"Contain your childish eagerness, Joe."

"I assumed you hadn't summoned me all the way from Belgrade to chew the rag about Tanzanian politics."

Ross marveled that their sparring always seemed to produce satisfactory results in the end. Their antipathy wasn't an act—the mutual contempt was genuine enough.

Along the Fourth Floor they called Cutter "007"—he was one of the last of the adventurers, the ones who'd come into the game for excitement and challenge back in the days when you could still tell the good guys from the bad guys. Myerson naturally regarded him as a hopeless romantic, incurable sentimentalist, obsolete relic.

And Cutter held Myerson in equal scorn: saw Myerson as a pale slug gone soft where he sat and soft where he did his thinking—clever enough of course but comfortable in his bureaucratic web. Cutter detested comfortable people.

On the surface they were equally cold but Ross knew the difference: Myerson's coldness was genuine and Cutter's was not. The bitterness between them masked a mutual respect neither of them would admit on pain of torture. Myerson was without peer as a strategist and Cutter was equally brilliant as a tactician in the field and Myerson knew that or he wouldn't have kept assigning Joe Cutter to the toughest ones.

And me?

Leonard Ross is just along for the ride to hold everybody's coat.

But Ross didn't mind. He'd never have a better pair of teachers. And despite all Cutter's efforts to keep him at a rigid distance Ross liked him. If you knew you had Cutter at your back you never had to worry about what might be creeping up on you.

Myerson reopened the file. He selected a photograph and held it up on display. "Recognize the woman?"

To Ross it was only a badly focused black-and-white of a thin woman with attractive and vaguely Oriental features, age indetermi-

nate. But Cutter said immediately, "Marie Lapautre."

"Indeed."

Ross leaned forward for a closer look. It was the first time he'd seen a likeness of the dragon lady, whose reputation in the shadow world was something like that of John Wesley Hardin in the days of the gunslingers.

"The signal from Arbuckle reports she's been seen in the lobby of the Kilimanjaro in Dar. Buying a picture postcard," Myerson added drily.

"Could be she's out for a good time," Cutter said. "Spending some of the blood money on travel like any other well-heeled tourist. She's never worked that part of the world, you know."

"Which is precisely why Peking might select her if they had a sensitive job to be done there."

"That's all you've got? Just the one sighting? No confirmation from Arbuckle, no evidence of a caper in progress?"

"Joe, if we wait for evidence it could arrive in a pine box. We'd prefer not to have that sort of confirmation." The cigar had grown a substantial ash and Myerson tapped it into the big glass tray. "The triumvirate in Dar is fairly well balanced. The President—Nyerere—is a confirmed neutralist and an honest one. I'm explaining this for your benefit, Ross, since it's not your usual territory. Of Nyerere's two partners in leadership one leans toward the West and the other toward the Communists. The tension keeps things in equilibrium and it's produced good results over a span of years. We have every reason to wish that the status remain quo. That's both the official line and the under-the-counter reality."

Ross was perfectly well aware of all that but Myerson enjoyed exposition and it would have annoyed him to be interrupted by a junior. An annoyed Myerson was something Ross preferred not to have to deal with. Cutter could get away with insulting Myerson because Cutter knew he was not expendable.

"The Chinese are not as charitable as we are toward neutralists," Myerson went on. "Particularly in view of the Russian meddling in Angola. The Chinese have been discussing the idea of increasing their own influence in Africa. I have that confirmed in recent signals from Hong Kong station. Add to this background the presence of Marie Lapautre in Dar-es-Salaam and I believe we must face the likelihood

of an explosive event. Possibly you can forecast the nature of it as well as I can?"

It was an obvious challenge and Ross was pleased to see Cutter rise to meet it without effort: "Assuming you're right, I'd guess Lapautre's job would be to assassinate one of the three leaders."

"Which one?"

"The one who leans toward the Communists."

Ross said, "What?"

Cutter said, "The assassination would look like an American plot."

Myerson, his head obscured in a grey cloud, said, "It would take no more than that to tilt the balance over toward the East."

"Deal and double deal," Cutter said under his breath.

Myerson said, "You two are booked on the afternoon flight by way of Zurich. The assignment is to prevent Lapautre from embarrassing us."

