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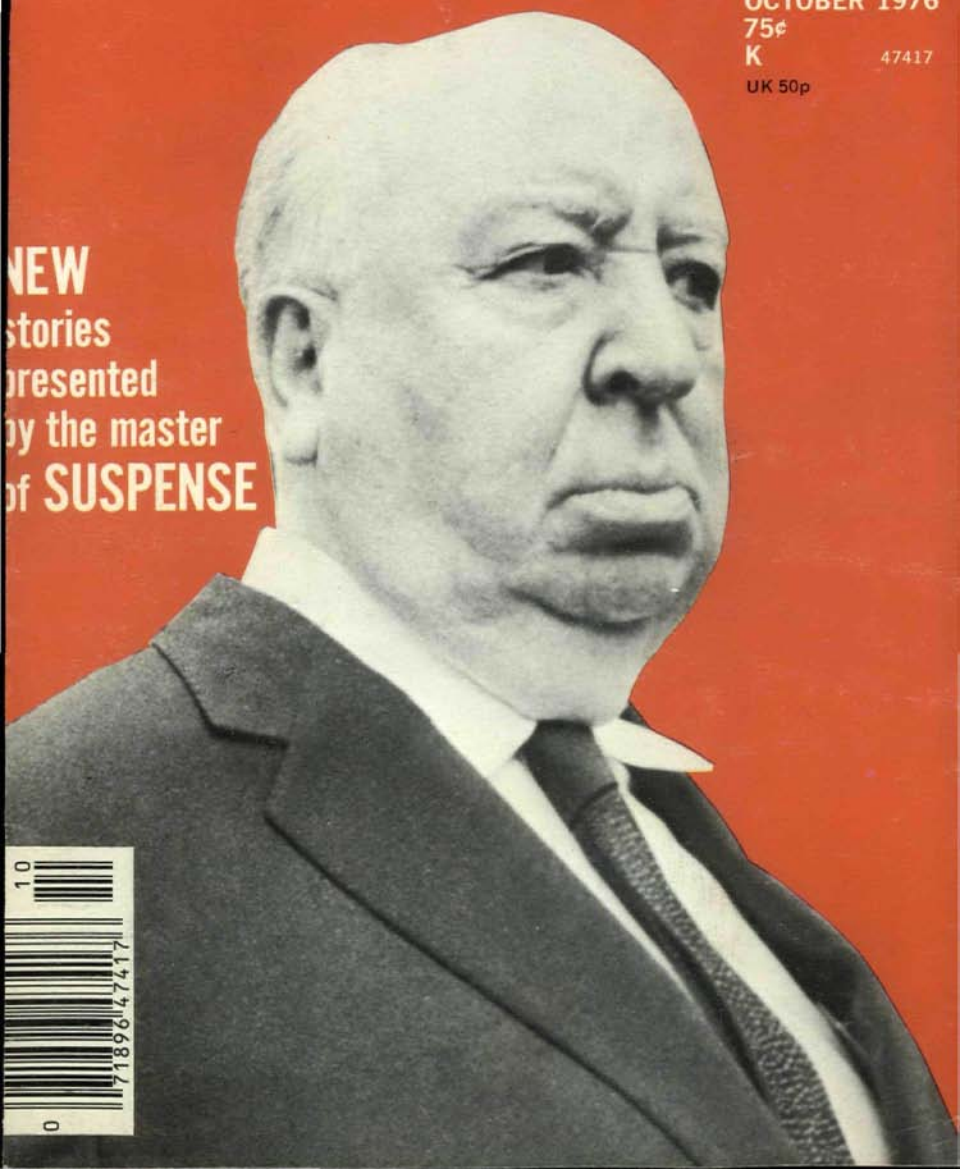

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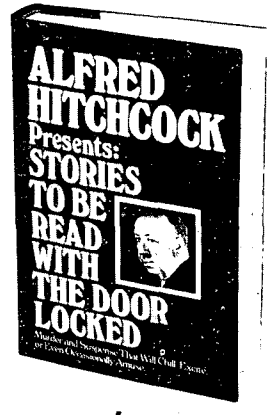

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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SHORT STORIES

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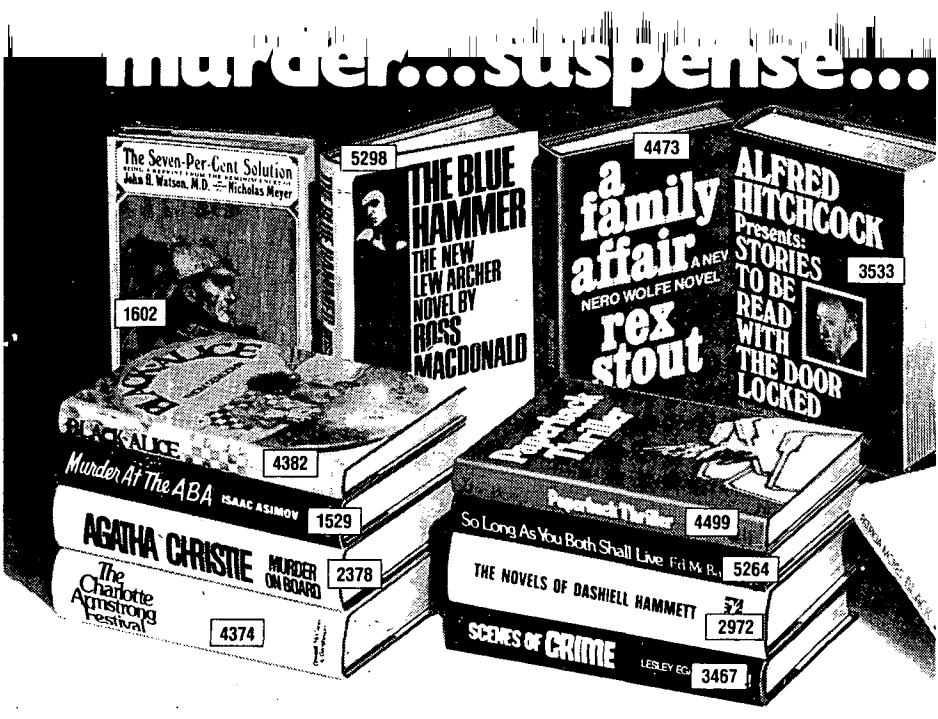

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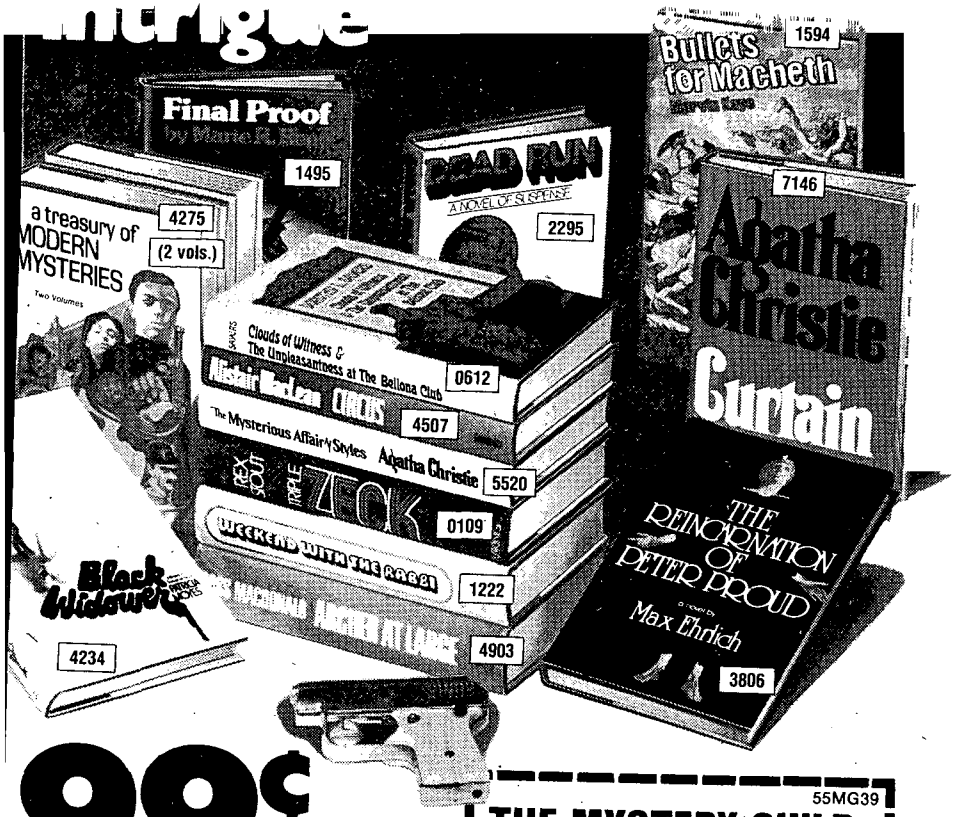

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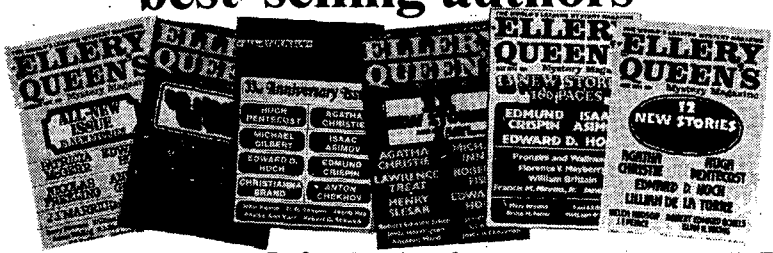

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October 1976

Dear Reader:

When I was four or five years old, my father sent me to the police station with a note. The chief of police read it and locked me in a cell for five or ten minutes, saying, "This is what we do to naughty boys."

I haven't the faintest idea what I was being punished for, but my father was a very nervous man and he loved the theater.

Reading through this issue, it occurred to me that my father would have enjoyed it thoroughly. All of the stories are nervous-making and the settings are strongly theatrical. There is intriguing action on a nightclub stage in Gary Brandner's *The Goodbye Strip,* on a baseball diamond in S. S. Rafferty's *Morte d'Arthur,* in a television studio in Carleton Carpenter's *Second Banana,* and on a movie set in Robert E. Morsberger's *The Double.*

My own special fascination was with the convicts in *How To Turn a Deaf Ear* by Carroll Mayers and *The Arrowmont Prison Riddle* by Bill Pronzini. For some peculiar reason, they inspired in me a remarkable sense of déjà vu.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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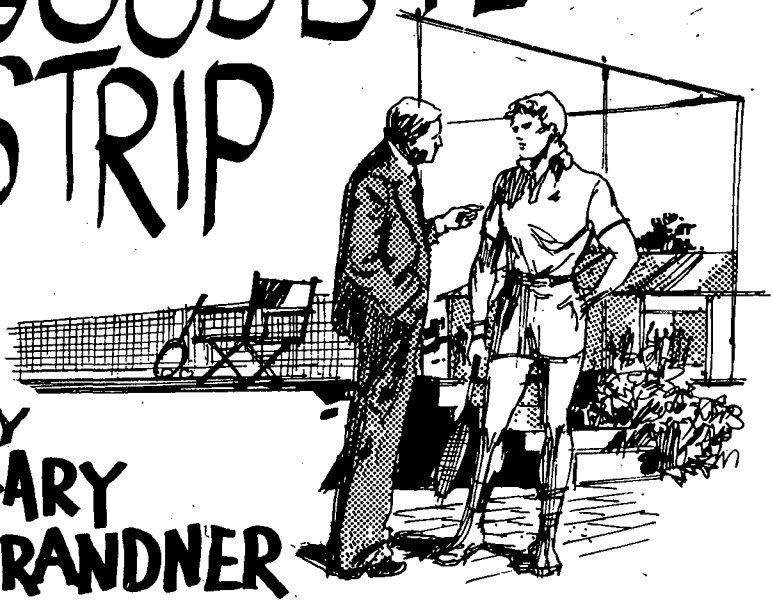
Love knows no laws . . .

THE GOODBYE STRIP



by GARY BRANDNER

You don't see many clubs like the Rendezvous Room any more. Not in Los Angeles. With topless waitresses, bottomless dancers, and anything-goes massage parlors, who needs an old-fashioned strip joint? The Rendezvous, on the frowzy south side of Hollywood, is one of the last.

I swallowed a mouthful of bad bourbon and watched Katy Brenner move through the familiar gyrations of the striptease. A three-man

band—piano, sax, and drums—thumped out the traditional *boom-chucka-boom* rhythm.

Katy, I knew, had to be at least 40, but under the soft pink spotlight the years didn't show. The body was smooth and firm as I remembered, and the big green eyes still had a message for every man in the room. Nothing seemed to have changed.

My thoughts of the past were interrupted by a neat, balding man who picked his way across the floor to my table.

"Stonebreaker?" he asked.

"That's my name."

"I'm Hal Channing, Katy's manager. She asked me to tell you she'll be right out after she finishes her number and changes."

I nodded at the chair across the table and Channing sat down. He had a weary face with a cynical quirk to the mouth, but his eyes were soft and sensitive. At least they were when he watched Katy Brenner.

"I hear you and Katy are old friends," he said.

"In a way. We knew each other a long time ago."

"I've been her manager for almost ten years."

"It was longer ago than that."

"I was surprised to hear that Katy had called a private detective. She didn't tell me what it was about."

"Mm-hmm." I ignored Channing's fishing expedition. The fact was that Katy hadn't told me what it was about either, just that she needed a detective and would fill me in when she saw me.

Channing and I sat for a while without talking, watching Katy strip. Her moves were good and graceful and the crowd liked it. Channing and I nodded at each other, adding our approval.

When she was down to a short, gauzy garment of some kind, Katy moved behind the curtain for a moment and came out brandishing a long shiny sword. She moved around, using the weapon as a prop, suddenly turning awkward and unsure.

Channing gave a little hiss of annoyance. "She insists on using that damn thing," he said.

"It doesn't add much," I admitted.

"To put it mildly. She got the crazy idea a couple of months ago that she needed a gimmick—something like Jennie Lee's tassles or Lili St. Cyr's bathtub. Hell, Katy doesn't need a gimmick. There are few enough girls around today who can do a straight strip. All she has to do

is the same thing she's been doing for years."

"Why a sword?" I asked.

"Who knows? She saw it in a shop in Westwood and thought it would add to the act. So far she's just using it in the early show. Half the time she forgets about it between shows and I have to lock it up for her. The damn thing cost three-hundred dollars."

"There's more than I thought to being a manager," I said.

Channing smiled, a little embarrassed. "Being a prop man isn't usually a part of my job, but Katy's kind of a special client. She's the only stripper I handle, all the rest are straight variety artists."

"I guess there's not much work for strippers any more."

"Not in this town. Katy won't work stags, and I wouldn't let her anyway. She closes here tomorrow night, and told me not to book her for a while. I don't know what she has in mind."

The band honked and bumped to its finale, and Katy danced off stage still modestly dressed in pasties and a G-string. A seedy comic slouched out and told a line of bad jokes while the musicians took a break at the bar.

"How many girls work here?" I asked.

"There's supposed to be two, but the other one got herself marked up in a brawl and Katy's finishing the week out by herself."

In a little while Katy came out and joined us. She was wearing a tailored outfit of brushed cotton that curved where she did. Without stage makeup a few little wrinkles showed, but she still looked just fine.

"Well, Stonebreaker," she said, "it's been—what?—twelve years?"

"Twelve years," I said.

She took one of my hands in both of hers and looked at the scars across the knuckles. The big green eyes searched my face. "You've taken a few lumps," she said softly.

"A few."

"Not that you were any beauty to begin with." Katy smiled at me, and for a couple of seconds twelve years didn't seem so long ago.

Hal Channing cleared his throat. "Look, I guess you two have things to talk about. Did you lock up backstage, Katy?"

"Gee, I'm not sure, Hal. I think I did."

"I'll go check on it," Channing said. And to me, "See you later."

Katy sat back. "Well, aren't you going to tell me how *I* look?"

"Gorgeous," I said.

"Really?"

"Hell yes, really. How come you don't get older like the rest of us?"

She laughed deep in her throat. "Clean living, dear. Seriously, though, I watch my diet and work to keep in shape. I did have my teeth capped and my eyes lifted, but the body's all mine—not an ounce of silicone. Not bad for a 38-year-old lady, huh?"

"Pretty damn good," I said, not about to quibble over a couple of years.

Katy relaxed, and her face showed a little softening along the jawline. She said, "Are you married, Stonebreaker?"

I shook my head.

"Me either. I tried it once, but it didn't take." The light came back into her eyes. "Do you remember my son, Russell?"

"I don't think so."

"I guess he was living with my folks when I knew you. He was about six then. Well, he's at UCLA this year. Taking political science. I wish you could meet him."

"He's not here tonight?"

"Oh, no, Russell never comes here."

"I guess you see enough of each other at home, anyway."

Katy looked away for a moment. "We tried living in the same apartment for a while, but with my crazy hours and all, it didn't work out."

"I see."

"I mean, it's not like he was on the other side of the world. We found him a nice apartment in Westwood where he's handy to the college and everything. We both thought it would work out better."

"Sure."

The waitress brought another bourbon for me and a coke for Katy.

"I guess we might as well get down to business," Katy said. "Somebody is hassling me, Stonebreaker."

"How do you mean?"

"Nothing big—just little things, but they add up. Phone calls that wake me up in the morning, and there's nobody on the line. Air out of my tires. Spray paint on my door. Stuff like that. I want it stopped."

"I suppose you've got a reason for not calling the police?"

"Uh-huh. I think I know who's doing it. The ex-husband I told you about—Lloyd Brenner."

"And you don't want to put the law on him."

"No. Oh, it's not that there's anything between us any more, that was dead long ago." She smiled faintly. "Lloyd was a sax player. You'd think I'd have sense enough not to marry a musician. But I did, even though I knew he was already into the hard stuff. He told me he could handle it. He couldn't, of course. After two years of hell I called it quits."

"How long ago was that?" I asked.

"Eight years."

"He's been bugging you all this time?"

"Oh, no. They put him away for a stretch after he tried to hold up a drugstore with a water pistol. He got out a couple of months ago and went right back on junk. He found me and started coming around for money. I'd been through all that before, so I turned him down. About that time the phone calls and the other funny business started."

"And you don't think this guy belongs back in the joint?"

"Maybe he does," Katy said, "but I don't want to be the one to put him there. He's a junkie and a loser, but in his way he did try to do his best for me. He legally adopted my boy, for one thing."

"What do you want me to do, Katy?"

"Just get him off my back. Some good things are about to happen in my life, and I don't want Lloyd screwing it up. But I don't want him hurt either. In the old days you had a way of persuading people without actually busting them up. Your eyes tell me you can still do it."

"Are you sure your ex-husband is the one doing all this?"

"I haven't any proof, but who else?" Katy took one of the bar napkins and wrote out Lloyd Brenner's address. It was on Grammercy Place, not far from the Rendezvous. She asked me what I figured the job was worth, and paid me in cash.

With business out of the way Katy relaxed again, and the lights danced in her eyes. "Guess what? This is going to be my last gig."

"Your manager told me you close here tomorrow night."

"Not just here," she said. "For good. I haven't told Hal yet, but tomorrow is my goodbye strip. I'm getting married."

"The hell you say."

"I can hardly believe it myself. He's really a super guy, Stonebreaker. He's handsome, smart, has money. Best of all, he's crazy about me."

"Congratulations," I said. "And good luck."

"My good luck was in finding Rick," she said. "I just hope I'm good enough for him."

"You're good enough," I told her. "I hope he's man enough."

Katy took my hand again and looked into me with those great green eyes. "Stonebreaker, you're a hell of a guy."

Hal Channing came back to the table then, and I got up and said quick goodbyes. It was time to go.

It was hot and bright the next morning as I cruised down Gramercy Place below Melrose. In the 1920's this had been a neighborhood for the middle-rich. There'd been a lot of changes in fifty years. Some of the big old houses were still there, but they'd been chopped up into housekeeping rooms for rent. One of these was the address Katy had given me for her ex-husband.

I found *L. Brenner* scrawled on the mailbox for a second-floor room. I walked up a flight of dark stairs through the smell of a thousand lonely meals.

The man who answered my knock wore a heavy grey sweater in spite of the heat of the morning. He had a complexion like lard and a long pointed nose that dribbled. He blinked at me and licked his dry lips.

"What do you want?"

"Are you Lloyd Brenner?"