"All right." That was the sum of Cutter's response. He asked no questions; he turned toward the door.

Ross said, "Wait one. Why not warn the Tanzanians? Wouldn't that get us off the hook if anything did happen?"

"Hardly," Myerson said. "It would make it worse. Don't explain it to him, Joe—let him reason it out for himself. It should be a useful exercise for him. On your way now—you've hardly time to make your plane."

By the time they were belted into their seats he thought he had it worked out. "If we threw them a warning and then the assassination actually took place later, it would look like we'd done it ourselves and tried to alibi it in advance. Is that what Myerson meant?"

"Go to the head of the class." Cutter fed him the sliver of a smile. "Things are touchy—there's an excess of suspicion of *auslanders* over there—they're xenophobes, you can't tell them things for their own good. Our only option is to neutralize the dragon lady without anyone knowing about it."

"Can we pin down exactly what we mean by that word 'neutralize?' "

"I'll put in this way," Cutter said. "Have you ever killed a woman, Ross?"

"No. Nor a man for that matter."

"Neither have I. And I intend to keep it that way. I've got enough

on my conscience."

"Then how can we possibly handle it? We can't just ask her to go away."

"Let's see how things size up first." Cutter tipped his head back against the paper antimacassar and closed his eyes.

It was obvious from Cutter's complacency that he had a scheme in mind. If he hadn't he'd have made more of a show of arrogant confidence.

The flight was interminable. They had to change planes in Zurich and from there it was another nine hours. Ross tried to sleep but he'd never been able to relax on airplanes. He spent the hours trying to predict Cutter's plan. How did you deal with an assassin who had never been known to botch an assignment?

He reviewed what he knew about Marie Lapautre—fact, rumor and legend garnered from various briefings and shop-talk along the corridors in Langley.

French father, Vietnamese mother. Born 1934 on a plantation west of Saigon. Served as a sniper in the Viet Minh forces at Dienbienphu. Ran with the Cong in the late 1960s with assignments ranging from commando infiltration to assassinations of village leaders and then South Vietnamese officials. Seconded to Peking in 1969 for specialized terrorist instruction. Detached from the Viet Cong, inducted into the Chinese Army and assigned to the Seventh Bureau—a rare honor. Seconded as training cadre to the Japanese Red Army. It was rumored Lapautre had planned the tactics for the bombings at Tel Aviv Airport. During the past few years Lapautre's name had come across Ross' desk at least five times in reports dealing with unsolved assassinations in Laos, Syria, Turkey, Libya and West Germany.

Marie Lapautre's weapon was the rifle. Four of the five unsolved assassinations had been effected with long-range fire from Kashkalnikov sniper rifles—the model known to be Lapautre's choice.

Lapautre was forty-two years old, five feet four, one hundred and five pounds, black hair and eyes, mottled burn scar on back of right hand. Spoke five languages including English. Ate red meat barely cooked when the choice was open. She lived between jobs in a 17th century villa on the Italian Riviera—a home she had bought with funds reportedly acquired from hire-contract jobs as a free-lance. Three of the five suspected assassinations had been bounty jobs and the other

two had been unpaid because she still held a commission in Peking's Seventh Bureau.

That was the sum of Ross' knowledge and it told him nothing except that Lapautre was a professional with a preference for the 7.62-mm. Kashkalnikov and the reputation for never missing a score. By implication it told him one other thing: if Lapautre became aware of the fact that two Americans were moving in to prevent her from completing her present assignment then she would not hesitate to kill them and she naturally would kill them with proficient dispatch.

He was having trouble keeping his eyes open by the time they checked into the New Africa Hotel. It had been built by the Germans when Tanganyika had been one of the Kaiser's colonies and it had been rebuilt by Africans to encourage business travel; it was comfortable enough and Cutter had picked it because it was within easy walking distance along the harborfront to the Kilimanjaro where Lapautre had been spotted. Also, unlike the Hiltonized Kilimanjaro, the New Africa emulated the middle-class businessmen's hotels of Europe and one didn't need to waste energy trying to look like a tourist.