"Are you a cop?"

I stepped past him and shut the door. The room smelled of vomit.

"L-listen, I'm clean," Brenner said, backing off. "I've been straight ever since I got out. No, really, man." He dabbed at his wet nose and looked away. "I got a cold, that's all. I ought to be in bed right now."

I stepped forward and shoved one of my cards into his hand. "I'm not a cop," I told him. "I don't care whether you're shooting smack or swallowing aspirin. I want to talk about your ex-wife."

"Katy?" He tried to bring his eyes into better focus.

"Right. She tells me you're giving her a hard time."

"All I did was ask her for a loan. She'd get it back. I need it to . . . to get clothes so I can look for a job."

"So when Katy turned you down you started with the phone calls and the spray paint and fooling around with her car."

He looked mystified. "No, I never did anything like that. I just asked her for the money, that's all. It's not like she couldn't get it. She could get plenty."

"What do you mean?"

"Her new boyfriend, Richard Pomeroy, he's rich."

"How do you know about Pomeroy?"

"One night I was waiting to talk to Katy at closing time and I see her drive off with this cat in an Aston Martin. Next night the car's there again, so I take a peek inside. Just to see the registration, you know. Richard Pomeroy. I've heard the name. Oil money."

I turned my back on Brenner and walked across the room. Then I came back and stared at him. His eyes watered, but he didn't flinch.

I said, "Lloyd, I'm inclined to believe you. I hope you don't do anything to prove me wrong, because then I'll just have to come back and bend you a little."

"I tell you, man," he said, talking fast, "I didn't pull any of that stuff. That's not my scene. I'm not a punk. I'm sick. You know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean."

Brenner squinted down at my card for the first time. "Listen, Stonebreaker, you couldn't let me have a little bread, could you? Ten, maybe? Five?"

"No," I told him, and walked out.

Richard Dennis Pomeroy, known to his pals as Rick, lived during the summer in a beach house at Malibu. It was the kind of a place that gets a four-page color spread in *Home* magazine and fires bitter envy in a million hearts. I couldn't think of any reason why Rick Pomeroy would let the air out of his girlfriend's tires, but it was a good day for the beach, so I drove out there.

Pomeroy was not at home. A Latin houseboy told me the young gentleman might be found at the Bel Air Tennis Club. I wheeled on over there with the windows rolled down to enjoy the smell of money.

The tennis club was surrounded by a tall iron fence with a uniformed guard at the gate. I shuffled through my collection of business cards and picked out one that identified me as an agent for the Internal Revenue Service. The guard waved me through.

I parked my car in somebody's reserved space and walked across an

acre of plush green lawn to the clubhouse. There my seventy-dollar suit drew disapproving frowns, but I did learn that Mr. Pomeroy was out on the courts. I left the clubhouse and headed for a cypress grove behind which I could hear the solid thwack of racket on ball.

Rick Pomeroy was playing mixed doubles with three other people almost as attractive as himself. Pomeroy had those unreal Flash Gordon good looks—clear eyes, straight nose, strong jaw, smooth limbs. I took an instant dislike to him.

There were bleachers at the side of the court and I took a seat several rows up to watch them play. Pomeroy's partner was a long-legged brunette who ran like an antelope. The other couple were middle-aged, tanned, and handsome. At the end of the set the brunette gave Pomeroy a victory kiss and they all shook hands.

As the foursome started toward the clubhouse, I walked down to courtside.

"Mr. Pomeroy."

He gave me a cool glance. "What is it?"

"I want to talk to you for a few minutes."

"I'm afraid it will have to wait. I have a luncheon engagement."

I walked up close enough to let him get a look at my eyes, which people tell me are the color of gunmetal, and can get very cold when I want them to. I said, "You can eat later."

A frown clouded his boyish face for a moment. He turned to the other players, giving the brunette an affectionate pat. "I'll meet you up in the bar. This shouldn't take long."

The others moved off toward the clubhouse and I handed Pomeroy my card. The real one.

He glanced at it. "All right, so you are a private detective and your name, if I am to believe this, is Stonebreaker. What business do you have with me?"

"Do you know a girl named Katy Brenner?"

"Of course I do. She's a stripper at a charming little place on Melrose. The Rendezvous Room, I believe."

"Very good," I said. "Katy has the idea you're going to marry her."

He dismissed the idea with a laugh. "That's ridiculous. We've played around a little . . . but *marriage*? She has to be fifteen years older than I am, and that's the least of about a hundred objections I can think of."

"Where do you suppose she got such a ridiculous idea?"

Pomeroy shrugged, giving me his Huck Finn smile. "I suppose I never told her it *couldn't* happen. I hope you're not going to tell me I'm trifling with the woman's affections. She's not exactly a virgin, you know. I take her places, buy her presents, and it's a kick for both of us. Sunday I'm taking her to the Islands for a week. After that I break it off gently and we go our separate ways. What business is it of yours?"

I nodded toward the clubhouse. "How do your friends feel about the romance?"

Pomeroy laughed again. "Oh, my God, you're not thinking of blackmailing me? My friends think it's absolutely marvelous that I'm having an affair with a real stripper. And yes, that includes Michelle, the girl you saw me playing tennis with just now. I'm afraid you'll make no sale here."

He waited for a response, then, when he didn't get any: "And if you want to tell our friend the stripper what I've said, be my guest. You won't make her feel any better, and she'll lose out on a week in the Islands. As for me, the romance, as you call it, has about run its course anyway. Was there anything else?"

"Just this, Mr. Pomeroy . . . earlier this morning I talked to a broken-down junkie musician who's killing time before his next bust by panhandling and rifling cars for the price of a fix. His mind is so blown out he can barely think, and his body is eaten away to where a good breeze would knock him over. You know something, Mr. Pomeroy? He's still twice the man you are."

Pomeroy's handsome nostrils flared and muscles bunched along the firm line of his jaw.

Do it! I urged silently. Take a swing at me!

But whatever he might be, Rick Pomeroy was not a fool. Not only did I have four inches and thirty pounds on him, but when I am feeling ugly the look on my face will break a pane of glass.

He took a careful step backward and gave me a slightly bent version of the boyish grin. "If that's all, fellow, you'll have to excuse me. My friends are waiting."

"That's all," I said, and watched him stride away across the lawn in his glittering tennis whites.

Back in the parking lot I was slipping the key into my car door when a hand came down on my shoulder, just a little too hard to be friendly.

Reflex action spun me around and back a step to where I had room to maneuver. A guy about my size with a Mr. Universe build stood looking at me with an unpleasant smile. He wore a muscle-hugging T-shirt with the name of the club printed on it. On his wrist jangled a heavy metal name-bracelet.

"I want to talk to you, friend," he said.

"I'm listening."

"You got in here by using false identification."

"No kidding," I said.

"You also harassed one of our members."

"Really?"

"This is a private club, friend, and we don't like keyhole peepers who lie their way inside and give the members trouble."

"Get to the bottom line, friend."

The smile faded away. He had a pouty little mouth that didn't go with the physical-culture body. He said, "Don't ever show your face here again or we might have to mess you up a little."

I was, I think, six years old when I learned one of the most important lessons of my life: the guy who hits first usually wins.

So I hit him. Low down in the belly. It was like punching a frozen slab of beef, and I think he was more surprised than hurt.

It only took him a second to recover. He jumped into a karate stance and made menacing movements in the air. That suited me just fine. I'm crazy about tough guys who see a Bruce Lee movie, take a course in Oriental fighting, and think they're ready to beat up the world.

I threw a nice lazy right hand at his jaw, which I knew would please him since that is the punch they learn in Lesson One. He came through as expected, slashing up and out with the edge of his left hand. But instead of following through with my clumsy punch I pivoted on my right foot and brought my cleated left heel down on his instep.

Mr. Universe forgot all about Kung Fu then and reached down to grab his ruined foot. I pumped a knee into his face and felt the nose break. To his credit, when the guy straightened up he was flailing away at me with his fists, but, blinded by tears and blood, he made an easy target. I measured him with the left and fired a straight right to the point of the chin. He slammed backwards into my car and folded up on the asphalt.

I had probably hit him harder than necessary because by proxy I was slugging Richard Dennis Pomeroy. Maybe it wasn't fair to the Body Beautiful, but it made me feel better.

Driving out through the iron gate I answered the guard's scowl with a cheery wave. I noticed something dangling from the side mirror, so I reached out and hauled it in. It was the shiny metal bracelet worn until recently by the Kung Fu warrior. His name, I saw, was Jason Galt. I dropped the bauble into a pocket and drove to my office on Western Avenue.

There I sat in my swivel chair with my feet propped on the wastebasket, wondering what to tell Katy Brenner. There wasn't much to report. I didn't think her ex-husband was the prankster, and there was no way I could tie Rick Pomeroy in. As for Katy's one-sided affair with Pomeroy, that was none of my business. Maybe I would refund the fee since I hadn't really done anything. Well, half of it . . .

It was just after midnight when I pulled into the jammed parking lot behind the Rendezvous Room. As I cruised along looking for an empty slot, a shadow ducked down out of sight between two cars—one of them Katy Brenner's light-blue Mustang. I drove through the lot and parked out on the street. I left the car and sauntered past the wall of the building where I couldn't be seen from the parking lot. I waited thirty seconds, then came back low, quiet, and fast, heading toward the spot where I'd seen the shadow. It was still there—a slim figure with a bundle under one arm, fumbling with the gas cap of Katy's Mustang.

I covered the distance in half a dozen long strides and clamped my hand on the back of a neck. With a squeal of surprise a boy of eighteen or so tried to wriggle free of my grasp. He was hampered by the bundle he carried—a five-pound bag of sugar.

Loosening my grip a notch, I turned the kid around to have a look at him. He cut loose with a stream of the foulest language I'd heard since boot camp.

"That's a bad mouth you've got there, kid," I said. "What's your name?"

"Go to hell."

I dug my thumb into the nerve at the end of his collarbone. His soft face went blotchy white with pain.

"What's your name, kid?" I asked again, easing the pressure enough so he could talk.

"Russell Brenner," he got out.

"Katy Brenner is your mother?"

"If you want to call her that."

I let go of young Brenner and he sagged against a car, rubbing his shoulder. "Then it's you who's been making the mystery phone calls and fooling around with the spray paint."

He looked at me with juvenile defiance.

"And just now you were going to dump sugar into your mother's gas tank."

The kid shrugged and said nothing.

"Why?" I asked him.

Russell spat the words at me. "How would you like it if your mother showed off her body to men for a living? If she had a new boyfriend every week and couldn't even tell you who your father was?" He made a strangled sound, then went on. "And then that lousy creep she was married to started hanging around again."

"Tell me—what were the Halloween pranks supposed to get you?"

He just stood, looking sullen.

"Get out of my sight," I told the kid. "You make my teeth ache."

Cradling his bag of sugar, Russell Brenner slouched out of the parking lot. Watching him go, I tried to frame the words I would use in my report to his mother. I had done my job and earned my money, but the result wasn't going to please anybody. I walked around the building and into the Rendezvous Room.

Katy was on stage when I went in and I found a table near the door. She was not using the sword for this show. It was a big improvement. When she finished, she skipped off stage in G-string and pasties and the house lights came up. The comic took over with the same rotten jokes. I had a drink and looked around at the crowd. At a table off to one side, wearing a super-hip safari suit with a choker of puka shells, sat my pal Richard Dennis Pomeroy. I got up and walked over.

Before he could react I planted my hands on the tabletop and leaned down, giving him an ugly grin.

"Hello, Mr. Pomeroy."

He kept his smooth handsome features under control. "I don't think we have anything to talk about."

"One *little* thing," I said. From my pocket I took the heavy metal name-bracelet dropped by Mr. Universe in our scuffle at the tennis club. Holding the ends of the name-plate between thumb and forefinger, I stuck it under Pomeroy's nose and bent it into a narrow "U" while his eyes crossed.

"If you ever send muscle after me again," I said slowly, keeping the grin on my face, "I'll come looking for you."

I dropped the bent ID bracelet on the table and strolled back to my own just as Hal Channing came in the door a little out of breath. I waved him over and he dropped into a chair across from me.

"Damn," he said, "I wanted to be here earlier for Katy's closing night, but I was held up by another client. How's she doing?"

"I just got here myself," I told him, "but she looks fine."

He jerked a thumb at Rick Pomeroy. "I see you've met the husband-to-be."

"A nodding acquaintance," I said.

The waitress brought drinks and Channing took a big gulp of his. "If you're waiting for Katy I'll join you if you don't mind."

"Sure."

We sat for a while half-listening to the comic until I began to get an uncomfortable prickling on the back of my neck.

"Shouldn't she be out by now?" I asked.

Channing looked startled. He glanced at his watch. "She's had plenty of time to change. Do you think we should go back and check?"

"Yeah." With Channing leading the way we moved fast between tables and down a short passage at the side of the stage. The bartender watched us curiously.

We came to a flimsy plywood door at the end of the passage. Channing reached past me and knocked. "Katy, are you in there?"

No response.

Channing and I looked at each other. I saw in his eyes a dark reflection of what I was thinking. I tried the door and found it locked.

"Is there another way out?" I asked.

"There's a fire door leading out to the alley, but Katy never uses it."

"Can we get in that way?"

"No, it has to be opened from the inside."

I slammed my foot against the door. It flew open, banging the wall as the cheap bolt lock pulled loose and clattered to the floor.

I took a step into the room and froze. Channing bumped into me. "God!" he said.

Katy Brenner was seated at the mirror with her head down on the dressing table. Her face was smeared with cold cream. One hand hung down at her side clutching a tissue. Sticking out of her naked back was the hilt of the three-hundred-dollar sword. The blade had passed all the way through her body, leaving her pale belly slick with blood.

Channing started to move toward her but I held him back. "You can't help her now," I said. "Tell the bouncer to get on the front door and keep everybody inside until the police get here." Channing just stood there, trying to swallow. "Get moving," I said, and gave him a shove.

Before going for the phone I took a quick look around. The wardrobe closet and the prop trunk were both open. The fire door to the alley was closed. I resisted an impulse to cover Katy with something. Dead, she looked very naked.

It took less than five minutes for the first black-and-white unit to arrive in answer to my call. The patrolmen took charge of the front door and sealed off the dressing room. In a few more minutes Sgt. Dave Pike, my partner from the old LAPD days, arrived with the Homicide people.

I filled Dave in on everything I knew, then sat back down at my table to puzzle out a couple of things that bothered me. Hal Channing came over and sat with me. His color was bad. I hoped he wasn't going to pass out.

Dave Pike motioned toward the front door. "Talk to you a minute, Stonebreaker?"

I got up and followed him outside to the street.

"We picked up a character hanging around in the back, acting funny. He won't identify himself, but from what you told me earlier I think I know who he is."

Dave signaled to a uniformed officer, who brought over a thin sniffling guy in handcuffs.

"Yeah, that's Lloyd Brenner, her ex-husband," I said.

"I didn't do anything," Brenner whined. "What do you want to roust me for?"

Dave and I walked out of earshot. "He looks good to me," Dave said. "Comes back to put the bite on the ex-wife again, she lets him in

the back door, he makes his pitch, she turns him down, he puts the blade to her."

I shook my head. "I don't think so, Dave. The way Katy felt about Brenner, she'd never open the door for him. And even if she had, she wouldn't have sat calmly cleaning the makeup off her face while he pulled the sword. She would have seen him in the mirror."

I steered Dave back inside, over to my table. Hal Channing was still there, trying to light a cigarette.

"We know the killer had to get in through the fire door," I said, "because the bartender at the service bar would have seen anybody go in from the stage side. That means Katy let him in, and it had to be somebody she trusted enough to go on dressing while he was there."

Hal Channing looked up at me curiously. "Pomeroy?" he said.

"No. I was with Rick Pomeroy from the time Katy went off until you walked in. By the way, Hal, how did you know Katy planned to marry Pomeroy? Last night she still hadn't told you."

"She . . . told me about it tonight."

"When? You got here late, remember. When did you talk to her, Hal?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"That when you arrived tonight you went to the back door to talk to Katy alone. That's when she told you about Pomeroy. It wasn't unusual for you to handle the sword, so she probably thought nothing of it when you took it from the prop box. You stabbed her, then ran around to the front entrance where I saw you come in a little out of breath."

"But why would I kill Katy?"

"Because she was marrying Rick Pomeroy, or so she thought, and you thought you were losing her forever. That would be a cruel thing to hear if you were as much in love with her as I think you were."

Channing sagged in the chair. "I loved her more than my life. Katy never thought of me—that way—but I would have done anything just to be close to her. When she told me about her and Pomeroy, I—went crazy for a minute." Then he started to cry—great, wrenching sobs. I walked away as Dave Pike started to read him his rights . . .

I sat in the front seat for a while, thinking about Katy and Pomeroy and Channing. Then I turned off my thoughts and turned on the ignition. But my car wouldn't start. Somebody had poured five pounds of sugar in my gas tank.

Charade can be the name of the game—of life . . ."

Who am I?

by FRANK SISK

The doctor's name is Frith. I seem to know it from somewhere. The face too—saturnine and owl-eyed. Perhaps that's because I've been seeing the man once a day since the accident. A week now. More than a week. Eight days, according to my calendar wristwatch. At least I can still count.

Dr. Frith calls me Wylie. The nurses address me as Mr. Hull.

Wylie Hull?

Like Dr. Frith's name, it sounds vaguely familiar but strikes no precise chord of memory. I don't associate it with myself. Nor do I really recognize the face which accompanies it.

On the sixth day here the face was lathered by the hospital barber and the itching stubble scraped off. I used his mirror to examine the results.

What stared back at me, plainly aghast, was the face of a 40-year-old man—furrows of fatigue parenthesizing a loose mouth, yellow-flecked grey eyes veering away, great bewilderment crinkling a pale forehead, iron-grey hair growing thick except over the right temple where a square of surgical gauze took the place of a missing swatch.

It is a face I may have seen before, yes.

But it is not my face.

Since the third day, which is the first day I'm truly conscious of, there's been a regular visitor. A tall, nervous, thin-lipped woman with faded blue eyes and dyed blonde hair. She always wears beautifully tailored suits, as if coming here from an afternoon of bridge, and sometimes she touches one of my hands with one of hers. I notice a nice diamond ring, a wide wedding band of platinum.

Like Dr. Frith, she calls me Wylie.

"Who are you, lady?" I ask.

"Oh, Wylie," she says, tears brimming in her sad eyes.

I know her in a way, and I don't know her at all. It is as if we encountered each other a long time ago briefly in a crowded room, exchanging impulsive confidences, and then had been swept apart. Oh, a *long* time ago. I seem to have nothing but this dim recollection. Still, she pretends to know me well.

Strange.

Another visitor, a large grinning man in his forties, dropped by one morning, the day before the barber shaved me. Dr. Frith was in the room at the time, standing at the foot of the bed, polishing his eyeglasses with a piece of facial tissue.

The visitor gave the doctor a glance and then focused fully on me. "Good lord, man, don't they have a razor in the joint?"

"Tomorrow," I said, trying to place the face.

"Good. How're you feeling otherwise?"

"Not too bad.".

"What's the matter with your voice, Wylie? You sound like—"

"Allow me to introduce myself," Dr. Frith said. "I'm Doctor Frith, Mr. Hull's physician."

"Glad to meet you," the visitor said, offering a hand. "I'm Chuck Glover. Wylie and I are in business together."

"Oh, yes." Dr. Frith accepted the hand. "You were with him, I understand, when he—"

"Right. We'd just finished our weekly game of squash and were back in the locker room, ready for a belt, when he, well, he just keeled over and hit his head on this wooden bench. Out like a light. Damnedest thing. What the hell caused it, Doc? You found out yet?"

"Not exactly."

"There was some talk of a, of a—I can't think of the term offhand."

"Aneurysm?"

"Yeah, that's it. Betty told me there was some talk of an aneurysm when he was first brought in. Betty's his wife."

"Premature diagnosis, I'm afraid." Dr. Frith set the eyeglasses on the bridge of his nose and again resembled his owlish self. "His circulatory system functions nicely. In fact, his general physical condition is fine. But we're going to keep him here a few more days and—"

"His voice, Doc. What the hell's happened to his voice?"

"Well, for one thing he's suffering from retroactive amnesia—"

"I've heard of that."

"And this, we believe, is combined with a psychic regression phenomenon—"

"Holy God!" Shaking his head in confoundment, the visitor sat in the chair beside the bed and took a foil-wrapped cigar from his jacket pocket. "Is it all right if he smokes, Doc?"