The change in time zones was bewildering; it was the same time of afternoon in Dar as it had been at Dulles Airport when they'd boarded the 747 but to Ross it was the wee hours of the morning and he stumbled groggily when he went along with Cutter to the shabby export office that housed the front organization for Arbuckle's soporific East Africa station.

It wasn't as steamy as he'd anticipated. A fresh breeze came off the water and he had to concede he'd never seen a more beautiful harbor, ringed by palm-shaded beaches and colorful expensive houses on the slopes. Some of the older buildings bespoke a dusty Mexican sort of poverty but the city was more modern and energetic than anything he'd expected to find near the Equator on the shore of the Indian Ocean. There were jams of hooting traffic on the main boulevards; on the sidewalks business-suited pedestrians mingled with turbaned Arabs and dark-eyed Asians and black Africans in proud tribal costumes. Here and there a 4x4 lorry growled by with a squad of armed soldiers in it but they all seemed bound for some innocent destination and there was no police-state tension on the streets. There was a proliferation of cubbyhole curio shops selling African carvings and cloth but the

main shop windows were well dressed out with sophisticated displays of European fashions. It occurred to Ross after they reached Arbuckle's office that he hadn't been accosted by a single beggar.

Arbuckle was a tall man, thin and bald and somewhat nervous; inescapably he was known in the Agency as Fatty. He had one item to add to the information Myerson had already provided: Lapautre was still in Dar.

"We've been keeping her under informal surveillance. She's in four-eleven at the Kilimanjaro but she takes most of her dinners in the dining room at the New Africa. They've got better steaks. Watch out you don't bump into her there. She knows your face, I suppose."

"She's probably seen dossiers on me," Cutter said. "I doubt she'd know Ross by sight."

Ross said, "Sometimes it pays to be unimportant."

"Hang onto that thought," Cutter told him. When they left the office he added, "You'd better go back to the room and catch up on your jet-lag."

"What about you?"

"Chores and snooping. Department of dirty tricks and all that. Catch you for breakfast—seven o'clock."

"You going to tell me what the program is?"

He saw Cutter wince. "I see no point discussing anything at all with you until you've had sixteen hours' sleep."

"Don't *you* ever sleep?"

"When I haven't got anything better to do."

Ross watched him walk away under the palms.

He came famished down to the second-floor dining room and found Cutter there nibbling on a mango. The breakfast layout was a fabulous array of fruits and juices and breads and coldcuts. He heaped a plate full and began to devour it unabashedly.

The room wasn't crowded but there was a sprinkling of businessmen from Europe and the Far East, African officials, tourist couples, a table of Englishmen who probably were engineers on hire to Tanzanian industries, a trio of overweight Americans in safari costumes that appeared to have been tailored in Hollywood. Cutter said mildly, "I picked the table at random," by which he meant that it probably wasn't bugged.

Ross said; "Then we're free to discuss sensitive state secrets."

"Do you have to talk in alliterative sibilants at this hour of the morning?" Cutter tasted his coffee and made a face. "You'd think they could make it better. After all, they grow the stuff here." He put the cup down. "All right. We've got to play her cagy and careful. If anything blows loose there won't be any cavalry to rescue us."

"Us?"

"Did you think you were here just to feed me straight lines, Ross? It's a two-man job. Actually it's a six-man job but the two of us have got to carry it."

"Wonderful. Should I start practicing my quick-draw?"

"If you'd stop asking droll questions we'd get along a little faster."

"All right. Proceed, my general."

"First the backgrounding. We're jumping to a number of conclusions based on flimsy evidence but it can't be helped." Cutter ticked them off on his fingers. "We assume, one, that she's here on a job and not just to take pictures of elephants. Two, that it's a Seventh Bureau assignment. Three, that the job is to assassinate somebody. Four, that the target is a government leader here. We don't know the timetable so we have to assume. Five, that it could happen at any moment. Therefore we must act immediately. Are you with me so far?"

"So far, sure."

"We assume, six, that the local Chinese station is unaware of her mission."

"Why do we assume that?"

"Because they're bugging her room."

Ross gawked at him.

Cutter made a show of patience. "I didn't waste the night sleeping."

"All right, you went through the dragon lady's room, you found a bug. But how do you know it's a Chinese bug?"