Dr. Frith raised a palm negatively. "Hospital rules."

"I don't smoke anyhow," I said.

"Listen to that, will ya. He don't smoke anyhow. Why, he smokes like a goddamn chimney."

I didn't know this man and I didn't like him either.

On the tenth day I leave the hospital. The woman who passes herself off as my wife asks the doctor in a worried whisper, "Do you really think he's well enough to go home?"

"Physically he couldn't be better," Dr. Frith states. "As for the mental block, well, time is the best healer. But to help time along, I suggest you set him up with a psychiatrist. Doctor Philip Gritzmacher is one of several I can recommend."

The woman escorts me to the parking lot across from the hospital where a pretty dark-haired girl awaits us in the driver's seat of a station wagon.

"Hello, Daddy," she says, smiling. "I bet you'll be glad to get home."

Daddy? What an elaborate deception this is! But if I'm not who they think I am, then who am I?

Home is a large well-furnished house in a typically affluent but unfamiliar suburb. It's nothing like the house I remember as home. That house is much smaller, set back from a narrow country road against three sheltering maple trees. Its furniture shows signs of age and hard use.

Inside this new home the woman takes me to a room that she designates as mine. Afternoon sunlight slants through a wide window and falls across a single twin bed. I'm infinitely relieved to see that the woman doesn't plan to carry the charade to an embarrassing extreme.

"You'll find everything in your bathroom just as you left it," she says. "In case you want to shave before cocktails."

Which reminds me that I've grown new stubble.

"Thank you, ma'am," I say.

The woman shudders slightly and departs.

I don't feel like shaving. I go to a big wardrobe and begin idly opening the drawers: handkerchiefs, cufflinks, tie clips, pajamas, sweaters, shirts, socks, underwear, many things with a WH monogram . . .

In the lowermost drawer I find face-down a framed picture of the woman who pretends to be my wife, looking much younger, and an old black-paged photo album. I open the album and immediately discover myself.

I'm standing near a hydrangea bush holding a bicycle by the handlebars. I'm squinting fiercely against the sun, my mouth twisted in a funny grimace, but it's me all right. The sweat shirt with *Madison Magnets* printed on it, those khaki shorts, the braided belt, the blue sneakers. Of course, of course . . .

Removing the snapshot, I hurry down the stairs to establish my rightful identity. A murmur of voices comes from the left. The woman and the girl are in a book-lined room beside a portable bar, drinks in hand.

"Oh, Wylie, you didn't shave," the woman says in an aggrieved tone.

"I'm too young to shave."

"What's the matter with his voice?" the girl asks.

"Shall I mix you a Rob Roy?" the woman says.

"I don't drink." Handing her the snapshot, I say, "Take a look at that and tell me who it is."

Hesitantly she examines it. "Why, I believe it's a picture of you when you were—"

"You bet your sweet life it's me, ma'am. What have you done with my bike?"

"Your bike? Oh, honey, you must know you're talking utter nonsense."

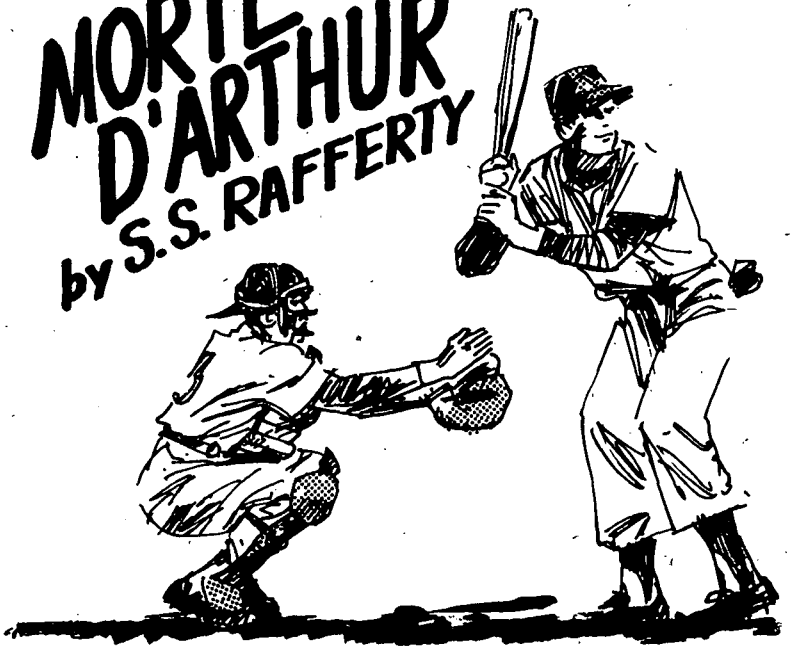
"Listen." I seize a cutglass decanter from the bar. "You give me back my bike or I'll kill you!"

I can see by the expression on her face that she now realizes I mean business.

There'd have been more joy in Vascalusa if Arthur had struck out . . .

MORTE D'ARTHUR

by S.S. RAFFERTY



Rooney was livid, and rightly so. Here he courageously defies state laws and keeps his bar and grill open at all hours to grant succor to the lame, halt, and hardly-able, and in walks the Chief of Police, who has the temerity to plop at the bar and order buttermilk. "Ulcers be damned," our host said, planking down a nick of rye and a shell of beer for me and a gin-and-it for Opie Hooter. Since we were in the back booth, away from the crowd at the bar, he could mutter as he pleased.

"Ulcers are like bad plumbing," Opie said. "Always most bothersome at night. Must have something to do with the moon and tides and things. Right, Doc?"

Doc West, aka Richard Sparks, M.D., is the medical examiner for the west side of town and is called Doc West by most of the newspapermen who man the oars at the three slave galleys that flank the alley where Rooney ladles up his after-hours potables. The Doc, as they say in the RAF, was standing down on this round.

"I suppose stress would be greatest at night for a police officer," the Doc said. "Stress being the cause of most stomach disorders."

"Some stress," Rooney muttered anew, giving a backward glance at the Chief. "What's he afraid of—someone lurking about to drop a dime on him?"

"If you've got something around here for a dime, I'll take it."

We all looked at the newcomer. It was Genderman, a sportswriter on the *Blade*.

"Well, well," Rooney muttered again. "Enter the Grantland Rice of the grain belt, the Runyan of the rubes, the Pegler of the . . ."

"I'll have a nick and a shell," Genderman said to him and then smiled sardonically. "And a Brandy Alexander on the side."

I looked at Opie Hooter, the old wire man on the *Sentinel*, and he winked. It was a deft stroke, very deft for a sportswriter. First Rooney is stuck with scouting up buttermilk at four in the morning and now he has to reconnoiter for cream. Rooney tramped off, a victim of his own house rule: If you can drink it, Rooney serves it. The maxim is countered with another bylaw: If you came here to eat, you'll starve to death. Rooney does not serve food. He is afraid of fire, goes the theory, thus he won't allow a cook on the premises. A few years ago when I had been fired for the fourth time by the same editor, Rooney and I sat up for three days philosophizing on the evils of eating.

"Stay away from it," he warned me evangelically. "Your body is 98 percent liquid, so keep it that way."

I stuck with him for 71 hours and then went out and got my job back on the police beat and a plate of pork chops and eggs.

Genderman sat down next to Opie. "It is customary for a knight approaching the round table to buy a jar or two," I said to him.

"Esteemed colleague, I dub you Sir Tope." That was also very well put for a sportswriter—almost high English—and I told him so.

"Excellent, Genderman," I said, "I give you a snatch of the medieval and you follow suit with something right out of *Morte d'Arthur*."

"You know of Mort Arthur?" He frowned. "I'll be damned. I should have copped a Pulitzer for that story. The bombing of Mort Arthur was one of my first scoops."

Opie Hooter looked amazed. "You were in on the bombing of Port Arthur? You must have been two years old."

"Not *Port* Arthur, *Mort* Arthur," the sportswriter corrected him. "Mort Arthur was one of the hottest hitters in the lower southern circuit back in '38. He could have made the majors too. He was right up there with DiMag and Pepper and the rest of 'em, then he gets bombed."

"The ravages of drink," Opie said, lifting a glass.

"No, really bombed. Explosion. Smoke and damage. The poor kid died at the plate."

"That's what comes of eating," Rooney said, putting the beer, rye, and Brandy Alexander down on the table. "Plates will get you into trouble every time."

"I mean home plate, Rooney. This poor soul connected with an inside curve, and boom! He blew up half the ballpark. It was one of the famous unsolved crimes of the century."

"Hyperbole," Opie said.

Rooney stated another hyperbole. "That's three and a half," he said. "A nick and a shell is a buck twenty-five, a brandy 75 cents."

"What's the other ace and a half for?" Genderman wanted to know.

"The brandy glass." Rooney was magisterial.

"What do you mean, the glass?"

"You're taking it with you, so I got to charge it up. Fair's fair."

"Wait a weeping-willow second, Rooney," Genderman snarled. "I don't want to buy the glass. I just wanted a Brandy Alex."

"The pipes! Can I toss dairy residue down the pipes? Look over there in booth 7. That's the Sewer Commissioner himself. Am I to toss the dregs of cream into his system? It could start a plague around here."

Genderman turned to Doc West with a pained look. "This sounds medically unsound to me."

Doc sucked on his pipe for a few seconds. "You gentlemen are at loggerheads. You, Genderman, tried to get a rise out of Rooney by or-

dering a protein-loaded drink and now he counters you by charging for the glass. Stalemate. Now let's break clean. You were telling us about an unsolved crime, so let's have a contest."

"Hors de combat," Opie put in.

"If that's what you want, go to a cocktail lounge," Rooney said.

"A contest," Doc repeated. "We will let Genderman tell us the details of this crime, and if we can't come up with a satisfactory solution he pays for the glass."

"Ho, Doc, I'm home free," Genderman scoffed. "I told you, it's the unsolved crime of the century."

"You're not home and you're not free," Rooney invected, "but you're on. You give us the crime and we'll solve it."

I looked at Genderman, who grinned back in confidence.

"Look," I said, "let's have it tight. Straight lead, descending importance, toss the garbage and the adjectives. Four takes, no more, and, for God's sake, key to the headline."

"Who died and made you editor, esteemed colleague?"

"Genderman," I said, "call me foul, call me inane, but never call me an editor!"

"You're right—I retract that. O.K., Rooney and gentlemen, here's the lead: On September 2, 1938, in the cool winds of early autumn—"

"Strike the cool winds," Opie blue-pencilled.

"—Mort Arthur, center fielder for the Vascalusa Demons, was gripped in a head-to-head duel with Lefty Monks, the magic-armed pitcher of the Hogansville Blue Sox—"

Opie was in again. "Head-to-head? Were they goats? And could Monks make his arm disappear? Magic and head-to-head?"

"Gentlemen, I can appreciate the journalism, but let this poor man get on with his story." Rooney was being extra kind or planning something.

"All right." Genderman started again. "It's the last gasp of the ninth, and Monks is creaming the Demons 2-0 and on his way to a perfect game. He fans 24 batters in a row and then gets sloppy and walks Joe Crowley. Crowley is the Dillinger of the league, and he steals second. This puts more rattle in Monks and he walks Tyler, the next batter. Now with Mort Arthur coming up, the Hogansville manager gets a case of the willies and goes out to the mound to hold a parley with Monks. It's a tough decision to make. Old Mort Arthur has blood in his eye

because he was booed when he fanned in the third and again in the sixth."

"Fame is fleeting," Opie mused.

"It sure was for Mort Arthur," Genderman said. "But I had a feeling he had Monks' number and, with a homer, the game would be in the bag for the Demons. Well, Hogansville decided to leave Monks in and a classic moment is reached in baseball. The windup, the pitch, and Mort connects—boom!

"When the smoke clears, there is a catcher with a busted shoulder, an umpire with a torn suit, and Mort Arthur's remains all over the infield. Now there's nothing in the rule book about a batter dying at the plate, so the umps allow the Demons a substitute. He fans and Hogansville goes on to cop it. O.K., men, solve it."

"You mean they finished the game?" Opie cried.

"Certainly. It was a crucial game. Well, the cops got around to investigating, but got nowhere. There were just too many suspects and too many motives. The only guy who seemed to be in the clear was Lefty Monks, the pitcher."

"I should have thought he would be the prime suspect, since he tossed the bomb," I said.

"But just before he tossed the fatal pitch, it was low and inside, just where Mort Arthur liked 'em, and the plate umpire, Jim Cappello, tossed in a new ball." He looked around the table with a grin. "Don't go make a morning line against the ump. He was new in the league and didn't even know Mort Arthur."

"Where were the balls kept?" I queried.

"The home team supplies the apples and in this game, Vascalusa was the host outfit. The balls were kept in an unlocked supply closet off the team's locker room. Anyone on either club had access to them. Combined, that makes thirty players plus trainers, managers, batboys, newspaper guys, and even some fans who were allowed in to talk to the players before the game."

Rooney looked grim. "What do you call that part of a crime?" he asked me.

"Opportunity," I told him. "But I'm more interested in motive. Whoever put that explosive baseball in the supply room had to hate the poor slob."

"Oh, there were plenty of people who qualified as Arthur haters. At

least four players on the Demons had had arguments with him over dames. The club manager, a guy named Bobby Choate, had it in for him because he was cozy with the owner of the team and was angling to bring in a buddy of his to replace Choate."

Something occurred to me and I pursued it with another query to Genderman. "Let's examine another angle. How did Cappello, the plate ump, get the new ball to throw into the game?"

There was a gleam in the sportswriter's eye. "Now you're thinking like a cop, esteemed colleague. He got it from the Vascalusa batboy, who happened to be the manager's son, Bobby Jr. He wasn't a boy really, around eighteen, and the cops had the hots for him on two counts. One, he wanted a berth in his daddy's lineup as a regular player. Two, he wanted to protect papa's job. But the cops couldn't get anywhere. He didn't hand the ump that particular ball. He just held the box and let Cappello pick three from a fresh dozen before game time. The plate umps carry two extras in their coat pockets. Cappello testified that Bobby Jr. just shoved the box at him and walked away from the supply-room counter."

Doc West had stopped puffing on his pipe and was staring off into space. Either he had lost interest or he was onto something.

Rooney tapped the table with his pudgy fingers and grunted. "O.K., Genderman," he said, "was a new ball used at any other time during the game?"

"What the hell sense does that question make?" Genderman scoffed. "The one that blew Mort up was the one the ump tossed in just before the fatal pitch. The cops figured it was a high-impact bomb, like a land mine. You could handle it, but when it was smacked it went off."

"I'll tell you what kind of sense it makes, you cluck. If the bomb was in one of the three the ump selected from the box, the bomb could have been tossed into the game at any time. *Any* batter could have been the target. You said Monks had a no-hitter going, so Hogansville got all the hits prior to the blast. Maybe the Vascalusa manager planned to knock off one of the opposition and it backfired."

"That's nonsense," Opie Hooter cut in. "The balls were picked at random from the box and put into the game the same way. You very conveniently gave Cappello a no-motive plea, but maybe he was a nut or he had money riding on Hogansville and tossed the bomb in at the last minute to protect his bet."

"Umps aren't allowed to bet," Genderman said sanctimoniously.

"Har," Rooney laughed and looked over at the bar where several city officials were enjoying their sojourn in an after-hours joint.

"Well, all I know is that the cops checked Cappello eight ways to Sunday," Genderman said defensively. "They couldn't make a nut-charge stick because the head doctors said he had all his buttons. As I said, he just came into the league from the northern circuit and didn't know any of the players." He took the wilting Brandy Alexander and drank it and put the glass down in front of Rooney. "I guess you get to keep your glass, mine host."

"I say the ump was a nut." Rooney was adamant. "And you owe me a buck and a half."

"Wait a second, Rooney," I intervened. "We've all taken a shot at it except the guy who started the whole contest. Doc, you've been sitting here as silent as a tomb. Either you're as stymied as we are or you have an ace up your sleeve."

The medic took his pipe from his mouth and looked hard at Genderman. "Did Bobby Choate, Jr., ever make the team?"

"Yes, he did," the sportswriter said with surprise. "He turned out to be a pretty good ballplayer too. Do you think he did it, Doc?"

"Either on his own or in collusion with his father. They both gained by Mort Arthur's death. Opie made an astute observation that gave me the answer."

The wireman beamed. "Glad to be of service. What observation?"

"That the balls were chosen and put into play by random selection. That's a chancy way to kill someone. I discount the umpire because although the blast *didn't* harm him it could have. No one mentioned the catcher, by the way. He could switch balls under his chest protector, but he too would be putting himself in danger of the blast. Doesn't the plate umpire give a new ball to the catcher, Genderman?"

"Sometimes. Or if he feels energetic he tosses it out to the mound himself. I think Cappello tossed it in himself."

"It doesn't matter. I just wanted to point that out as an element, but we can eliminate the catcher on the basis of personal danger. Fellows, the key word here is 'random.' Did Mort Arthur strike out much, Genderman?"

"He had a .360 average. It was a freak that he struck out twice in a day."

"So, sooner or later, he could be counted on to get a hit, or pop up or fly out?"

"Sure."

"Then that's how Bobby Jr. planned it. He knew Mort would get a hit, no matter how randomly. The fact that he blew himself up at a crucial point in the game was coincidental."

"I don't follow that, Doc," Genderman said. "O.K., so Bobby Jr. plants a bomb in with the other baseballs. How could he predict that it would be pitched to Mort and not some other player?"

"He could be absolutely sure, because the bomb was in the bat, not the ball. The ball connected with the bat and set off the explosion. If he had gotten a hit earlier in the game he would have died that much sooner."

"The bat!" Rooney was all smiles. "Sure! Every batter has his own bats. A heavy hitter like Mort would have special equipment."

Genderman wasn't happy and he voiced it. "How could Bobby Jr. put a bomb in a bat?"

"Come on, Genderman," I told him, "it's simple enough. They bore holes in warm-up bats all the time." The Doc looked puzzled now. "A warm-up bat has a lead-weight filling, Doc. When a warm-up batter swings with that, it makes the game bats feel lighter. Bobby Jr. was the batboy so he knew which bats the players were favoring."

Rooney got to his feet and looked down at Genderman. The sportswriter came up with the buck and a half and Rooney walked away with a triumphant jaunt.

"Rats," Genderman growled.

"Bats," Opie chided, then turned nostalgic.

"There was a story back in '44—an opera singer was killed by a bat, flying type, while she was practicing an aria on the *Super Chief*."

"Was she singing *Die Fledermaus* at the time?" Doc West queried.

"Bet you two rounds you can't solve it," Opie challenged.

We all looked at each other. What the hell, it was dawn, and you have to keep the brain alert.

Drop in sometime.

Some say cleanliness is next to Godliness, some do not . . .

EXTRA WORK

by Robert W. Wells

The tall, graying man got out of his car and walked across the yard to the door of the white-clapboard farmhouse. He stood on the porch for a moment, his shoulders a little stooped, his sunburned face thoughtful. Then he rapped just once on the screen door. He took off his hat quickly when the young woman opened it.

"Can I step in, Mrs. Fram?"

His voice was soft. It would have seemed shy in a younger man.

"You're from the sheriff's? I don't know what questions you've got I haven't already answered."

He smiled reassuringly at her and followed her into the kitchen. It was a large bare room. There was a cooking stove in one corner and next to it an old-fashioned icebox.

The linoleum on the floor was cracked and darkened with long wear, but it was clean. So were the cheap cotton curtains at the windows. The panes of glass themselves were spotless.

The tall man's eyes took in these details approvingly. He sat down at the plastic-covered kitchen table. The woman remained standing, her arms folded defiantly.

"Set down." The way he said it, it was not an order but a suggestion. "This might take a while. Don't pay to be in a hurry when it's murder you're dealing with. Anyway, so they tell me."

She eased herself into one of the plain wooden chairs across the table from him. She was a tall woman, in her early twenties. Her chestnut hair was combed back severely from her oval face, which was entirely free of makeup. There were the beginnings of dark circles under her brown eyes, but none of the redness that comes with weeping.

"Have they caught the tramp yet?" she asked.

"No. Funny thing about that. A town like Marsburg, a stranger stands out. Seems like nobody saw the fellow you described at all." He pulled a battered briar from his pocket, filled it with tobacco from a can he carried in his hip pocket, tamped it down carefully and lit it. "That is, nobody but you. And Sam. Only, of course, Sam ain't around to tell us."

She watched him warily, her lips pressed tightly together. He pushed himself back in the chair and exhaled a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"Guess I ought to introduce myself," he said. "My name's Vaughan. My ma called me Horace, but it wasn't long before folks changed it to plain Horse. Don't know why exactly, but my wife claims it's on account of I look a little like one. I don't hold to that myself. I always tell her it's a tribute to my horse sense."

He looked over at the young woman quickly to see if she was smiling but she wasn't and he sighed and tipped his chair back a little further, balancing himself with his knees on the underside of the table.

"Now let's see, Mrs. Fram," he said. "I know you told old Keezey, the sheriff, how it happened when we was out here yesterday and I was supposed to be listening, but I wonder if you'd just go over the whole thing once more? I got kind of a poor memory."

She jumped to her feet and walked over to a small mirror that hung over the cast-iron sink. It was slightly crooked and she straightened it and walked back to where he was sitting.

"You're trying to trap me. That's it, isn't it?"

Vaughan's surprise seemed genuine. "Now why'd I want to do that? Like I told you, I'm a fellow who forgets things easy."

"All right," she said. "I'll go through it again. We was sitting right here having supper and—"

"That would be Sam and you?"

"Who else?" she demanded. She looked at him suspiciously but his expression was bland. "He was sitting in that chair you're in and I was just getting up to go to the stove to get him some more pork chops when he must of seen something out the window because he jumped up and ran out. I took the skillet off the fire and went out on the back porch to see what was going on. Sam was out by the barn arguing with this tramp."

"You hear what they was saying?"

"Not the words, but I could see Sam swinging his arms around like he was excited. The tramp was just standing there, not saying much. I figured Sam was ordering him off the place, only he didn't look like he was going, so I went to the closet and got the shotgun."

"You check to see it was loaded?"

"I knew it wasn't. I don't allow loaded guns around my house. I put a shell in. Sam kept them in a dresser drawer. I figured I'd take the gun out and give it to Sam in case he needed it to get the tramp to leave."

"This tramp, now. Seems like I recollect you said he was a sawed-off little runt, hardly five foot high. That right?"

"Yes. He had a day's growth of beard. I'd judge he was maybe in his forties. An ugly little man."

"About the same age as Sam and me."

"Just about. Husky too. Huskier than Sam, even if he was a lot shorter. Dirty clothes. Smelly, like they hadn't been washed in weeks. Sam was always so clean."

She sat down quickly in the chair and put her hands over her face. After a few moments Vaughan leaned forward and touched her gently on the arm.

"Hate to be a nuisance, Mrs. Fram," he said, "but when you get hold of yourself I'd like to hear what happened next."

She put down her hands.

"What are they saying in the village, Mr. Vaughan? Don't believe all you hear. They never liked me here. Said I was stuck-up on account of I never mixed much."

He leaned back in his chair again. His voice was apologetic. He rubbed his chin with one heavy hand in apparent embarrassment.

"Folks always say lots of things, Mrs. Fram. They think it's funny nobody saw this tramp but you. They even say you and Sam didn't get along so good. Anything to that?"

"We argued sometimes. Everybody argues."

"They say old Sam was such a bug on keeping everything clean it might of made him pretty hard to live with. They say on account of him being a bachelor so long, not getting married 'til he was past forty-five, he didn't know how to treat a young girl. They say you didn't like it much, after living in the city, being stuck off here on a side road on this rundown farm. I'm just telling you what they say, now."

She leaned toward him and gripped his arm with both her hands.

"They think I done it, don't they? That's what they been telling you. How do they know what it was like living with Sam? None of them ever come around to see how I was getting along, not one. Not a single one. Maybe we was happy together and maybe we wasn't, but nobody in Marsburg would know one way or the other."

"Well now, Mrs. Fram. Folks in the village are about like those anyplace else. You ever go out of your way to be friendly?"

"I didn't know how!" she cried. "I would have but I didn't know how!"

She rubbed a hand wearily across her forehead and her voice died down almost to a whisper.

"Besides, Sam didn't want me to be mixing. He didn't want me to talk to people. He didn't want me to do lots of things—like wearing lipstick or putting my hair up nice. All he wanted was for me to scrub the place clean—scrub and scrub and scrub! He acted like he was scared of dirt, somehow—and him a farmer all his life. Well, I did like

he said. I scrubbed 'til my hands was raw. And now look at what's happened."

Vaughan acted as though he had scarcely heard her. He was looking up at the ceiling, watching the smoke rise toward it, his eyes half closed and his hands clasped comfortably across his tan shirt.

"To get back to when you took out the shotgun," he suggested apologetically. "As I recall what you told us yesterday, Sam got shot right where we found him, out next to the barn."

She nodded. "That's right. I took the gun, like I said, and ran out toward the barn, intending to give it to Sam. But this tramp fellow heard me coming. He grabbed it out of my hand before I knew what he was about. Then Sam wrestled with him and got a hold of the gun and the thing went off."

"And Sam right in front of it, I take it. So it was more like an accident, then. That'd make it second degree, I guess."

"That all the questions? I got work to do. I got to wash down the back steps before dark."

Vaughan brought his chair down with a crash. The sound seemed to startle him and he stood up, his red face flushing.

"You don't have to no more, you know," he told her. "Sam's dead now. You don't need to scrub 'em unless you want to."

She looked up at him warily.

"No, I guess I don't," she said. "I forgot."

"Habit's a funny thing," he said. He sauntered over to the window and looked out. "There's still a couple of points puzzle me, Mrs. Fram. 'Course, I puzzle easy. Maybe you can straighten me out. Right at first, I got to admit, it looked like an easy job and that made me feel good on account of I got some work to do around home, fixing up the yard for my old woman. But then I noticed something that got me to wondering."

"Mind telling me what it was?"

Her tone seemed as casual as his. He glanced at her quickly, but she didn't look up. She was polishing the plastic tablecloth with a crumpled paper napkin, her arm making wider and wider circles as she rubbed.

"Well, now, we'll get to that," he said. "But first I guess I ought to mention that we got some help from the crime lab in the city. We don't usually bother—Keezey don't hold much with that scientific stuff. But this time we did. The boys there tell me they found only one set

of fingerprints on the gun. They wasn't yours, Mrs. Fram, and they wasn't Sam's. Seems like they belong to a fellow with a record. His name's Carson—Herman Carson, nicknamed Kit. He did time down at Columbus a couple of years back. Ever hear of him?"

She was still rubbing the tablecloth, her eyes focused on the task.

"Maybe that was the tramp's name," she said. "How should I know?"

"Could be. Funny thing, though. The description they got of Carson don't jibe worth a cent with the one you give us. Seems like Carson's a big fellow, over six feet, and a lot younger than you said the tramp was. Good looking, too, judging from his pictures, if you like the kind of looks that goes with slicked-back hair. Matter of fact, he sounds like just about the opposite of the bird you told us about. Makes it hard to figure exactly what to think."

"I bet you tried," the woman said bitterly. "I bet you tried real hard. And you come out here, soft spoken and all, acting like you're so friendly."

Vaughan walked over, not hurrying, and looked down at her, his long face as innocent of guile as a colt's.

"I'm as friendly a fellow as you're likely to meet," he said. "Can't say I enjoy this, but old Keezey talked me into taking this deputy's job a few years back and there are things I got to do to earn my pay." For the first time something hard and implacable came into his tone. "Like asking you to stop telling fibs, Mrs. Fram."

She jumped to her feet and hurried to the back porch. Grabbing a broom that was hanging there, suspended by a string through its handle, she began brushing the steps vigorously. Vaughan came to her and took the broom out of her hand and motioned to her to sit down. She dropped to the top step and cradled her chin in her hand, looking out across the distant fields, her expression sullen.

"I told you all I'm going to," she said.

The tall man looked down at her, his face sad.

"Suppose I tell you what I think happened, Mrs. Fram. Then you say where I slipped up, if I'm wrong."

She didn't answer. He shook his head regretfully.

"You're a good-looking woman. Don't know how you got mixed up with Sam. Not that he wasn't a good man, in his way, but he ought to of married somebody nearer his own age. Anyway, that part's none of

my business." He pulled his pipe from his pocket and lit it, savoring the smoke for a moment, reluctant to begin. "This Carson fellow," he said. "The way I got it figured, maybe you knew him in the city. According to the stuff the boys there sent us, he used to have a wife about your age. About your build too. Same color hair and all. She divorced him while he was in the pen. I don't say it was you, but it could of been, couldn't it?"

He eased his massive frame down on the step beside her, grunting softly with the effort. His eyes moved casually toward her and studied her face briefly, but when she gave no sign he resumed talking.

"Say for the sake of argument it *was* you. Nothing wrong in that. Girls get mixed up with the wrong fellows sometimes. Now just suppose it was you and after you got the divorce you decided to start all over and you started looking for a place to disappear. Let's say you met a fellow from the country, a fellow like Sam, and you figured if you married him and moved out in the sticks Carson couldn't find you and you could forget about him. So you did and you found out pretty soon you'd bought yourself no bed of roses. But you tried to make the best of things. You did like old Sam told you. You quit wearing lipstick and you learned how to swing a scrub brush. You kept the place nice and clean like he wanted and you stayed away from the folks in the village, maybe partly because Sam was jealous, him having a young wife and all, but maybe partly so's there'd be less chance of running into somebody you knew from the old days."

"You've got it all wrong," she said.

She wasn't looking at him. Her hands were clasping and unclasping themselves in her lap nervously, as though anxious to be about some task. Her mouth was sullen but there was something desperate and frightened in her eyes. Vaughan's placid voice droned on.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Anyhow, let's suppose that some way or other this Kit Carson fellow found out you was here and he come around on the sly yesterday, making sure nobody seen him, and hid out until Sam changed his clothes and left to take that load of feed to town. Then maybe this Carson come up to the house. Maybe Sam come home while he was here. Maybe he didn't like it, seeing the two of you together. Maybe that's when Sam got shot. It could've happened like that."

"It could have," she said, her voice flat and hard. "Only it didn't."

"Some of it was right, though, wasn't it?"

She didn't answer. Her face was calm, but her eyes darted from side to side, desperate with their need to get away from Vaughan's soft approach. He leaned back, his elbows supporting him, and played the card he had been saving.

"It'd be a good idea to talk, Mrs. Fram. The city boys say it's only a matter of time before they catch up with Carson. Seems like they've found the woman he's been living with and they're watching the place like cats around a rat hole."

She twisted toward him, her face suddenly ugly. "You're just saying that to trick me! There's no woman!"

"A big blonde," Vaughn said, his voice gentle and a little mournful. "Good-looking, they tell me. Works in a nightclub floor show. I wouldn't fool you, Mrs. Fram."

The woman had been rigid but now she collapsed. Her head went down on her chest, her legs sprawled in front of her on the steps, her shoulders sagged. The tears came and she made no attempt to hide them. Vaughan offered her his handkerchief, which she refused. After a moment she wiped her face with her hand and sat up straight again.

"I guess I was a fool to think he'd change," she said. "Why should I tell lies for him any more?"

"No reason to," Vaughan said. There was no triumph in his tone. "No reason at all."

"You had most of it right," she said. "Kit did it, all right. I was frying pork chops like I told you, only it was for Kit, not Sam. I thought Sam wouldn't be back for another hour. He saw us and got the gun and then there was a struggle out near the barn and Sam got shot."

"But you still say it was an accident?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. It just happened."

"I suppose," Vaughan mused, "after being married to Sam for over a year, this Kit fellow looked pretty good to you?"

"Not at first. Not when he first walked in. But he's a good talker, Kit is. He gets me all confused. It was always like that, he's always been able to twist me around, make me do anything he wanted."

Her voice was dry, the fires all burned out of it. Vaughan stood up and helped her to her feet, his hand resting lightly on her arm.

"Let's see," he said softly. "Sam had four thousand in insurance. This place here's got some pretty good land if it was worked right. It'll

bring maybe eight, ten thousand. No other heirs, so I guess it all would go to you."

She tried to pull away from him. He tightened his grip.

"I tell you what, Mrs. Fram," he said. "Every time you change your story you put a little more of the truth in it. Only one thing still bothers me—no, make it two. Why would this Carson fellow look you up? It could be because he was sweet on you, but it don't seem like that would be it, judging from his record. Besides, there's this blonde, and there seems to of been plenty of others between you and her. Only one thing'd make him come way out here and look you up, the way I see it. He knew how you felt about him and he figured if you was Sam's widow he could work it so's he'd get most of the money. That means he planned ahead of time to shoot Sam. That makes it first degree, and it means both of you are in lots of trouble."

"It was an accident!" she cried. "I swear it! They was fighting over the gun out near the barn and all of a sudden Sam was dead!"

Vaughan shook his head sadly.

"I don't know what to do with you," he said. "You keep telling me fibs, Mrs. Kram, and that ain't neighborly, is it? You know those crime-lab boys are pretty smart. They figured out Sam was shot from a distance of maybe five, six feet with the gun aimed level with his chest. That don't tie in with what you said. Besides, like I told you, Sam's prints weren't on the gun. And I know another thing you don't think I know—Sam wasn't shot out by the barn at all."

He let go his grasp and she took a step or two toward the porch railing. There was a rag hanging there and she picked it up and began polishing the worn wood.

"You was wondering what it was I noticed that first made me think you weren't giving me a straight story," he went on. "Well, I'll tell you. Last night, after we left here, I got to looking at Sam's clothes and there was grass stains on his overalls, the ones he put on fresh to go to town in, him being the kind of fellow who always liked things clean. They wasn't the kind of marks you'd get just sitting around, either. To me, those stains meant just one thing: after he was shot, he'd been dragged across the yard and then somebody'd taken a lot of trouble to clean up afterward so we wouldn't know it.

"Well, up until then I didn't have no real reason to suppose your story wasn't true as silk. The pieces didn't all fit together, maybe, but

that's the way things usually are in a shooting and it didn't bother me. I'm not a fellow that goes around looking for extra work. But when I seen those grass stains I knew Sam hadn't got shot out by the barn like you told us. I got to thinking that maybe if you hadn't told the truth there, it'd be worth some checking to see if you'd been fibbin' on some other stuff. That's when I talked old Keezey into calling those city experts in on it and then we started turning up stuff right and left that didn't fit into the story you'd told us.

"It hadn't been for those grass stains, though, I might of took your word for it, you being such a nice-looking young girl and all, and I'd be home today spading up the flower beds instead of having to arrest you as accessory to a murder."

The young woman's hands were still busy. Her whole body was concentrated on the task of polishing the worn railing. Her face, which had been defiant at first, then sullen, now wore a look of weary hopelessness.

"I'm tired," she said. "I'm too tired to lie any more." Then a little of her former manner returned. "I'm not answering anything else until I get a lawyer."

Vaughan nodded. "Guess that'd be smart," he said.

He scratched the back of his head, his eyes narrowed in thought.

"I got it pretty well figured out anyhow. Carson shot him. No doubt of that. Maybe you helped him plan it and maybe you just tried to cover up for him—that's something for the jury to figure out. Anyway, it must of happened here on the porch, because the city boys found a couple of fresh splinters stuck in Sam to go with the grass stains. The gun must of been aimed out away from the house or we'd of found the stray pellets. Probably Sam got shot as he was coming home for supper, maybe as he was smelling the pork chops you was frying and thinking how good they'd taste, maybe before he even knew Carson was here."

The woman stopped polishing the railing and faced him. He came over and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't know how I ever got mixed up in a job like this," he said. "Can't say as I enjoy it. I got a big bump of curiosity, though, when I get started and there's one thing I wish you'd tell me before we go see the sheriff. How come Carson didn't leave Sam where he fell? How come he hauled him out in the yard and got you mixed up on your

story of what happened? If it hadn't been for that, your story might of held up."

"It was me," she said, looking into his face, her eyes dazed, wondering. "I dragged him. Kit shot him here on the porch but then he lost his nerve and run off, leaving me with the dirty work, like always. I dragged Sam to where you found him. I thought it'd be simpler if I just said that was where he was killed."

"Sam must of weighed close to one-ninety," Vaughan said. "How come you felt called on to do that?"

Her voice was earnest with the effort to make him understand. "Don't you see?" she said. "The porch. There was blood on the porch. I had to scrub it. I had to scrub it off right away or Sam would have run riot on me for real."

Revenge may not always be sweet, but there are times . . .

SECOND BANANA

by CARLETON CARPENTER

Peter Wilson shivered as he walked down the uncarpeted hallway toward the dressing room that had been assigned to him. Steam was whooshing from the grimy radiators in the drafty old sound studio. It didn't really help.

It had been five below zero when he left his tiny hunk of woods upstate and boarded the 5:20 express bus for the city.

That was the trouble with shooting these damn commercials. 7:30

calls. Sure, the residuals were great, if the thirty-second masterpieces eventually hit the television screens and ran for a while, but 7:30! They'd be lucky if they got to the first shot by 11.

"Peter?" The familiar voice boomed out at him from the make-up room he was passing. That voice with the decibels clearly revved up to reach the back row of any second balcony. The voice that for so long had been nibbling away at his reason, drawing him like an uncontrollable magnet to this exact place. At this exact time.

Annabelle Jones. He hadn't seen her in nearly fifteen years. In the flesh, to be more accurate. In the ample flesh, to be even more accurate.

He backed up a couple of steps and stuck his head in the room.

"Hi, Annie," he said, smiling into the wall-to-wall mirror. The calmness of his voice and the sincerity of his smile surprised him.

There she was in all her reflected glory wedged into a barber's chair, her hair wound around a dozen or so spring coils and wearing a wrap-around smock and that trademark expression of hers. Half cynical, half contemptuous, totally comic.

"I'll be my ravishing self in a bit when this stonemason finishes her job." Her oversized eyes panned slightly right to the girl applying the make-up base. Annabelle, a pro to the toenails, wasn't about to move the face being worked on.

"This is Ruthie Klinger. Peter Wilson. You remember him."

"Of course," Ruthie agreed. Her deep Miami tan cracked into a brief grin and quickly retreated.

"Haven't seen him in years," Annie bellowed as if Peter had already left the room. "Well, that's not true," she addressed him in the mirror, "I saw that wonderful film just last week, that one where you and what's-her-name did that terrific song and dance. You were cute as a button, honey."

Peter's eyes dropped to his galoshes. "Yeah. I tell people that was my son. That was twenty-five years ago."

"Oh my God, honey, don't do that. Those old *Merrily We Love* reruns of mine . . . I tell everybody that was my mother."

Peter obliged with a laugh and started removing the heavy wool overcoat. "You can get away with that."

"Bull," she said. "But you could, honey, you haven't changed a bit. Where the devil have you been, in a time capsule?"

Actors always lie to each other about their looks. It goes with the territory.

But Annabelle Jones was right about one thing, although she had no way of knowing it. One thing about Peter hadn't changed a bit. And wouldn't until accounts were settled up.

Annie was rattling on about something at full performance pitch but Peter's mind closed a door somewhere and closeted him with dark personal thoughts.

Annie had it made. Those old *Merrily We Love* reruns she scoffed at had made her a very rich woman. That long-running situation comedy had been dubbed in a dozen languages and episodes were still being played all around the world, sometimes three or four times a day. And Annie wasn't even the star of the series. Just the second banana. *Just the second banana*, Peter thought bitterly.

". . . so much to dish about." The clarion voice brought Peter's head back into focus. "Although probably everyone I could ask you about is by now either dead, divorced, or demented. How long has it been, honey, since we've seen each other?"

"Almost fifteen years." Peter could have named the exact date. The exact day of the week. Almost the exact minute of that day.

"How long will you be?" Russ, the assistant director, had poked his balding head in the open door.

"Maybe twenty minutes," Ruthie Klinger said, her mouth filled with bobbie pins.

"No sweat. He's already changing the first set-up. How about Wilson? He O.K.?"

Ruthie squinted at Peter in the mirror and shrugged. "I'll powder him down on the set. That's all it needs."

It. Peter winced. So impersonal. Another prop. A thing.

"You need anything, Miss Jones?" Russ asked.

"Yeah, honey. More."

"More time?"

"No, honey. Just more. More everything."

Russ laughed his hearty assistant-director's laugh.

"And it's Annie, honey."

"Right, Miss Jones." And he laughed himself out of the room.

"He's new, isn't he?"

"No, Annie," Ruth said. "He's been on the last four we shot."

"Well, you know how I am about faces and names."

I know, Peter Wilson wanted to say. That's one of the things he had counted on. He excused himself and headed for the dressing room.