"Because I found not one bug but three. One was ours—up-to-date equipment and I checked it out with Arbuckle. Had to get him out of bed, he wasn't happy but he admitted it's our bug. The second was American-made but obsolescent. Presumably the Tanzanian secret service placed it there. We sold a batch of that model to them some years back. The third mike was made in Sinkiang Province, one of those square little numbers they must have shown you in tech briefings back in school. Satisfied?"

"Okay. No Soviet agent worth his vodka would stoop to using a bug of Chinese manufacture, so that leaves the Chinese. So the local Chinese station is bugging her room and that means they don't know why she's here. Go on."

"They're bugging her because she's been known to free-lance. Naturally they're nervous. They want to find out who she's working for and who she's gunning for. Peking hasn't told them because of interservice rivalry and need-to-know and all that nonsense—they're paranoid by definition, the Seventh Bureau never tells anybody anything. They feel a secret has the best chance of remaining a secret only so long as the number of people who know it is kept to a minimum. The thing is, Ross, as far as the local Chinese are concerned she could just as easily be down here on a job for Warsaw or East Berlin or London or Washington or some Arab oil sheik. They just don't know—so they're keeping an eye on her."

"Go on."

"Now the Tanzanians are bugging her as well and they don't bug just any tourist who checks into a first-class hotel. That means they know who she is. They're not sure enough to take action but they're suspicious. So whatever we do we handle it very quietly. We don't make waves that might splash up against the presidential palace. That's another reason we can't have a termination-with-extreme-prejudice on the record of this caper. When we leave here we leave everything exactly as we found it. That's the cardinal rule. Corpses don't figure in the equation—not Lapautre's corpse and certainly not yours or mine."

"I'll vote for that."

"More assumptions. We assume, seven, that Lapautre isn't a hip-shooter. If she were she wouldn't have lasted this long. She's careful, she finds out what the situation is before she steps into it. We can use that caution of hers. And finally—crucially—we assume, eight, that she's not very well versed in surveillance technology."

"We do? How?"

"She's never been an intelligence gatherer. Her experience is in violence. She's a basic sort of creature—a carnivore. I don't see her as a scientific whiz. She uses an old-fashioned sniper rifle because she's comfortable with it—she's not an experimenter. She'd know the rudiments of electronic eavesdropping but when it comes to sophisticated devices I doubt she's got much interest. Apparently she either doesn't

know her room is bugged or knows it but doesn't care. Either way it indicates the whole area is outside her field of interest. Likely there are types of equipment she doesn't even know about."

"Types like for instance?"

"Parabolic reflectors. Long-range directionals."

"Those are hardly ultrasophisticated. They date back to World War Two."

"But not in the Indochinese jungles. They wouldn't be a normal part of her experience."

"Does it matter?"

"I'm not briefing you just to listen to the sound of my dulcet voice, Ross. The local Chinese station is equipped with parabolics and directionals."

"Now I begin to get the idea." Ross felt overstuffed. Forewarned by Cutter's reaction he eschewed the coffee and pushed his chair back.

Cutter said, "Good breakfast?"

"Best I ever ate."

"You've got to memorize your lines now and play the part perfectly the first time out. You're well fed and you look spry enough but are you awake?"

"Go ahead. I'm awake," Ross said dismally.

According to plan Ross made the phone call at nine in the morning from a coin telephone in the cable office. A clerk answered and Ross asked to be connected to extension four-eleven. It rang three times and was picked up: the woman's voice was low and smoky. *"Oui?"*

"Two hundred thousand dollars, deposited to a Swiss account." That was the opening line because it was unlikely she'd hang up until she found out what it was about. "Are you interested?"

"Is this a crank?"

"Not a crank, Mademoiselle, but clearly one does not mention names or details on an open telephone line. I think we should arrange a meeting. It's an urgent matter."

Beside him Joe Cutter watched without expression. Ross gripped the receiver with a palm gone damp and clammy.

"Are you speaking for yourself, M'sieur?"

"I represent certain principals." Because she wouldn't deal directly with anyone fool enough to act as his own front man. Ross said,

"You've been waiting to hear from me, n'est-ce-pas?" That was for the benefit of those who were bugging her phone; he went on quickly before she could deny it: "At noon today I'll be on the beach just north of the fishing village at the head of the bay. I'll be wearing a white shirt, short sleeves, khaki trousers and white plimsolls. I'll be alone and of course without weapons." He had to swallow quickly.