It was nearly an hour before Russ called him to the set. By that time he'd been over everything a number of times. He was astounded by the sense of calm that had settled over him. No butterflies. No nerves. No stage fright at all. If anything troubled him it was his total lack of jitters. The easy coolness with which he was proceeding, step by step, to bring this long-awaited plan into being. The enormity of it didn't bother him in the least. Just deserts.

He was standing on a designated mark in front of the camera being lit when Annabelle Jones came onto the set. Not to her spot before the lens—her stand-in was there beside Peter quietly waiting while lights were adjusted—but only to the traditional canvas chair. It said *Elsie* on the back of it. That was the name of the continuing character Annie played on the commercials. They were popular commercials like Jane Withers and her Josephine the Plumber bit. Elsie hawked orange juice. Well, not really orange juice but a mixture of chemicals and water that was supposed to taste even better than the real thing—and, of course, was touted as being even healthier than the real thing.

It was the "health" thing that had first decided Peter on his plan. Wherever Elsie was or whoever she happened to be with or whatever the gimmick for any particular commercial, each one ended with the same tag. "To your health!" Elsie would say with a wry lopsided smile and take her healthy slug of it just before they cut to the product shot. The beauty shot. A gorgeous close-up of the jar standing beside a frosty tempting glassful of the pre-mixed wonder.

The irony of "to your health" was almost too much for Peter to bear. One day he'd audition for one of those commercials and get it. And when he did he'd come prepared with a little extra chemical of his own. Something a little extra deadly.

"Whatever happened to what's-his-name?" Annie bellowed from her chair. "Up above the Sunset Strip? The one that played such rotten bridge?"

Peter filled in the name and told her he had died a few years back.

"I told you," Annie hooted. "Dead! Probably someone murdered him at the bridge table. God knows I could have a couple of times."

Her whatever-happened-to questions—shouted from the shadows behind the camera—took up the better part of half an hour. In every case Peter would have to supply the name and correct a few facts in her unstable memory from under the hot lights while the agency men and the clients and the production team changed and rechanged their collective minds. Finally the first shot was taken, retaken, and taken again, but at least they were under way. The day droned on.

During lunch—catered and set up cafeteria style in one corner of the set—Peter nearly altered his carefully nurtured plan. Annabelle's diet soda sat so temptingly close. His fingers crept to his jacket pocket and he could feel the small glassine envelope lying innocently inside.

"Honey, I don't know how you've managed to keep track of all those old wrecks out in California. My God, I live out there and don't know any of them. Of course I don't know much about show business since I remarried. Did you ever meet my husband? I can't remember. What about that lady writer who lived out by you? The one who seemed anxious to drink herself to death?"

"She did." Peter patted his jacket and returned his hand to the cold chicken on the paper plate.

Not yet, he told himself. Hang on. She'll get around to asking the fatal question. Just give her enough time.

"There you are," Annie said, pleased with herself, "another deadie. Like I said, everyone is either dead, divorced, or demented. Ruthie, move that lard rump of yours and get me another helping of that roast pork. And a scoop or two of that dressing while you're at it." She belched noisily. A class act all the way.

"What the hell is his name?" Annie waved toward the balding A.D. who stood well within ear-shot.

"Russ." Peter and Russ said it together. Russ wasn't smiling any more.

Nor were the clients. Nor the agency boys. They were huddled together over by the heavy sliding door where the blinking red light kept people out during a take.

By four-fifteen they were ready for the "to your health" shot. There had been a brief break during which Annie polished off a couple of pieces of fresh fruit.

"And whatever happened to that old actress you used to hang out with? The old broad who tested for my part on *Merrily*. She dead too?"

So here it was at last. The Question. Peter's heart whacked wildly against his ribcage. He slipped his hand into his jacket pocket and palmed the tiny envelope. She didn't remember. She didn't care.

"No," he said quietly. He didn't elaborate. December 17, 1961. A Sunday. The day he had had to have his mother committed—

"Let's go for a take," the director said.

She'd forgotten. She'd forgotten his mother. And what she'd done to her.

"Peter, you pass the glass to Annie, lift your own like a wee toast, and she'll deliver the old curtain line."

All those years of hot tubs and shock treatments.

"O.K., slate it."

All those times when she didn't even know him when he visited her. The times she spit at him or cursed him and had to be taken away, back behind locked doors.

"Sound is rolling."

The patient years. The slow crawling back to comparative sanity. The long analysis, patching and mending the broken actress.

"Speed."

The trauma of the final desperate chance for a comeback. A screen-test for the pilot of a new TV series. The excitement on the set the day the test was shot. The premature congratulations.

"On action, Annie, take one step into the shot to your mark."

The confession, too late, by the film editor of the bribe he'd accepted from the competing actress with the cute comic grin and the willing body. The "misplaced" test.

The final break.

"Ready?"

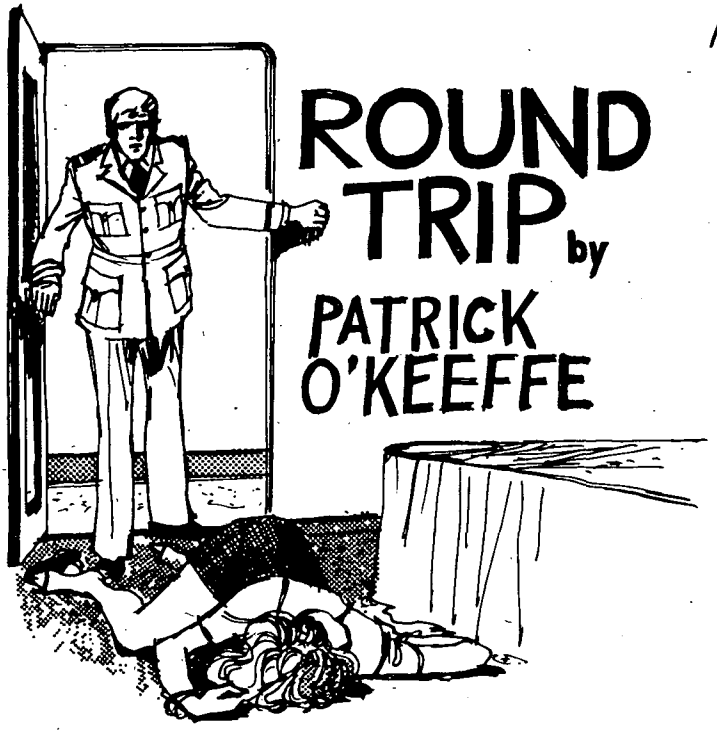
Peter's hand with the hidden envelope reached for the glass.

"And . . . action!"

Annabelle took the step toward her mark, skidded on the second of the two peels she'd carelessly discarded on the floor, and grabbed wildly at an arc lamp. The heavy lamp crashed toward the camera. The live wire, ripped loose and clutched tightly in her chubby fist, sent the high voltage tearing through her perspiring body. She was dead before she hit the floor.

Peter Wilson stepped back out of the remaining circle of light. His fingers barely shook as they replaced the unused envelope.

There are times when honesty can be extremely destructive . . .



ROUND TRIP

by PATRICK O'KEEFFE

Leaning over the bridge rail on that fateful night, Grayson became lost in joyful anticipation. The *Golfo*, a freighter in service to the Caribbean, had cleared the outer Bahamas; and with no other vessels in sight to keep a wary eye on across the calm, moonless sea, he was free to let the happy throughts parade through his mind. When the voyage ended in Baltimore, a mere three days hence, he'd take his leave of absence to marry Hilda. There were bright prospects for their future.

He'd recently been promoted to second mate, and the company was expanding with new container-ships; by the time he was thirty-five, in another ten years, he could expect to be in command of one of them.

Grayson, tall and light-haired, with large cautious eyes, was startled out of his blissful absorption when the helmsman struck one bell. He went into the darkened wheelhouse and plugged in the coffee percolator. It was bubbling noisily when the chief mate came up through the chartroom fifteen minutes later, loudly sniffing the smell, as if it were something for a cold in the head.

"Morning," he greeted Grayson. Mr. Pritchard was a solid-built man, middle-aged and graying. "I got a pretty good night's sleep for a change."

"Glad you did," Grayson replied, without warmth. Mr. Pritchard usually came up for his morning watch at four o'clock growling about not getting enough sleep, more often than not without blaming himself for staying up late playing cards with the passengers.

Mr. Pritchard poured a mug of coffee. "It sure feels good to pound the pillow right through to watch time once in a while. Y'know, it's a long time since the man calling the watch had to come right up to my bunk to get me awake."

Grayson yawned. He turned over the watch to the chief mate and then went into the chartroom to write up the rough log. This done, he took the inside stairway down to the deck-officers' quarters. Generally, at the end of his midnight to four A.M. watch, he would go to his room and turn in; but occasionally, if he felt peckish, he would go down to the galley for a snack first. On this particular night, he went below to the galley.

Helping himself to one of the prepared sandwiches and a glass of milk from the refrigerator, he carried them into the adjoining dining room. He was alone. Sometimes the second assistant engineer came in for a snack at the end of his engine-room watch; tonight he had seemingly gone straight to his room.

Someone had left a magazine on the table, and the title of an article featured on the cover caught Grayson's attention; he began reading it between sips and bites. It was a lengthy piece about no-fault insurance, of immediate interest to him, for Hilda had been in a collision in her car when driving him to the ship on sailing day.

By the time Grayson put aside the magazine, the dining-room clock

read a few minutes before five. Returning to the quarters, he trod softly along the row of darkened rooms, doors hooked ajar in the warm night. He had left his own door hooked wide open, as usual, with only the small bunk light left on. He froze as he was about to step inside. A woman lay in a heap on the floor.

Grayson's first thought was that she had wandered up into the officers' quarters, indifferent to the "Officers Only" sign, perhaps a little befuddled after one of the late parties, and entered the first open doorway she came to, slipped to the floor and was sleeping it off. Even if her face had been turned away, he'd have recognized her from the yellow hair and pink shorts as Gertrude Kroll.

While surveying her with some annoyance, it struck him that she was strangely still. He stepped up beside her and turned her over on her back. Her face was white. Drawing upon his ship-officer's first-aid instructions, he bent and put an ear to her thin blouse; he heard no heartbeat. He pushed back an eyelid and touched the eyeball; there was no reaction. There was no trace of blood or sign of injury. As a final test, he felt for her pulse; it was still. He straightened up in concern. Gertrude Kroll was undoubtedly dead.

Grayson's first impulse was to rush up to Captain Francke's room behind the bridge. He checked it, dismayed. Would the captain, would anyone, most of all Hilda, believe that the young woman had entered his room by chance? Might it not be suspected that he'd invited her, and she was waiting for him to come down from the bridge at four o'clock? It was around five now. Would it be believed that he'd spent the intervening time reading in the dining room, not in his room with Miss Kroll alive?

Grayson turned and unhooked this door and closed it in one swift movement. It was unlikely that anyone would pass by at this hour, unless it was the chief mate slipping down for cigarettes or something else he'd forgotten, but he'd better play safe until he'd had time to think what he should do. His marriage, his whole future, would be blasted if he couldn't prove that this woman passenger had died in his room solely by chance.

Grayson finally decided that the odds were overwhelmingly against him. His only hope was to switch the body elsewhere without being seen, and do it fast. The chief mate's room was right next door and empty; it wouldn't be thought Miss Kroll had been waiting for Mr.

Pritchard to come down from the bridge at eight o'clock in the morning, with the ship alive for the day. It would lead to awkward questions all around, though, from the fact that she'd been found in an officer's room.

The officers' washroom would be a better place. The door was always wide open and the lights on. It would be thought she'd strayed in there and collapsed, and no one would come under suspicion. It was at the far end of the passageway, though, and to reach it he would have to pass all the other doors, any one of which might suddenly be opened by a man going to the washroom. It was a risk that had to be taken, even though to be seen carrying the dead body from his room would brand him as guilty.

Hooking his door wide open again, Grayson gathered up Gertrude Kroll's featherweight form in his powerful young arms. She was still warm. With the stealth of a body snatcher, he stepped into the passageway and hurried along toward the other end, taut with the fear that one of the doors might suddenly open, or Mr. Pritchard perhaps hurry down from the bridge for something. When he came abreast of the washroom, he was tempted to continue out to the boat deck and lay the body down in the open, to make it appear that Miss Kroll had collapsed out there instead of in his quarters; but there was the danger of being seen by Mr. Pritchard from the bridge.

Grayson lay the body down gently on the white-tiled floor and then hastened back to his room. He swiftly placed the door on the hook, changed into pajamas, and swung into the bunk, switching off the bunk reading lamp.

Lying sleepless in the dark, he went over in his mind what little he had learned about Gertrude Kroll during the trip. She was unmarried and twenty-eight, secretary to a Baltimore advertising executive; her only relative was a distant cousin in Minneapolis, their correspondence limited to an exchange of Christmas cards. She verged on prettiness with teased, flaxen hair, blue eyes, and round pink cheeks. She had been friendly and popular with the other eleven passengers as a skillful bridge partner and always willing to make up a foursome at shuffleboard. She'd been equally popular with all the officers, and joked that, except for old Mrs. Barlow, she was the odd woman out on the nineteen-day round trip, since the rest of the passengers were married couples.

Grayson became uneasy with second thoughts about having moved Miss Kroll's body to the washroom. He'd panicked. He should have gone straight to the captain. His story would have been believed. Or maybe he should have carried her out to the deck. If there was any doubt as to the cause of death, the FBI would interrogate all the officers with rooms in that washroom section. They might break him down. His story would then be laughed at.

It was dawn by the time Grayson drifted into a troubled sleep. When he awoke, the room was bright with sunshine, and the *Golfo* was swaying to a light easterly swell. A vivid memory of the dead woman lying on his cabin floor held him motionless for several seconds; then he raised his head and glanced at the little travel alarm clock on his dresser. It was close to nine-thirty. He lay back again, puzzled; he wasn't a heavy sleeper, and he'd fully expected to be awakened by the commotion out in the passageway with the discovery of the body when the officers' steward came on duty at six-thirty. He surely couldn't have slept through it.

Slipping out of the bunk, Grayson stood before an open porthole and looked down at the foredeck. A junior engineer in a sweat-soaked khaki shirt was working on one of the cargo winches with a wrench; two tattooed sailors stripped to the waist were painting the rails; the chief mate, vizored cap tipped back, was talking to the bosun. From their unconcerned expressions no one would ever guess that a woman passenger had been found dead in the officers' washroom.

Grayson gathered up towel and shaving gear and went out to the washroom. Gertrude Kroll's body had been removed. While Grayson was shaving, the officers' steward came in to draw a pail of water. Grayson fully expected the steward would be bursting to tell him about finding the body. Yet the steward merely glanced at him and left without uttering a single word, as if the discovery of a dead woman in the washroom were part of his daily routine.

Bewildered, Grayson returned to his room, dressed in a set of fresh khakis and went up to the chartroom. Taking up his sextant, he went out to the bridge to shoot the sun for a time sight. Captain Francke and the young third mate were standing in the wing, gazing ahead toward the rim of the shimmering sea. They'd surely have something to say about Miss Kroll. But they merely nodded at Grayson as casually as on any normal forenoon, and then stared ahead again.

At a loss to understand, Grayson went about shooting the sun in the cloudless sky and returned to the chartroom. He looked for the rough log; the discovery of the body would have been entered. The log was missing. The chief mate must have taken it down to his room in order to bring the Official Log up to date.

Grayson began working out his sight, scarcely able to concentrate on the calculations. When he had finished struggling with the figures, he went down to the officers' quarters and along to the radio office, which was just around the corner from the washroom. The captain was sure to have radioed a report on the death of a passenger to the company's head office in Baltimore, and the radio officer was almost as certain to remark upon it. The radio officer, a slender man in his thirties, was listening to radiotelegraph signals issuing from a loudspeaker. He looked round as the second mate paused in the doorway.

Grayson smiled. "Anything exciting on the air this morning?"

The radio officer shrugged. "Only a tanker calling for a ship with a doctor."

Grayson continued out to the deck and along to the after end, where the passengers were lounging in steamer chairs under the canvas awning. They'd surely have something to say about a missing member of their group. Grayson noted that one chair was unoccupied, as he had expected. He stopped beside the nearest chair. A stout lawyer wearing a flowery sport shirt and shorts was sprawled in it.

"Looks like another fine day," Grayson remarked casually, glancing at the sky.

The lawyer removed a long cigar, blowing out smoke contentedly and grinning up at the second mate. "You fellows have done pretty well for us weatherwise. I've enjoyed every day of the trip. Nice and restful."

Grayson chatted for a few minutes and then went up to his room completely mystified. What was going on? Had the body been found before the steward came on duty—the radio officer or the purser turning out early, perhaps? The captain had then ordered it carried down to Miss Kroll's stateroom before anyone else saw it, and was keeping it from the passengers for the time being? But why from him too? Had he been seen carrying the body to the washroom, and, with only three more days left of the voyage, was the captain leaving it to the FBI to investigate?

Grayson heard the chief mate go into his room next door and come out again almost immediately. Looking through a porthole, Grayson saw Mr. Pritchard walk out onto the fore deck. He hurried round to the chief mate's doorway. The Official Log was lying on the desk, the rough log beside it, open at that day's page. Grayson darted inside for a quick glance. He stared at the page in disbelief. Nothing had been entered about Gertrude Kroll.

Grayson hastened back to his room, telling himself that he hadn't dreamed it all. It hadn't been some kind of nightmare. He was as sure he'd carried a dead woman into the washroom that morning as that he himself was now alive. What had happened to her? Why hadn't it been logged?

The mystery became even more baffling at lunchtime. The passengers' hour began at noon, but Grayson, having the afternoon bridge watch, always ate at eleven-thirty. The purser occasionally joined him, and was already seated when Grayson entered the diningroom and sat down with him.

After a while, Grayson remarked off-handedly, "I hope all the passengers are in good shape, not likely to hold up the ship at quarantine station."

The purser, a tubby man with horn-rimmed glasses, grunted. "All disgustingly healthy, I'm happy to say. No sick reports with reams of copies to make. I checked their vaccination certificates, except for Miss Kroll's. She sometimes sleeps right through to lunchtime. I'll get her when she comes out to eat."

Grayson went straight up to his room from lunch and thence to the bridge, dazed as to how Gertrude Kroll could possibly be asleep in her stateroom when he'd left her dead in the officers' washroom around five o'clock that very morning.

Grayson was no closer to a solution of the mystery when Captain Francke came to the bridge toward the end of the lunch hour, his rugged, elderly face grave.

"Miss Kroll is missing. She didn't show up for breakfast or lunch. The chief steward finally knocked on her door. She wasn't in there, and her bed hadn't been slept in."

Grayson could only stare dumbly at the captain. Captain Francke went on. "The chief and third mates are making a search, along with the chief steward and the purser. I told them to look everywhere she

might have gone into and collapsed. She confided in me at the outset of the voyage that she had a weak heart and occasionally blacked out."

Grayson finally recovered his voice, striving to keep it steady. "When was she last seen?"

The wheelhouse telephone rang. The captain hastened to answer it, muttering, "Maybe she's been found." He came back shaking his head. "It was the chief steward. He's checked all his storerooms, the linen room, and the baggage room. If she's overboard, it'll be pretty hopeless to turn back to look for her. She once told Mr. Pritchard she'd never learned to swim. So far, he seems to have been the last to see her. He sat out on deck with her a while after their bridge game ended, toward midnight."

Some ten minutes later, the chief mate appeared on the bridge, his forehead damp from the search. "All quarters, deck lockers, cubbyholes—everyplace Miss Kroll could have found her way into has been searched. No sign or trace of her. None of the crew saw her after the card game in the lounge." The chief mate shook his head gloomily. "It looks as though I was the last to see her alive."

"And that was more than twelve hours ago, a long time even if she could swim," the captain observed mournfully. "The passengers at my table told me that Miss Kroll seemed her usual cheerful self in the lounge last night, apparently nothing on her mind. How was she when she left you?"

"In good spirits, I'd say. When she got up to go she said she was going down to her stateroom and bade me good night. If she went straight down to her room, she didn't turn in, seeing that her bed hasn't been used. What happened after she left me is anyone's guess."

"She may have got bad news by radio," the captain suggested. "I'll check later with the radio officer. If I don't turn up any reason why she should take her own life, as appears to be the case, I'll log her as missing overboard at sea, circumstances unknown."

The captain turned to go into the chartroom. With an odd look at Grayson, Mr. Pritchard followed him. Presently the captain and the chief mate went below.

Grayson began pacing the bridge with short, feverish steps, desperately asking himself what could have happened to Gertrude Kroll after he turned in. Someone had obviously removed her from the washroom, but why hadn't that someone reported finding her?

It struck Grayson for the first time that Gertrude Kroll may not have collapsed in his room after all. It may have happened in one of the other rooms, and she'd been carried into his for the same reason he'd moved her to the washroom.

The thought excited Grayson. He pursued it. The room could have been that of any one of the other four officers berthed in the quarters—chief and third mates, radio officer and purser. All four had been on friendly terms with Miss Kroll, and any one of them could have invited her to slip up to his room after everybody else had turned in and the ship had quieted for the night.

Grayson halted his pacing momentarily as his suspicion fell on one man, the chief mate. Their rooms adjoined. It would take only a minute or so to make the switch, with less risk than resorting to the washroom. Grayson recalled that Mr. Pritchard came to the bridge that morning proclaiming that he had had a good night's sleep. That could have been a ploy to divert suspicion at the inquiry into the passenger's death. As a married man with a family, and soon due for promotion to captain, he had good reason to cover himself by any means available. And hadn't stopped at throwing the blame onto him.

The thought enraged Grayson. That could have been the meaning of the look Mr. Pritchard gave him before following the captain into the chartroom: it was one of relief that he hadn't spoken up. Well, he was going to have plenty to say when Mr. Pritchard came to the bridge at four o'clock.

The helmsman was striking eight bells when the chief mate eventually appeared on the bridge for his watch. Grayson was purposely standing over in the port wing, to be out of the hearing of the helmsman and the standby man. By that time, Grayson had already reasoned out what may have taken place that morning, and was all set to confront Mr. Pritchard.

Taking in the tranquil sea and westing sun with a glance as he crossed to Grayson's side, the chief mate remarked sadly, "Too bad about Miss Kroll."

That gave Grayson his opening. "Just what I wanted to talk to you about," he raged. "That was a pretty dirty trick, switching her to my room."

Mr. Pritchard's face darkened. "What're you talking about?"

"You should ask! Miss Kroll died in your room. You switched her to

mine, then came to the bridge telling me what a good night's sleep you'd had—protesting too much. When I didn't report finding her, you came down later and found her in the washroom. What happened after that, only you know. My guess is that you dropped her overboard."

Mr. Pritchard stared at Grayson for a long moment, breathing hard. "Grayson," he finally said, "I wasn't playing a dirty trick on you. I had to think fast. She keeled over. I tried hard to resuscitate her. The standby man was due to come down and call the watch. Your room was handy. I figured you'd find her when you came down from the bridge at the end of your watch, and it would look as though she'd been wandering around the ship, couldn't sleep, maybe, and she'd drifted in there. It didn't work out that way."

"Because I didn't go straight down to my room first. I went below to the galley for a snack. I didn't go up to my room till around five o'clock. I couldn't see it being believed I hadn't been with her in my room all during that hour. I carried her out to the washroom."

"When nothing happened right after you'd gone below," the chief mate said, "I sneaked down for a look, figured you'd gone to the galley, then I went back to the bridge. When still nothing happened, I went below again and found Miss Kroll in the washroom. By then I'd had more time to think. I did what I should have done in the first place—carried her out to the rails and dropped her overboard. Then there'd be no questions about what she was doing up in the quarters. I figured you'd moved her to cover yourself and would keep your mouth shut."

Grayson stared at the chief mate in horror. "You really dropped her overboard!"

"What difference does it make?" Mr. Pritchard snapped. "With no close next-of-kin to want her buried ashore, she'd have gone over the side anyway, only wrapped in canvas."

The chief mate's callousness shocked Grayson. "And you expect me to go on keeping my mouth shut?"

"It'll go pretty hard for you if you don't. Dumping a passenger's body overboard will get you more than being logged a day's pay."

"Me! That's what you'll have to answer for."

Mr. Pritchard laughed in derision. "I'll deny everything I just told you. I'll say that I happened to glance into your room before I went up to the bridge at four o'clock and saw Miss Kroll in there, waiting for

you. I decided to be a little discreet and say nothing, not dreaming what was going to happen. It might be suspected you murdered her and got rid of the body over the side."

Grayson was stunned for the moment. "If I had, who'd think I'd be crazy enough to mention her?" he gasped.

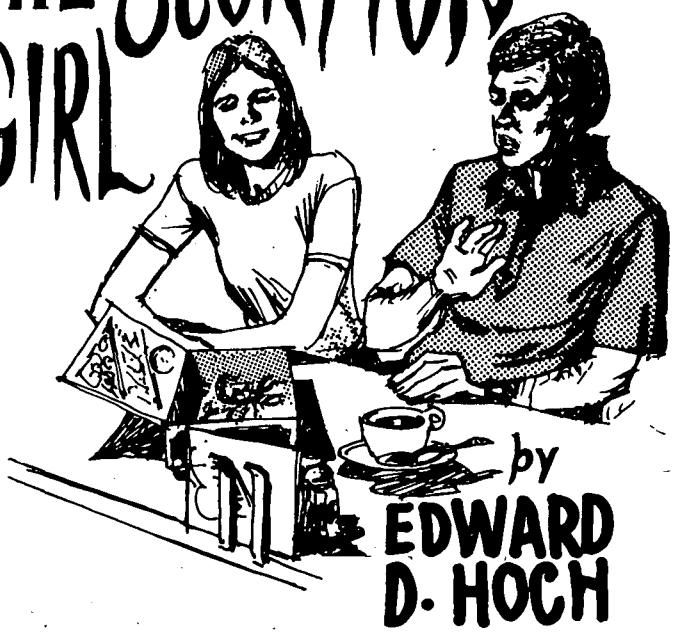
"No crazier than you'll be thought for saying you found her in your room. Grayson, there's little to be gained by telling what happened. It won't do anything other than show what became of her. Think about all you stand to lose—job, license maybe—? you'll finish up in jail. What about your wedding, your bride, what it'll all mean for her? Go down to your room and think it over."

Just then the captain stepped from his room onto the bridge. Mr. Pritchard turned and moved to greet him. Grayson stood in frightened silence for several moments, and then went into the chartroom. After feverishly writing up the rough log, he hurried below, to think it over at length in his room.

Thus did the disappearance of Gertrude Kroll become one of the riddles of the mysterious Bermuda Triangle.

An extraordinary judge and jury render justice . . .

THE SCORPION GIRL



by EDWARD D. HOCH

Tokay met her for the first time in one of those little roadside diners along Route 60 near the Arizona-New Mexico border. She must have been in her early twenties, though there was something about her boyish figure and innocent face that made her appear much younger. She was travelling with her teen-age brother, a somber youth who walked with a limp.

Her name was Liz Golden, she said, and her brother's name was

Randy. They were driving to Hopworth for a scorpion fight. Tokay had been only mildly interested until she opened the cigar box on the counter between them and he saw the four-inch-long bluish-green scorpion nestled in some loose sand and pebbles.

"My God!" he gasped. "That thing could kill you!"

She smiled at his ignorance. "Not really, though the sting is very painful. The Mexican *Centruroides* has been known to cause deaths, but this is a *Hadrurus hirsutus*. It's called a Giant Hairy Hadrurus for obvious reasons."

"And what did you say you were going to do with it?"

"In Hopworth they're having an illegal scorpion fight tomorrow night. Scorpions only sting in self-defense, and of course the poison has no effect on members of the same species, but they can sometimes be goaded into doing battle with their pincers."

"That's the most bizarre thing I've ever heard," Tokay said. "Actually I'll be quite near to Hopworth tomorrow. I should come over and see it."

"Bet on our scorpion," Randy urged. "He never loses."

"That's right," the girl agreed. "Big ones like this have larger pincers, and they're easier to handle besides. Their sting isn't nearly as venomous as the smaller species."

"Have you ever been stung?"

"Oh sure! I carry scorpion antivenin with me for emergencies."

He was glad when she closed the lid of the cigar box. He finished his coffee and rose to leave. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow night," he said. "My name's Tokay. I'm a professor of archaeology."

"Are you going to Hopworth to dig?" the boy asked.

"I hope the digging's all been done," he answered. "I'm just going to talk to an old friend of my father's."

It was nearly noon when he pulled away from the diner. He had several hours more driving before he reached his destination, and he wanted to get there before nightfall.

He saw the church steeple while he was still some distance away, and he pulled up by a cultivated field where a young Mexican was pulling weeds. "Is this the Mission of San Felipe?" he called out.

"It is," the Mexican answered. His expression was curious, as if he wondered what had brought Tokay here.

"I have come to see Father Payne. Is he at the mission?"

The Mexican glanced toward the mission tower, where a high window caught and reflected the final glow of the setting sun. "Yes, he is always there. He never leaves."

"Thank you." Tokay drove on to the church down the road.

By the time he reached it a white-haired man in a black cassock was there to meet him. "Welcome, traveler. I am Father Payne of the Mission of San Felipe. Are you going far?"

"I have reached my destination," Tokay said. He told the priest his name. "My father was an archaeologist who visited you many years ago."

Father Payne bowed, showing a bald circle on the top of his head. "I admired your father. Is he in good health?"

"He died last year. But could we speak inside?"

"Visitors are always welcome. Come in!"

Tokay followed the black-robed man inside, silently marveling at the stonework of the mission. It was indeed as his father had described so many times. "I noticed the Mexican down the road. Is he in your employ?"

Father Payne shook his head. "Not really. He does some chores in return for his lodging, but I expect he'll move on soon. But tell me of your father. I'll remember him in my prayers."

Tokay leaned back in his chair and accepted a small glass of wine the priest offered. "I learned many things about archaeology from my father," he said. "Chief among them was the beauty of this church, and of the old church over the hill. He urged me to come back here after he died, to see it for myself."

The old priest's eyes twinkled. "And to take back the Spanish scrolls? That is what your father always wanted from me, and what I would never give him—the account of the early discovery of this land, handwritten by the Spanish explorer Coronado."

"I won't pretend I haven't heard of them. They've been translated and reproduced in books."

The conversation was interrupted by the sudden entrance of the Mexican. Father Payne looked up. "What is it, Jugo?"

"The light," the Mexican said. "I see the light by the old ruins again."

Father Payne frowned. "Are you certain?"

"I see it!"

"All right. I will come." He turned to Tokay. "Some trouble. An intruder, perhaps. You must excuse me."

"Could I help?"

"Do you have a weapon?"

"A revolver in my car."

"Bring it, then."

Tokay followed them out of the church and paused at the car long enough to get the gun. Darkness had come quickly, as it often did in desert regions, and he could feel the drop in temperature.

"This way," the priest said, guiding him with a flashlight that cast an eerie glow across the sand.

"Where are we going?"

"Over the hill to the ruined church. As your father must have told you, it crumbled in an earthquake long ago. The new one was built on firmer ground."

They went the rest of the way in silence, until at last they stood before a ruined steeple partly buried in the sand. From somewhere within came a glimmer of light. As they entered through a crumbling doorway, Jugo cautioned, "Be careful of scorpions. They nest here."

"Scorpions?" Tokay hesitated, remembering the girl in the diner.

"There's no danger," the priest assured him.

The light that had attracted them came from below. Tokay held his pistol tightly as they descended the old steps to the ruined church's lower level. Suddenly a bearded man with long dark hair appeared. He dropped his flashlight and leaped back in alarm when he saw them. "Why are you here?" Father Payne demanded. "Who are you?"

The bearded man recovered his light. "You would be Father Payne," he said.

"That's right. Who are you?"

"Nat Quarn. I do some prospecting."

"And why are you here? We've seen your light other times recently."

"I'm searching for treasure," he answered.

"There is no treasure here," the priest responded angrily.

"This church collapsed . . . "

"Because of an earthquake!"

"Or because of a treasure room beneath it."

"There is no treasure room! Get out of here or I'll have the police on you!"

"I . . . "

"Get out of here!" the old priest repeated.

Quarn hesitated a moment. Then, deciding that further pleading was useless, he scurried away up the steps. "Whatever his purpose here, it is evil," Father Payne said. "I have heard bad talk of him in the town."

"In Hopworth? I think I'd like to look around there," Tokay said. "Maybe find out more about this Quarn fellow."

"In the morning. Stay the night with Jugo and me."

Tokay agreed, wondering if perhaps it was really his pistol they wanted to remain.

The town of Hopworth was little more than a desert crossroads, with a few dozen low buildings stretched out in four directions under the haze of the morning sun. There might have been a few hundred residents of the town at best, though this day their numbers seemed to be swollen by a number of out-of-state cars.

Tokay stopped in the first tavern he came to, and the bartender asked, "You here for the scorpion fights?"

"Not really, but I heard about them. That what's attracting the crowd?"

"Sure thing! Some people'll bet on anything!"

"I'm staying out at the church with Father Payne."

The bartender grunted. "He still got that Mexican with him?"

"Jugo? What's wrong with him?"

"He's been in trouble with the sheriff. A little too fast with his knife when he's been drinking. But Father Payne manages him."

"He seemed harmless enough to me," Tokay said.

"Don't turn your back on him."

Tokay finished his drink. "Know where I might find a prospector named Nat Quarn?"

"Haven't seen him around today yet. But if he's in town he'll be at the scorpion fights tonight."

Tokay spent the rest of the day back at the church, studying the scrolls of Coronado. Then in the evening he went to the scorpion fights.

The men in the little barn were mainly from out of the state, some

from as far away as Las Vegas. They talked and laughed in loud voices, and drank from a barrel of beer furnished by the nearby tavern. In the center of the floor was a large table, and on it was a ring some three feet in diameter surrounded by a low wall. It was there the scorpions would do battle.

As Tokay watched and sipped his beer, the girl from the diner entered with her cigar box. "How's the scorpion?" he asked her.

"Oh—hello! I was hoping I'd see you again." She opened the lid so he could see the hairy curved tail. "Want to bet on him?"

"What wagers are usually made?"

"Mostly ten or twenty dollars, though later in the evening someone might go for a hundred."

"I could maybe risk a buck."

She threw back her head and laughed, and Tokay was suddenly struck by her youthful beauty. "Well, that's better than nothing."

He glanced around the barn. "Where's your brother?"

"Out wandering around somewhere. He comes with me but he doesn't like to see the fights."

The man whose scorpion would oppose hers in the first fight was Hakor, owner of the barn and one of the town's wealthiest men. He seemed almost like a scorpion himself, curved slightly with age and ready to sting. When he unboxed his champion a murmur of approval ran through the spectators and new bets were made.

"It's only half as large as yours," Tokay said.

"Hakor is smart. That's a Mexican species whose venom could paralyze my *Hadrurus*."

Hakor accepted a few more bets, then nodded to Liz Golden. She took up a position on one side of the table and unboxed her scorpion. At once more bills changed hands and there were shouted wagers among the crowd. Liz poked at her scorpion with a small stick, goading it into battle, and gradually as Tokay watched the two scorpions moved closer together.

There was a roar of delight from the spectators as they clashed, but almost at once attention was diverted to the door. Someone new had entered, and Tokay recognized the bartender from the tavern.

"What is it, Sammy?" Liz asked as he approached her.

"Your brother—someone has stabbed him. He's dead."

A low moan escaped from her throat, and Tokay grabbed her as she

swayed and nearly fell. Then she pushed by him and hurried after Sammy.

Later, when Tokay found the girl, he held out the cigar box to her. "Your scorpion won," he said quietly. "I collected the money for you."

She nodded her thanks without speaking and accepted the scorpion box and the money. Tokay said, "I'm sorry about your brother. Who could have killed him? Was he robbed?"

"He never had more than a few dollars on him, and none of it was taken. I don't know. I don't know who would do such a thing."

"Where was he killed?"

"In an alley near where the car was parked. Sammy heard a noise and found him dying there."

"Should you call your family?"

She shook her head, brushing away a tear. "I'm all the family Randy had. Our folks were killed in a car crash. That's where he got the limp."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

It was Hakor who appeared then, bent with age but moving faster than he had in the barn. "The sheriff's looking for you, Liz. The knife that killed your brother had a name carved into the handle."

"A name?"

"*Jugo*. The Mexican who lives out at the church. It was his knife."

"You think he did it?" Tokay asked.

"Seems so. The sheriff's planning to arrest him, anyway."

Tokay tried to remember if Jugo had carried a knife the previous evening, but he could not. Either way, he knew he was needed back at the Mission of San Felipe. Father Payne had asked for his protection, and now he needed it.

When Father Payne heard of the killing and the knife he shook his head sadly. "Jugo has been here all evening. They're using the killing as an excuse to arrest him."

"But why?"

Father Payne closed his eyes, as if better to focus on something in the reaches of his mind. "It is a long story, Tokay, and one better left for another day."

"I think I should hear it now," he said.

"Very well, then. When the old church collapsed, generations ago, some of the townspeople were killed. That man Quarn was right—there was no earthquake. The priest who had built the mission, and who died himself in its collapse, had indeed put a treasure room for Spanish gold beneath its foundations. The church collapsed, and the people—rightly or wrongly—blamed the priest. The new mission was built, and I came to minister to them, but the old suspicion and hatred remained—passed down three generations. When I allowed an outsider like Jugo to live here for a time, that old hatred flared again. He was a sinister stranger, and I was another of the old priests bringing disaster to the town."

They heard cars pulling up outside, and doors slamming. "That will be the sheriff," Father Payne said, "with some of the townspeople. I must warn Jugo."

There were voices outside the mission doors now, and a hard knocking. Tokay left the old priest and went out to meet the crowd. The sheriff was in the lead, and old Hakor was by his side.

"We've come for the Mexican," Hakor said. "The sheriff has a warrant for his arrest."

Tokay stood in the doorway, blocking it. He spotted Liz Golden and called to her. "It was your brother who died, Liz. Do you want an innocent man to suffer for the crime?"

"Only the guilty one," she replied.

Then, near the edge of the crowd, Tokay recognized Nat Quarn, the prospector. "What about you, Quarn?" he said. "You were sneaking around here last night. You could have found Jugo's knife."

Quarn stepped forward, his beard spotted with tobacco juice. "If you're accusing me you'd better be able to prove it! I never even seen that limping boy till after he was dead!"

"Do you deny you're treasure-hunting here?"

Quarn started to answer but Hakor interrupted. "There's the guilty one now!" he shouted, pointing beyond Tokay to where Jugo had appeared with Father Payne. Suddenly the crowd surged forward and Tokay feared they might break past him.

But Father Payne spoke to them. "You all know me. Go back to your homes. I give you my word this man is innocent!"

"Let's have the Mexican!" someone else shouted, and Tokay saw that it was Sammy, the bartender.

But as the shouting increased and the mood of the crowd grew more ugly, Liz Golden ran forward to join Tokay on the steps. "Listen—listen, all of you! He was my brother and I have a right to be heard! Don't do anything you'll be sorry for later!"

"We won't be sorry getting rid of that Mexican!" Hakor cried.

"You have the knife that killed my brother. Let the Mexican touch it—here, inside the church—and swear to God he is innocent of the murder. If he does that, it will convince me."

Tokay had stepped aside and the crowd gradually spilled into the back of the church. The sheriff produced the knife and handed it to her. "Don't worry about fingerprints," he said. "A dozen folks handled it before I ever got a look at it."

Liz Golden took the knife and looked around for someplace to put it. She decided on a deep wooden box with a hinged and slotted top through which donations for the poor could be dropped. Father Payne emptied it of its few coins and Liz dropped the knife inside. "Now then, Jugo," she said to the Mexican, "reach inside, grasp the knife and swear by the Lord that you did not kill my brother."

Jugo looked at her uncertainly, then shifted his gaze to Tokay and Father Payne. Perhaps it was the grumbling of the crowd that finally decided him. He thrust his hand into the poor box and said, "By the Lord I am innocent of this crime!"

"What does that prove?" Hakor asked with a snort.

Liz Golden merely smiled. "Would you like to try it, Mr. Hakor?"

"Of course not! It's superstitious nonsense!"

"I don't think so. I think it'll tell us who really killed my brother."

Sammy the bartender spoke up. "I'll take the oath. I don't want people thinking I killed him because I found the body."

He plunged his hand into the box, grasped the knife and said the words. One or two others stepped forward then, and even the sheriff joined in. Finally Hakor was forced to follow them.

"Satisfied now?" he asked Liz.