The line seemed dead for a while but he resisted the urge to test it. Finally the woman spoke. "Perhaps."

Click.

"Perhaps," he repeated for Cutter's benefit and Cutter shrugged—in any case there was nothing they could do about it now. He would have to be on the beach at noon and hope she showed.

Driving north in the rent-a-car he said to Cutter, "She didn't sound enthusiastic. I doubt she'll come."

"She'll come."

"What makes you so confident?"

"Without phone calls like that she wouldn't be able to maintain her standard of living. She can't afford to turn down an offer of two hundred thousand American. She'll come."

"Armed to the teeth, no doubt," Ross muttered.

"No. She's a pro. A pro never carries a gun when he doesn't have to—a gun can get you in too much trouble if it's discovered. But she's probably capable of dismantling you by hand in any one of a dozen methods so try not to provoke her suspicions until we've sprung the trap."

"You have a way of being incredibly comforting sometimes, you know that?"

"You're green, Ross, and you have a tendency to be flip when you shouldn't be. This isn't a matter for frivolous heroics. You're not without courage and it's silly to pretend otherwise. But it's a mistake to treat this kind of thing with childish bravado. There's a serious risk of ending up in the surf face-down if you don't treat the woman with all the caution in the world. Your job's simple and straightforward and there's nothing funny about it—just keep her interested and steer her to the right place. And remember your lines, for God's sake."

They parked the car on the verge of the road and walked through

the palms to the edge of the water. The beach was a narrow white strip of perfect sand curving away in a crescent. At the far end was a scatter of thatched huts and a few sagging docks to which was tethered a small fleet of primitive catamaran fishing boats. It was pleasantly warm and the air was surprisingly clear and dry. Two small black children ran up and down the distant sand laughing; their voices carried weakly to Ross' ears. The half mile of beach between was empty of visible life. A tourist-poster scene, Ross thought, but a feeling of menace put the taste of brass on his tongue.

A few small wretched boats floated at anchor and farther out on the open water a pair of junks drifted south with the mild wind in their square sails. A dazzling white sport-fisherman with a flying bridge rode the swells in a lazy figure-eight pattern about four hundred yards offshore; two men in floppy white hats sat in the stern chairs, trolling their lines. A few miles out toward the horizon a tramp prowled northward, following the coast, steaming from port to port—Tanga next, then Mombasa, and so forth. And there was a faint spiral of smoke even farther out—probably the Zanzibar ferry.

Cutter put his back to the ocean and spoke in a voice calculated to reach no farther than Ross' ears. "Spot them?"

Ross was searching the beach, running his glance along the belt of palms that shaded the sand. "Not a soul. Maybe they didn't get the hint."

"The sport fisherman, Ross. Use your head. They've got telescopes and long-range microphones focused on this beach right now and if I were facing them they'd hear every word I'm saying."

That was why they'd given it three hours lead-time after making the phone call. To give the Chinese time to get in position to monitor the meet. In a way Ross felt relieved: at least they'd taken the bait. It remained to be seen whether the dragon lady would prove equally gullible.

He turned to say something to Cutter but found he was alone at the edge of the trees: Cutter had disappeared without a sound. Discomfited, Ross began to walk along the beach toward the village, kicking sand with his toes. He put his hands in his pockets and then thought better of that and took them out again so that it was obvious they were empty. He twisted his wrist to look at his watch and found it was eleven fifty-five. He walked to the middle of the crescent of sand and

stood there looking inland, trying to ignore the fishing boat a quarter of a mile behind him, trying to talk himself out of the acute feeling that a rifle's telescopic crosshairs were centered between his shoulderblades. He discovered that his back muscles had gone tense against an awaited bullet.

He started walking around in an aimless little circle, spurred by the vague theory that they'd have a harder time hitting a moving target. He realized how ridiculous it was: they had no reason to take potshots at him—they'd be curious, not murderous—but he was no longer in a state of mind where logic was the ruling factor.

He heard the putt-putt of an engine and turned with casual curiosity and watched a little outboard come in sight around the headland and beat its way forward, its bow slapping the water. Then he looked away, looked back up into the palm trees wondering when the woman would show up. He did a slow take and turned on his heel again and watched the outboard come straight toward him.

It was the dragon lady and she was alone at the tiller. She ran the boat up onto the beach, tipped the engine up across the transom, jumped overside and came nimbly ashore. She dragged the boat forward and then turned to look at Ross across the intervening fifty yards of sand. He tried to meet her stare without cringing. Her eyes left him and began to explore the trees and she made a thorough job of it before she stirred, coming toward him with lithe graceful strides.

She was not a big woman but there was nothing fragile or petite about the way she held herself. The unlined face was harder than the photograph had suggested; it was something in the eyes, as if her pupils were chipped out of brittle obsidian stone. She wore an *ao dai*, the simple form-fitting dress of Indochina; it was painted to her skin and there was no possibility she could have concealed any sort of weapon under it. Perhaps she wore it for that reason.

Ross didn't move; he let her come to him. It was in his instructions.

"Well then, M'sieur."

"The money," he began, and then he stopped, tongue-tied.

He'd forgotten his lines.

The obsidian eyes drilled into him. *"Oui?"*

In the corner of his vision he saw the white sport boat bobbing on a swell. Somehow it galvanized him. He cleared his throat. "The money's already on deposit and we have the receipt. If you do the job

you'll be given both the receipt and the number of the account. Two hundred thousand in American dollars. That works out to something over half a million Swiss francs at the current rate."

Her lip curled a bit—an exquisitely subtle expression. "I would need a bit more information than that, M'sieur."

"The name of the target, of course. The deadline date by which the assignment must be completed. More than that you don't get." He kept his face straight and feverishly rehearsed the rest of his lines.

"But of course there is one item you've left out," she said.

"I don't think there is, Mlle Lapautre."

"I must know the nature of my employers."

"Not included in the price of your ticket, I'm afraid."

"Then we have wasted our morning, both of us."

"For two hundred thousand dollars we expected a higher class of discretion than you seem inclined to exercise." It was a line Cutter had drilled into him and it went against his usual mode of expression but Cutter had insisted on the precise wording. And it was amazing the way she responded: as if Cutter had somehow written her dialogue as well as Ross'. His predictions had been uncanny.

She said, "Discretion costs a little more, M'sieur, especially if it concerns those whom I might regard as my natural enemies."

"Capitalists, you mean."

"You *are* American?"

"I am," Ross said. "That's not to say my principals are Americans." *The thing is, Ross, you want to keep her talking, you don't want to close the door and send her skittering away. And at the same time you don't want to get her mad at you. String her along, get her curiosity whetted. She'll insist on having more information. Stretch it out. Stall her. Edge her away. Don't give her the name of the target until she's in position.*

Casually he put his hands in his pockets and turned away from her and strolled very slowly toward the palms. He didn't look back to see if she was following him. He spoke in a normal tone so that she'd have trouble hearing him if she let him get too far ahead of her. "My principals are willing to discuss the matter more directly with you if you agree to take the job on. Not a face-to-face meeting of course, none of us could afford that. But they'll speak to you on safe lines. Coin telephones at both ends—I'm sure you know the drill, you're not an

amateur." The words tasted sour on his tongue: if anyone in this game was an amateur it was himself.

But it was working. She was trailing along, moving as casually as he was. He threw his head back and stared at the sky. "The target isn't a difficult one. The security measures aren't severe."

"But he's an important one. A visible figure. Otherwise the price would not be so high," she said. It was something Cutter hadn't forecast and Ross wasn't quite sure how to answer it.

So he made no reply at all. He kept drifting toward the palms, moving in aimless half circles. After a moment he said, "Of course you weren't followed here?" It was in the script.

"Why do you think I chose to come by open boat, M'sieur? No one followed me. Can you say the same?"

Position.

He turned and watched her move alongside. She had, as Cutter had predicted, followed his lead. It was Indochinese courtesy, inbred and unconscious—the residue of a servile upbringing.

She stood beside him now a few feet to his right; like Ross she was facing the palm trees.