She reached in with a cloth to wipe off the knife. "Who's next? How about you, Mr. Quarn?"

The prospector glanced about uncertainly, then stepped forward and thrust his hand into the box. Almost at once he let out a shriek and fell to the floor grasping his hand. "My God! My God—yes, I killed him! I stabbed him! Oh, God!"

Liz Golden slammed down the lid on the poor box. "There's your confession, Sheriff—and the real killer of my brother."

The sheriff merely gaped. "Why would he kill your brother?"

Tokay stepped forward, looking down at the man on the floor. "I think I can answer that. We found him prowling around the old church last night, looking for Spanish gold. That's when he must have stolen the knife from Jugo's belt. He had nothing against young Randy, but he wanted Jugo arrested for a killing—any killing. You see, Father Payne never leaves the mission, but he did get Jugo off a couple of times when you arrested him. Surely he'd hurry into town if Jugo was charged with murder, and Quarn could search the mission for the Spanish treasure."

"Is this true, Quarn?" Hakor asked the man on the floor.

"Yes, yes! God, do something about my hand!"

Liz bent over him with a needle. "This antivenin will help."

"Help with what?" Hakor asked.

Liz looked up. "It was the only way I could get a confession out of him. When I wiped off the knife, I left my scorpion in there."

Later Tokay asked Father Payne, "What happened to the treasure under the old church?"

"Stolen long ago. My only treasure is Coronado's scrolls."

"Then I'll leave them with you. They'll be safe here."

Tokay went outside to find Liz Golden. "Which way are you headed?"

"Back home to Tucson, after tomorrow morning. Father Payne is having a service for Randy and he'll be buried here."

"Your car's rented. Turn it in and I'll drive you back."

"All right."

"But tell me one thing," Tokay said. "How did you know Quarn was guilty when you set him up for the scorpion?"

"He said he'd never seen my brother but he described him as a limping boy. How did he know about the limp if he'd never seen him?"

"Someone else might have seen Randy and mentioned the limp to Quarn. He might have been completely innocent."

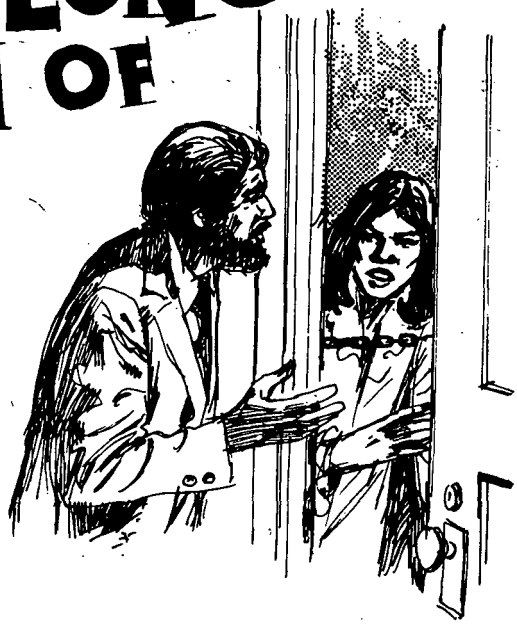
"But he wasn't, was he?"

The next afternoon, with the scorpion in the cigar box, they left for Tucson together.

Does one become a friend by ceasing to be an enemy? . . .

THE LONG ARM OF EL JEFE

by EDWARD WELLEN



Soon the presses of *Libertad* would roll and the blazing words of Juan Vallejo, leader in exile of all those opposing El Jefe, would bring new life to butchered trees. In his eagerness to stop the presses, Enrique Saenz made his fatal slip. He let Juan Vallejo see into his soul.

They had been talking about money and power. Vallejo had repeated to Saenz the theme of his lead editorial.

"The millions of dollars Uncle Sap pours out in foreign aid to our

homeland go into the Dictator's pockets and those of his family and friends."

That was when Saenz burst out in raw self-interest. "Does that not tell you, Juan, it is well to be among El Jefe's friends?"

Vallejo looked at Saenz with the beginning of a smile, as though believing Saenz to be joking. The smile aborted. The tapping of typewriters and the stutter of the teletype in the crowded office outside Vallejo's swelled to meet the silence. Vallejo sank deeper in his chair as if an enormous weariness weighed upon him.

"So. It is painful to find out that someone I had thought my friend is my enemy's friend. Or do you deny it?"

Saenz shook his head. His throat tightened. He had not meant to admit the truth of Vallejo's charge just yet, but maybe it was just as well. It would never become less hard to soften Vallejo up and now he would not have to hint at the offer El Jefe had commissioned him to make. He stroked his silken beard.

"One million dollars in a secret Swiss or Bahamas account. You do not have to become a friend, merely cease to be an enemy. You do not have to support El Jefe, merely stop your attacks on him."

"Thank you, Enrique."

The sincerity in Vallejo's voice brought a cynical smile to Saenz's lips.

"Yes, Enrique, it is worth a million to hear that. It tells me what I've been hoping all these years to hear—that your friend the Dictator is worried. He is right to worry. A change is in the wind."

Saenz's eyes fell to the polished rock paperweight on Vallejo's desk. Saenz knew the story of that rock. Vallejo had told him many times. The rock was all that remained to Vallejo of his homeland. In the days when Vallejo had printed his daily paper in the capital, someone in the up-and-coming party had flung it through the window of the composing room. Vallejo had polished it and put it to use as a paperweight. Shortly after, El Jefe had seized full control of the country and forced Vallejo to flee to New York. Now it was a symbol of the homeland, of Vallejo's own rocklike resolve to drive the Dictator from power.

Saenz pointed to the rock. "Juan, you are like that rock, a reminder of a lost cause. You have sentimental value, true, but otherwise you are worthless. What people want is bread, not a stone."

Vallejo sat taller. "Freedom is bread for the spirit."

"Words! Freedom is a commodity like any other. Even the high-minded Juan Vallejo sells it, doesn't he? What else is this sheet of yours but—" Saenz picked up a desk copy of *Libertad* and weighed it in his hand—"two ounces of your brand of freedom?"

Vallejo's eyes narrowed. " 'Words,' you say. Let us try to use the words that fit this case. You have sold out to the man you call El Jefe. Or have you always been in his pay? Ah, I can see now! Your mission from the first has been to win me over, or at least to remove my sting. Go back to your Dictator and tell him you have failed. That is the worst punishment I can wish you, the best payment for your treachery. You have betrayed our friendship and you have abused my hospitality. I must ask you to leave. *Now*."

Saenz pulled together the tatters of his self-image. "Before I leave this sacred soil let me give you one word of warning. El Jefe's arm is long. It reaches far. The fingers of his hand will squeeze you lifeless—if you are lucky. If you are *un*lucky, his hand will snatch you back to the homeland, where you will find out for yourself whether there are indeed the torture cells you have written about."

Vallejo's finger poised over the intercom. "I too am a dictator. Before I dictate a new lead editorial is there anything you care to add? Any more threats? Or bribes? Both make very good copy."

Saenz filled with panic. Not only had he failed to neutralize Vallejo, he had provided Vallejo with more ammunition.

He picked up the rock.

Vallejo sat slumped forward, his face on the desk, his blood soaking through sheets of copy paper.

Saenz found himself foolishly wiping his hands on the paper instead of polishing the rock of fingerprints. But even that would have been useless. The only way out was through the editorial room and he would be the last to have been seen alive with Vallejo.

His only hope was to get out of the country before the police could arrest him. Once he set foot on his own soil he would turn from fugitive to hero. El Jefe might publicly deplore the killing of Juan Vallejo but privately he would reward Juan Vallejo's killer.

Saenz strode out through the editorial room. He held his pace down, though the urge to run was strong. Reporters and copy editors stopped what they were doing and stared at him. Had they heard the loud

voices, the blow, the silence? Was there blood or its smell on him?

Their features and expressions were imprinted sharply on Saenz's mind, just as his were imprinted on theirs. They had seen him here often. They knew his name. When the alarm went out the police would have a make.

Once out in the corridor, he quickened his step. He punched the elevator button, but, remembering the old elevator's agonizing slowness, he took the stairs down to the street. A wise move. A hue and cry rose and swelled behind him.

Outside, he hailed a cab and gave his address. His heart beat faster and faster as the cab crawled the twenty blocks to his apartment. Every siren he heard spoke his name.

He had only to pick up his passport and his bank book, then draw out the balance El Jefe had fattened, but even this needed time, and the traffic was robbing him of time. Two blocks short of his address he told the cabby to stop, paid him, and got out.

Another wise move. Not only was it faster on foot, but when he stopped at his corner to scout the street ahead he spotted two men in plainclothes in a car across from his doorway. A stakeout.

Saenz hurried over to the next street and approached the apartment from the back. He could climb to his window by way of the fire escape. But the stakeout might include the apartment itself. Hugging the alley wall, he counted up to his window and kept his eyes on it. He watched for nearly five minutes, then he saw it. A curtain twitched, sending a chill through him.

Vallejo must have weighed more importantly than he had realized for the police to have moved so fast and so thoroughly. Had they sealed off the city as well? At the very least he had better get out of the neighborhood. He would have to go without his passport, but that would not matter at the other end and he would not need it at this end if he booked a seat on a flight to Puerto Rico. From there he could find passage by sea or air the rest of the way home. He had to leave his bank balance behind, but he had his credit cards . . .

He stopped short.

A credit economy worked fine—as long as you felt free to use the name on your credit card. But if the alarm had already gone out, if the clerks had his name on their list, if the police stood alert at all the terminals . . .

He could not flash his credit cards. He would need cash. But where could he borrow some?

He stopped again. He knew where to go.

Raquel kept her door on the chain. Her small face stared out at him. He did not like the look in her eyes. Or the tone of her voice.

"Don't give me 'darling.' You have some nerve coming here. I just now heard it on the radio."

He tried a smile. He had thought to borrow a razor from her to shave off the beard she had often told him lent machismo. He felt sure enough of himself without it, and without it he would be less likely to draw the notice of the police. But now he would be content to leave at once with whatever ready money Raquel could scrape together.

"Let me in. I don't know what you heard, but I'm sure I can explain."

Raquel's look softened, but she did not unchain the door.

"Are you going to keep me waiting out here?"

"Juan was a good man. I don't want to call the police, but I will if you don't go."

As he stepped back a pace to ram the door, it shut in his face. The dead bolt shot into place. He heard her walk away—and then silence. Suppose she were calling the police?

If Raquel's door closed to him, all other doors would be closed too. Cash was out. He would have to chance his credit.

He caught a cab to Kennedy Airport. Paying the cabby took the last of his folding money. He did not risk the ticket counters but joined the crowd watching the planes take off and land.

He looked surreptitiously for signs of unusual scrutinizing of passengers on their way to board flights. Just when he began to breathe easier he saw a pair of plainclothesmen examine the papers of a bearded man of his build.

He grimaced. Escape by plane was impossible. He would find the same barriers at bus and train terminals. He was trapped on alien soil.

Then it hit him—there was one place, in the heart of Manhattan, that offered sanctuary, promised asylum.

He mixed in with a group leaving the terminal building and enviously watched them board a chartered bus. He did not have enough change for the ride back, even on a regular bus. Not willing to run the

risk of stiffing a cabdriver, he eyed the hazy glow in the west. It would be a long walk back to Manhattan.

He had to keep to the highway to avoid getting lost. The broken shoulders were hard on his feet. After a few miles he stopped at a diner for coffee. He lingered over the empty cup, finally forcing himself back out onto the expressway. Outside, his eyes lit on the cars in the parking area. He cased them, one by one, and finally found one with keys in the ignition. His heart racing, he pulled out into Manhattan-bound traffic.

After a few miles, he pulled over to see what else he had lucked into. In the glove compartment he found an electric shaver that plugged into the cigarette-lighter socket. Quickly he shaved off his beard.

Shortly after he crossed the bridge to Manhattan he ditched the car. Its number must be on the police band by now and it would be a fine thing to be picked up for driving a stolen car. He made a last-minute search of the car and found riches. In the corner under the dash a magnet held a coin container. He pocketed the three dollars' worth of quarters. Now, if the place had closed for the day, he had enough to see him safely through the night. All he needed now was a weapon in case someone should get in his way. He took a jackhandle out of the trunk and stuck it in his waistband under his jacket.

He would not have to wait till morning. As he approached the consulate its lights shone. Behind the windows figures hurried back and forth in a play of shadows.

The police would hardly dare cross that threshhold uninvited, so the activity inside would not be a police search for Juan Vallejo's killer. Vallejo's death would no doubt be the catalyst but the activity would be strictly consular business. The information officer would be fielding reporters' questions about the slaying of El Jefe's foe and the communications officer would be handling messages between home, Washington, and the United Nations.

Saenz suddenly knew the assassin's glory, the feeling that he had changed history—whether for better or worse did not matter. He convinced himself that instead of striking out at Vallejo in panic he had struck out out of patriotism. The result was the same.

He looked and listened, then approached the consulate with caution. Voices in a hidden doorway froze him.

"Think that Saenz guy will show up here?"

"No, we're wasting our time. He'd be a fool to."

Saenz curled his lip. What arrogance! The police were the fools if they believed they could keep him from getting through to safe soil.

He backed up and went hunting. A lone policeman—one his size—patrolling a deserted area was his prey.

He walked eight blocks north and east before he saw a man of his slight build in uniform. Saenz approached him. Close to, the man proved to be an auxiliary policeman, a civilian who gave up a few of his nights to help man the streets. Saenz asked directions to an address uptown and when the man turned to point the way Saenz whipped out the jackhandle and cracked the man over the back of the head.

The door opened and the consulate guard stared at the uniform. Saenz tried to push inside before the men staked out in the street realized he was not one of them. The guard stopped him.

"I'm sorry, this is not U.S. territory. You can't come in."

"Yes I can, you idiot. I'm no Yanqui cop. Don't you know me?"

The guard's eyes flickered in uncertain recognition. A man appeared at the door behind him. "Who's there? What does he want?"

The guard stepped aside and Saenz moved in and shut the door.

Safe!

The other man frowned at him. "Officer, I hope you realize your intrusion is most irregular. You are infringing on our sovereignty."

In the light Saenz remembered the man as an underling he had bypassed in his visits to the consulate for instructions from El Jefe. Saenz had even more importance now, and no time to waste giving explanations to this man.

"Take me to the consul."

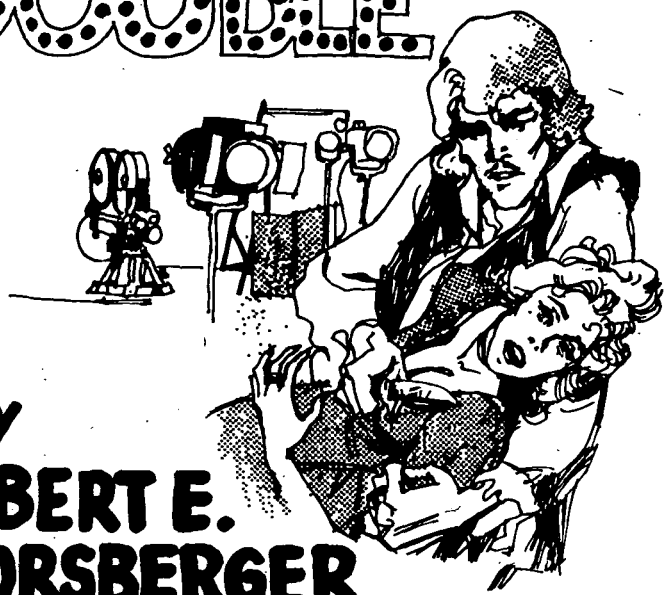
"I am the consul now."

Saenz stared. El Jefe *could* be capricious at times, elevating or destroying a man on a whim. "I'm Enrique Saenz," he said. "I claim sanctuary. I wish to send a message to El Jefe."

The new consul's face turned to stone. "Saenz," he said. "Haven't you read the papers or listened to the news? You will have to deliver the message to El Jefe yourself—and El Jefe is dead. Your killing of Juan Vallejo set off the coup that has been so long in the making. This consulate, like the homeland, is in the hands of your enemies."

Imitation might be the sincerest form of flattery, but certain boundaries should be observed . . .

THE DOUBLE



by

ROBERT E. MORSBERGER

Ever since early childhood, Peter Moss had wished he were Charles Ransome. The earliest movie he could remember seeing was *The Golden Hind*, in which Ransome swashbuckled as Sir Francis Drake; and thereafter Moss was Ransome's most devoted fan. Ransome's dashing manner, his dark moustache and beard (when he wore one) accentuating his daredevil grin, his athletic skill and ready wit were all that Moss lacked and longed to have.

As a boy, Moss was uncoordinated, spindly, and shy; his few playmates nicknamed him Mossy. Later he was called Pete Moss or Mossback. This matched his outward personality as a tongue-tied stumblefoot, but it was the opposite of the self Moss dreamed of being or becoming. In the fist fights that were obligatory with practically every boy in school during those years, Moss usually lost ignominiously, but on the way home, rubbing his bruises and nursing his revenge, he imagined himself as a Charles Ransome movie hero—the finest swordsman in France, England's champion pugilist during the Regency, the Confederacy's most gallant cavalry commander, a British soldier receiving the Victoria Cross for heroism in the Sudan. Shortcutting through the wooded vacant lots that still abounded, Moss would fashion a stick into a sword and slash his way through an army of imaginary enemies. "We cross swords at last, you dastard," he said through clenched teeth in his best Charles Ransome manner. He turned his running gait into a lopsided lope in imitation of a man on horseback. Alone at home, Moss outboxed, outfenced, and outwitted scores of villains, sometimes taking on a whole castleful at once. The back porch became a fort, from the walls of which Moss as Legionnaire Charles Ransome battled with hordes of swarming Touaregs or charging Afghans. In the cellar dungeons, Moss/Ransome rattled his chains defiantly, dug his way beneath the battlements, or seized a weapon from his jailer and fought his way to freedom.

But back in the schoolyard, he flailed futilely with his fists while more athletic boys bloodied his nose or blacked his eyes. In baseball, he usually struck out, and in football he fumbled or was piled up at the line of scrimmage. The girls paid no attention to him.

At first, these defeats were humiliating, but gradually Moss found that if he responded like Charles Ransome, he could salvage some scrap of triumph. Instead of weeping or crying uncle when beaten in a fight, he would manage a battered grin and put a defiant glint in his eyes. He would show the Inquisition that they couldn't break him on the rack. This pose won him a grudging respect, and eventually the tougher kids let him alone.

As Moss progressed into high school and college, it was natural that he should drift into dramatics. By then, his frame had filled out and he developed into a handsome young man. Moss, in fact, was delighted to detect some resemblance to his hero, though Charles Ransome by now

was in his late 40's. Moss could hardly wait until he was old enough to grow the sort of moustache Ransome usually wore. Meanwhile, he practiced Ransome's crooked smile in the mirror and bared his teeth in Ransome's most dashing grin. His speech began to take on a hint of Ransome's clipped British accent.

In his own person, Peter Moss had little to say, especially on dates. He had no fund of small talk; his secret life was too personal to discuss, and people would have ridiculed his romantic imaginings. In part his uncertain identity was caused by his knowledge that he was adopted. He wondered if his real parents were degenerate or whether he was the illegitimate offspring of wealthy, glamorous lovers—perhaps of Ransome himself.

Therefore the stage provided an outlet, for with someone else's dialogue he could be as dynamic as the part allowed. But where most performers tried to become the character they were playing, Moss would become Charles Ransome acting the role. As he did this increasingly well, he was usually cast in the sorts of parts Ransome played—mainly historical drama or romantic comedy. As Peter Moss taking a girl to a college dance, he was dull; his good looks failed to compensate for his stiff lack of confidence, and girls considered him a last resort. In early rehearsals he could be wooden too, but on stage something often swept through him; he totally forgot Peter Moss and found himself making love to the leading lady with all the charm and passion of Charles Ransome. He never had the assurance to continue such a romance offstage, and if an actress pursued him after hours she was apt to be puzzled and disappointed at his self-effacement. It was as if he were a different person altogether.

Meanwhile, he continued seeing all the Ransome films he could, including reruns of those he missed because he was too young. Ransome's career continued to prosper; it seemed as if he had been in films forever. Playing a succession of British gentlemen, dapper sleuths, soldiers of fortune, explorers in terra incognita, Ransome went from hit to hit. Most of his films were escapist fare, but he sometimes undertook a more demanding role, and Moss was overjoyed when Ransome won the Academy Award for his single foray into Shakespeare as Coriolanus.