Ross dropped his voice and spoke without turning his head; there was no possibility the microphones would hear him. "Don't speak for a moment now. Look slightly to your right—the palm tree with the thick bole."

He stepped back a pace as he spoke. He watched her head turn slowly. Saw her stiffen when she spotted Cutter, indistinct in the shadows. Cutter stirred then and it was enough to make the sun ripple along the barrel of his rifle.

In the same guarded low voice Ross said, "It's a Mannlicher bolt action with high-speed ammunition. Hollowpoint bullets and a 'scope sight calibrated to anything up to eight hundred yards. You wouldn't stand a chance if you tried to run for it." He kept stepping back because he didn't want her close enough to him to jump him and use him for a shield. Yet he had to stay within voice rance of her because if he lifted his tone or turned his head more than a quarter-inch the finely focused directional mike on the sport fisherman would pick up his words immediately.

He saw her shoulders drop half an inch and felt the beginnings of a swell of triumph. *If she doesn't break for it in the first five seconds she*

won't break at all. She's a pro, Ross, remember that. A pro doesn't fight the drop. Not when it's dead clear to her what the situation is.

"You're in a box, Mlle. Lapautre, and you've only got one way to get out of it alive. Are you listening to me?"

"Certainly."

"Don't try to figure everything out because it would take you too long and there are parts of it you'll never know. We're playing out a charade, that's all you need to keep in mind. If you play your part as required, nobody gets hurt."

"What is it you want, then?"

Her cool aplomb amazed him even though Cutter had told him to expect it. Again: *She's a pro.* She had sized up the situation and that was that.

Cutter was motionless in the shadows, too far away for Lapautre to recognize his features; because of the angle he was hidden from the view of those on board the sport fisherman. All they'd be able to tell was that Ross and Marie Lapautre were having a conversation in tones too low for their eavesdropping equipment to record. They'd be frustrated and angry but there wouldn't be anything they could do about it. They'd hang on station hoping to pick up scraps of words that they could later edit together and make some sense out of.

Ross answered her, *sotto voce*. "I want you to obey my instructions. In a moment I'm going to step around in front of you and face you. The man in the trees will keep his rifle aimed at you at all times. If you make any sudden move he'll kill you. But he's too far away to hear us unless we speak up. I'm going to start talking to you in a loud voice. The things I say may not make much sense to you. I don't care what you say by way of response. But whatever it is I want you to say it very softly so that nobody hears your answers. And I want you to look as if you're agreeing with whatever proposition I make to you. Understand?"

"No," she said, "I do not understand but I'll do as you wish."

"That's good enough. Take it easy now."

Then he stepped off to the left and made a careful circle around her, keeping his distance, looking as casual as he knew how. He stopped when he was facing her from her port bow: off to the right he could see the sport fisherman and if he turned his head to the left he could see Cutter. She would have to cross fifteen feet of sand to interpose

Ross between herself and the rifle and she knew there wouldn't be time for that. She didn't speak: she only watched Ross.

He cleared his throat and spoke as if in continuation of a conversation already begun. He enunciated the words clearly, mindful of the shotgun microphone that was focused on his lips from four hundred yards offshore.

"Then we've got a deal. I'm glad you agreed to take it on—you're the best in the business, I think everyone knows that."

Her lip curled again, ever so slightly; she murmured in confounding amusement, "And just what is it I'm supposed to have agreed to, M'sieur?"

Ross nodded vigorously. "Exactly. When you talk to my principals you'll realize immediately that their accents are Russian—Ukrainian to be precise—but I hope that won't deter you from putting your best effort into the assignment."

"This is absurd." But she kept her voice down when she said it.

"That's right," Ross said cheerfully. "There will be no official Soviet record of the transaction. If they're confronted with any accusation, naturally they'll deny it and the world will have only your word to the contrary. I needn't remind you what your word would be worth on the open market—a woman of your reputation? So you can see that it's in your own best interests to keep absolutely silent about the matter."

"This is pointless. Who can possibly benefit from this ridiculous performance?"

"I think they'll find that acceptable," Ross said. "Now then, to get down to the matter at hand."

He saw her eyes flick briefly toward the palms. He didn't look over his shoulder; he knew Cutter was still there. He went on in his overconfident voice:

"The target must be taken out within the next twelve days because that's the deadline for a particular international maneuver the details of which needn't concern you. The target is here in Dar-es-Salaam, so you should have plenty of time to set up the assassination. Do you recognize the name Chiang Hsien?"

She laughed then. She actually laughed. "Incredible."

He forced himself to smile. "Yes. The chief of the China station in Dar. Now there's just one more detail."

"Is that all? Thank goodness for that."

Ross nodded pleasantly. "Yes, that's right. You must make it appear that the assassination is the work of Americans. I'd suggest, for example, that you use an American rifle. I leave the other details in your hands, but the circumstantial evidence must be crystal clear that the assassination was the result of an American plot against the Chinese people's representative in East Africa."

The woman rolled her eyes expressively. "Is that all?"

Ross smiled again. "If you still want confirmation I'll arrange for the telephone contact between you and my principals. In the meantime the receipt and the account number on the Swiss bank will be delivered to your hotel. As soon as we receive confirmation of the death of Chiang Hsien, we'll issue instructions to the bank to transfer ownership of the numbered account and honor your applications for withdrawals. I think that covers everything. It's been pleasant doing business with you, Mlle Lapautre." With a courtly bow Ross turned briskly on his heel and marched away toward the trees without looking back.

He entered the palms about forty feet to Cutter's right and kept going until he was certain he was out of sight of the lenses on the sport fishing boat. Then he curled behind a tree and had his look around.

Cutter was still there, holding the rifle and looking menacing; Cutter winked at him.

The woman was walking back down the beach toward her open boat. The junks had disappeared past the point of land to the south; the catamarans were still tied up on the water by the village; the coastal steamer was plowing north, the ferryboat's smoke had disappeared, the sport fisherman was still figure-eighting on the water but now the two white-hatted men in the stern were packing up their rods and getting out of their swivel chairs.

Ross stood without moving for a stretching interval while the dragon lady pushed her boat out into the surf, climbed over the gunwale, made her way aft and hooked the outboard engine over the transom. She yanked the cord several times until it sputtered into life and then she went chugging out in a wide circle toward the open water, angling to starboard to clear the headland at the end of the bay.

When she'd gone a couple of hundred yards Cutter came through the trees slinging his rifle. "Beautiful job, Ross. You didn't miff a line."

"What happens now?"

"Watch."

The sport fisherman was moving now, its engines whining, planing the water—collision course. Near the headland it intercepted Marie Lapautre's little boat. She tried to turn away but the big white boat leaped ahead of her and skidded athwart her course.

"That skipper knows how to handle her," Cutter commented.

With no choice in the matter the woman allowed her boat to be drawn alongside by a long-armed man with a boathook. One of the white-hatted men came along the deck and gave Marie Lapautre a hand aboard.

The last Ross saw of them the two boats, one towing the other, were disappearing around the headland.

Cutter walked him back to the car. "They'll milk her, of course. But they won't believe a word of it. They've got the evidence on tape—how can she deny it? They wouldn't buy the truth in a thousand years and it's all she's got to offer."

"I feel queasy as hell, Joe. You know what they're going to do to her after they squeeze her dry."

"It'll happen a long way from here and nobody will ever know about it."

"And that makes it right?"

"No. It adds another load to what we've already got on our consciences. You may survive this but if she does she'll never get another job. They'll never trust her again."

They got into the car. Cutter tossed the rifle in the back seat; they'd drop it off at Arbuckle's office to go back into the safe.

Ross said, "It hasn't solved a thing." He gave Cutter a petulant look. "They'll send somebody to take her place. Next week or next month."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. If they do we'll have to deal with it when it happens. You may as well get used to it, Ross. You play one game, you finish it, you add up the score and then you start the next game. That's all there is to it—and that's the fun of it."

Ross stared at him. "I guess it is," he said reluctantly.

He turned the key. Cutter smiled briefly. The starter meshed and Ross put it in gear. He said with sudden savagery, "But it's not all that much fun for the loser, is it?" And fishtailed the car angrily out into the road.

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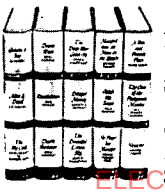

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