But rumors of Ransome's private life were disturbing. Three marriages went smash, and there was gossip of spectacular philandering.

On screen, Ransome was usually the model of honor and noblesse oblige, but Hollywood awarded him the most uncooperative actor award, and he began to make the news for public brawling, dissipation, and debauchery. Apparently there were two Ransomes also. Peter Moss couldn't understand it. How could a person who projected such a beau ideal on screen be so different in private life?

Ransome's agent couldn't understand it either. "Look here, Charley," he said, "you're a person who has everything—talent, looks, a voice that people would pay just to hear recite the alphabet, fame, and money—lots of money. You're the envy of all the men and the idol of millions of women, and you're throwing it all away. Why, for God's sake, why?"

"Well, old man," said Ransome with a weary smile, "I don't know myself. I didn't start out to be a sex symbol or a souse. I took acting seriously, you know, and I believe in it when I get a decent part. But Lord, you can't go on for over a quarter of a century playing superheroes without getting sick of the pose and pretense, so you try to tarnish the image—or to test your invulnerability with acts of self-destruction. I'm 54 years old, and I'm tired of having to look like Apollo and keep in shape for the Olympics. I'm sick of being charming to bitchy columnists and gushing fans."

"But they're your public," protested the agent.

"In the immortal words of Commodore Vanderbilt, the public be damned," replied Ransome pleasantly. "Let them live their own lives instead of making a fantasy out of mine. At times I feel that they're emotional, psychological vampires, drawing the life out of me and trying to absorb me into themselves. Maybe I drink and wench to excess just to prove that I own part of myself and can do what I want with it."

"You're pretty good at making your own fantasies."

"No doubt. Sometimes I get tired of it all, but often I feel that I can't live enough. Lord knows I've lived as intensely as possible. I have an insatiable appetite for experience, and I want to do everything, try all sensations, make love to all women."

"Your record is spectacular," observed the agent, "but not even you can keep it up forever."

"Well, old man, I never could resist temptation, and I've certainly had lots of it. The world, the flesh, and the devil. Maybe I've made a

pact with Satan—the best of everything for 25 years, after which I go to hell."

And go to hell he did, for a while. Ransome went all to pieces at once. Not even his body could endure the strain he put on it, and he spent a year in hospitals and sanitariums. Alcoholism, cirrhosis of the liver, a touch of tuberculosis, a stroke that temporarily impaired his memory left him a shattered wreck of his former self. Resembling a stately ruin, he could no longer play romantic leads.

Shortly after emerging from his crack-up, Ransome tried to make a new start on stage. By this time, Peter Moss was working in advertising—a field that gave full play to his imagination—while acting in community theater at night. When he saw an announcement that Charles Ransome, "brooding and masterful," was coming on tour with a stage version of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* prior to a projected Broadway run, Moss immediately bought an orchestra seat for the first Friday night. Moss had identified himself so closely with Ransome that he took his hero's triumphs and defeats personally. As Ransome aged, Moss observed every sign and felt depressed at his idol's mortality. The sudden eclipse of Ransome's career drove Moss to desperation. How could the public be so tasteless as to prefer insipid young players? Thus Moss's hopes for the success of the play were as great as Ransome's own—perhaps more so, for the papers announced to Moss's dismay that after two disappointing evenings Ransome was withdrawing from the company, and subsequent performances were being cancelled. The production was postponed until a replacement could be found. A review had not yet appeared, but rumor had it that Ransome was uncertain of his lines and tossed them away with alcoholic nonchalance.

The next day, Moss was waiting for a meeting with a client at the bar of the Hotel Jefferson when boisterous conversation drew his attention to the fact that Ransome and several cronies were drinking at a nearby table. Ransome was still remarkably handsome in a ravaged sort of way, but up close and in person the ravages were indeed apparent. Even so, Moss was electrified; here was his legend come to life. Throwing aside his customary caution, he approached and ventured, "Pardon me, but you're Charles Ransome, aren't you?"

"A part of him," replied Ransome genially enough.

"I'm awfully sorry the play has closed," Moss said awkwardly.

"You don't know how much I was looking forward to seeing you."

Ransome shrugged and twisted the left side of his mouth into one of his famous quizzical smiles.

Face to face with his alter ego, Moss could not restrain himself. His customary conversational reserve cracked, and he blurted out, "Mr. Ransome, I don't want to intrude, but I've got to tell you what your films have meant to me. You never heard of me before, and I mean nothing to you, but you have been the major influence in my life." And he poured forth the whole story of his obsession. At the end, Ransome looked more serious than he had for ages. He drained his glass, put it carefully down, and looked up at Moss intently.

"What you say is quite remarkable and rather frightening," he replied. "As you observed, I never knew of your existence until now, and yet you and who knows how many others to some extent have been living vicariously through my pictures.

"People I've never seen have been studying my every move and gesture. I suppose I should be flattered, but I feel as if I've been drained by vampires. No offense, young man, but I'll tell you what. I'd advise you to forget about me and lead your own life. You look disconcertingly like me, you even sound rather like me, but you are *not* me. And you don't really know me any more than I know you. If I were once again as young and healthy as you, I would not waste my time trying to become someone else, except as an actor assuming a role. I had, and I would have again, the confidence that you seemingly lack.

"But—" and Ransome gave a self-mocking smile "—you see before you a mere shadow of the Charles Ransome that was. So beware: if you persist in trying to become me, you may succeed better than you desire. Why you or any other person should wish to exchange places with an aging alcoholic actor is beyond my comprehension. You see, we can both have our moments of truth. Perhaps I should return the compliment and try to become you—to trade my deteriorating body for your young one. Believe me, if I could find a way, I would."

"Thank you, " said Moss uncertainly. "It has been an honor to meet you and talk with you."

"Not at all," replied Ransome, reverting to his jovial nonchalance. "Always glad to meet a member of my devoted public."

Later, Moss did not know what to make of Ransome's remarks. The essential thing was that Ransome had listened to him with attention,

was aware of him, and had responded to him. Maybe Ransome would remember.

Despite the demise of his play, Ransome made a comeback of sorts. No longer able to get romantic leads, he re-emerged as a star of B-budget horror films. Ransome did not play monsters; he specialized in mad doctors, sinister scientists, diabolical revengers, and tormented victims. Though critics ignored these productions, Ransome took a new lease on life and did some of the most interesting acting of his career. He was glad to get away from the quarterdeck and the drawing room to try his hand at a variety of extravagant characters instead of repeating endlessly the dashing heroes of his prime.

Previously, Ransome had no great interest in horror, but he now became a connoisseur of Gothicism both on and off the screen. He read extensively in the literature of the occult and made the acquaintance of some of its practitioners. Tabloids and fan magazines suggested that Ransome was an intimate of diabolical rites, and special issues of illustrated horror monthlies were devoted to him and his movies. As a grand master of horror films, Ransome acquired a new group of zealous fans.

But Peter Moss was disconcerted. This was no longer the Ransome with whom he identified. Though he loyally saw all of Ransome's horror pictures, Moss depended upon TV reruns of vintage Ransome hits in which his youthful idol performed his now archaic romantic exploits. After seeing one of these, Moss felt as if he had had an infusion of energetic dash and charm that lasted for several days. When it wore off, he was once more plain Peter Moss, though by now he had developed a presentable front, so that people no longer considered him a blank. When the Ransome mood took hold, Moss became a magnetic leader of men and a charmer of ladies. In between, he levelled off except when he was in a play after hours. Then, the stimulation of the role and the cameraderie of the troupe carried him along.

Ransome meanwhile found that making horror movies exacted its toll. Even after his crack-up, he had more energy than most, but the horror roles were often physically demanding and emotionally exhausting. Bounding about in swashbucklers took less out of him than projecting himself intensely into the tormented characters he now portrayed. But the intensity was crucial to him. "It keeps me alive," he said to his agent, when the latter wondered if Ransome could keep it up. "I may

not have much longer to live, but while I do I'll live to the hilt. What appals me is the thought of oblivion. I don't give a damn about the physical moment of dying; it can't be any worse than what I've been through already. But extinction—ceasing to exist—for some people, the concept seems peaceful, but I shudder at the void. And don't try to give me any religious consolations. Heaven is too bland for my tastes, hell is just one more Ransome horror show, and the idea of losing my individuality in some cosmic transcendental all is as bad as nothingness.

"You remember Poe's 'Ligeia,' " he mused, "where the first wife refuses to yield her identity even after death. She quotes a passage from Glanville . . . how does it go? Ah yes, 'And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.' Though physically dead and buried, Ligeia manages to infuse her spirit into the body of the insipid second wife. But Poe botched it. The second wife is already dead, and Ligeia succeeds only briefly in reanimating her successor's corpse. What she needed was a healthy, living victim and a willing one at that—someone like that eager young man after the closing of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. You remember? He had a strange tale of sometimes feeling as if he were me. He even looked and sounded like me 30 years ago. If I could start over again with a young body like his, I'd do it right this time—without liquor or drugs."

"Or women?" asked the agent with a grin.

"Well, now, you mustn't expect me to give up everything, especially if I were young again. And the women were certainly willing and not necessarily victims."

At this time Ransome was starring in *The Doctor Who Wouldn't Die* as a Renaissance necromancer who survived into the 18th century by draining the blood of young people and giving himself a complete transfusion every generation. The basic plot was threadbare, but the script aspired to intellectuality with a conflict between reason and the occult during the Enlightenment. Ransome was fascinated with the central character's dilemma—a lust for perpetual life coupled with despair and a death wish. At the climax, the protagonist discovers the doctor in his laboratory preparing to drain the blood of the heroine,

and they engage in a duel among the breaking vials and equipment. Just as the doctor is about to run his antagonist through, his time runs out; he falls in a paroxysm of agony and dissolves into dust.

It was twelve years since Ransome had wielded a sword and the director cautioned him not to be too strenuous and perhaps to use a double. "I was once considered the best swordsman in films," Ransome countered, "and I'm not going to fence lamely now." Thus despite his years and physical unfitness, Ransome engaged his opponent with all the flash and fury of his old days. "Ransome's not following the blocking," whispered the second-unit man. "I know, but it looks great," the director whispered back. "Keep the cameras on them." Thrusting and slashing, Ransome drove his opponent nearly through a railing and into a cauldron below. Suddenly, Ransome was seized with pain as if fire were searing his veins. He crumpled to his knees but forced himself up again, thrusting blindly with his sword and making incoherent animal sounds. Again the fire convulsed him, and he exploded into darkness.

Ransome's death produced much publicity, especially the sensationally authentic death scene in his final film. Magazines printed pictures highlighting Ransome's career and discussing his development from a legendary romantic lead to a dissipated and possibly diabolical creator of horror. Peter Moss clipped the pictures and fixed them in his memory. For a week after Ransome's death, he wore a black arm band. But since he depended upon reruns of Ransome's movies before the crack-up rather than on the later horror films, Moss's situation did not change too much at first. He wondered whether it was unnatural for him to recharge his personality from a dead man, and he was occasionally disconcerted at the thought that the youthful Ransome face to which he tried to mould his features was now a stiffened corpse, perhaps a skull. But if others responded to literature or painting by dead artists about dead people, his obsession with Ransome films was not so different.

But a gradual change now took place in Moss's relationship to Ransome. Formerly, a Ransome film served to recharge his batteries for quite a while; and in between, he could work up a sufficient substitute by projecting himself into a Ransome role until he felt passably like what he imagined his hero to be. Now it was more as if he were summoning the spirit of Ransome into himself and as if at the same time some unseen influence were trying to fuse itself with him.

It was more like conjuring than fantasy. Before, when he assumed the role of Ransome, it was like the Stanislavsky method of acting, feeling himself into the character. Now it was as if drinking some powerful potion actually turned him into Ransome. During those periods he possessed intense vitality and magnetism; when they wore off, he felt exhausted and empty. An almost imperceptible physical change took place also. Moss's teeth shifted their alignment slightly, giving him a replica of Ransome's grin. For one play, he had to shave his moustache, and when it grew back it came in thicker and neater, the hairs closer together, so that he could trim it into a facsimile of Ransome's.

His eyebrows came closer together and arched slightly. Moss began to hold himself more erect, to move more gracefully. In conversation, he was witty and dynamic, never at a loss for words, as if someone were speaking through him, for afterwards he had little recollection of what he had said. He felt like a musical instrument on which a virtuoso was playing brilliant improvisations. The intervals when he felt possessed by Ransome became longer and more potent, the relapses more unendurable. When Moss as a boy had played at being a Ransome hero, he was indulging in elaborate daydreams. Now it was like being addicted to a drug requiring stronger and stronger doses until it was only as Ransome that he felt really alive. Peter Moss was dying inside.

A cold, spectral hand seemed to be drawing him toward the grave. Moss considered seeking medical or psychiatric help but put it off as the Ransome periods became more dominant and exhilarating. The low ebbs when Moss returned to himself were more acutely miserable, but they were fewer and shorter, and perhaps he would get beyond them.

Some six months after Ransome's burial, Moss received a visit from his agent. "I'm sorry it took me so long," the agent apologized, "but it wasn't easy to locate you. I didn't have your name—only a description and the fact that you live in this burg and do some acting. But you're the man who talked to Charles Ransome after *The Mayor of Casterbridge* folded, aren't you? Well, now, you're a lucky fellow, because Mr. Ransome was so impressed with you that just before he died he instructed me to find you and to arrange for you to have a screen test. And since you'll need some money to get started in Hollywood, he left you $50,000."

"I'm very grateful," replied Moss in Ransome's voice. "He seems to have thought of everything."

The screen test was so impressive that Moss was groomed for a rapid rise to stardom. "It's incredible," said the studio head to Ransome's agent, who was not handling Moss. "He's a reincarnation of the young Charles Ransome. It's as if Ransome weren't dead at all."

"I know," agreed the agent. "But then who *is* in the grave at Santa Barbara?"

"Peter Moss" was quickly eliminated as a screen name. The new actor startled the movie world by assuming the name of his benefactor, Charles Ransome. Rumors circulated that this young man who could pass as a double of the star of 30 years ago was in fact the actor's illegitimate son. Moss, after all, had been adopted, and why else should he be Ransome's posthumous protegé? Ransome was not noted for sentimentality. So the name was changed legally. A new Charles Ransome was born, and Peter Moss ceased to exist.

Very little was known about the new star except that he had some stage experience. Otherwise, he was a man of mystery, whose private life was an enigma. He acquired Ransome's house and estate; a codicil to the will had turned up, in Ransome's hand, bequeathing them to him. One of the first visitors was Belinda Loring, a voluptuous starlet who had been the first Ransome's final mistress.

As she drove through the tunnel of trees that arched over Ransome's cobbled driveway, she noted that nothing seemed changed. The lawn, with its croquet and putting green, was as neatly manicured as ever, and not a weed seemed to have invaded the tennis courts or the bridle paths. The half-timbered Tudor mansion looked as if the master were still in residence. "It's good to see you again, Miss Belinda," said the venerable footman who showed her in.

"Why, James, I never thought you'd still be here," she replied. "I thought Mr. Ransome's staff would have retired or found other employment."

"We were afraid of that, but the master wanted nothing changed and made provisions to keep us on."

"Which master?" she wondered.

But instead of answering, he ushered her into the library. It was a replica of the dining hall at Christ Church College, Oxford, only somewhat reduced in scale. In addition to books lining the walls, there were portraits of Ransome in some of his leading roles and mementos from some of his films—assorted weapons and other props, items of

costume, a bust of him as Coriolanus, and his Oscar. An alcove contained an iron maiden, a rack, and sinister devices from the horror films of his last years.

"I think I'll have those removed," said Charles Ransome, entering with a brisk step. That's a phase of the Ransome career that I'd prefer not to dwell upon. It doesn't provide the most attractive setting for a lovely visitor like yourself."

"You're right," she said. "I wish we could turn time back.

"You know, Charles," she purred after several drinks, "—I may call you Charles, may I not?—I used to visit here often. I had your—shall we say your predecessor?—when he was aging and past his prime, and he was still the most unforgettable lover I ever knew. No young man could compare to him. I always wondered what it would be like to have been made love to by the real Charles Ransome when he was your age."

"Permit me to satisfy your desire," answered Charles Ransome.

The possession was complete.

Is it true that you can't cheat an honest man? Well, maybe not with impunity . . .

CORA'S RAID

by ISAK ROMUN

The service station attendant opened the hood, looked in at the engine. He reached down with a hand palming a small rubber syringe and applied a quick shot of oil to the alternator.

"Gee, look, sir," the attendant said. "The alternator's shot. It's spraying oil. Once you're back on the road it'll break down in ten, fifteen miles."

The driver, a spare small man, lifted his hands to his chest, soft

white palms out, as if pushing away unpleasantness. He had come off the limited-access highway to gas up and had asked the attendant to check under the hood. Bending warily over the car fender now he peeked into the darkened area below the hood. Adjusting his pince-nez, he looked unseeing at the unfamiliar part pointed out by the attendant. "Oh, dear," he said. "Is there anything you can do?"

"I dunno. I'll check our inventory and see if we have a replacement for it." The attendant turned and went toward a small building over which a sign, black letters on white peeling paint, proclaimed this place to be Moonstreet's Service Station and Garage. He disappeared into a gloomy, dirty car bay, its floor covered with oil-blackened sawdust, and stayed in there out of sight for a moment or two. Then he rejoined his customer outside.

"You're in luck, sir. We have one in stock. Shall I put it in?"

"Oh yes, do, please," said the car owner, his anxiety showing.

The attendant smiled encouragingly. "Don't worry, sir. I'll have your car back exactly the way it was in just a jiffy," he said as he got in to drive the vehicle into the bay. As he did, he reflected on his last statement. He had told this poor dude nothing but the exact truth.

In the bay, he switched off the engine, got out of the car, and pulled down the overhead door, shutting off the customer's view. Looking obliquely out through the small window in the door, the attendant carefully studied the customer now standing by one of the pumps looking forlornly at the garage door behind which his car had disappeared. What the attendant saw was moderate, comfortable prosperity, a man to whom a reasonable sum was worth the price of avoiding imagined discomforts.

The attendant nodded his head decisively, strode over to the car, and flipped up its hood. He reached in and screwed off a battery cap exposing the cell's acid level. Then he took a cylindrical jar from a shelf, shook out an antacid tablet, broke the tablet into three or four small pieces, and dropped these into the battery cell. He screwed the cap back on securely and turned his attention to the alternator.

Working quickly with a solvent-dampened rag, he wiped the alternator surface clean of its oil and any foreign substance that might have clung to it. Then, after toweling the part of the last dabs of solvent, he took a can of quick-drying paint and brushed black enamel evenly across the alternator surface until it fairly sparkled, just as if it were new. A

small, portable fan sped up the drying process. Finished, the attendant looked at his watch. Less than ten minutes had passed since he drove the car into the bay. Time to kill. He sat down, lit a cigarette, took up a magazine with an intriguing centerfold, and, for about the tenth time that day, hungrily surveyed its contents.

A few customers drove in for gas and as the attendant responded reluctantly to the bell summons, he flashed a friendly, confident smile at the small man waiting for his car to emerge from the garage.

"Won't be long now, sir."

"Um, yes, thank you."

At long last, after an hour and fifteen minutes, the attendant put down his magazine, snubbed out the last of many cigarettes, and got into the car. He turned the key in the ignition and heard a low whirr but, as he expected, the engine would not turn over.

He got out, opened the garage door, and beckoned to the customer. "Oh, sir, I'd like you to inspect the job," he said. With that he led the nervous car owner to the engine, indicated the painted alternator, and boasted, "Had a little trouble getting it in. This is a tough engine to work on. But it sure looks nice, don't it?"

The customer was moved to agree that the alternator did, indeed, look nice. However, any elation he might have felt at having his car at last in working order was considerably reduced by the attendant's next words.

"I'm afraid, sir, that you've got a dead battery here," he said and helpfully manipulated a hydrometer in and out of the neutralized cell to lend credence to his statement.

"I suppose this means a new battery," the little man gasped.

"Yes, sir, I think that's what we need," the attendant agreed with a joviality contrasting sharply with the car owner's downcast mood.

"Well, put it in."

The attendant did so, then labored a pencil stub over a sales slip before presenting the little man with a high three-figured bill.

"That includes tax," he said, then put in magnificently, "The boss'll kill me, but I gave you a break on the battery."

The other man took the bill and with unexpected crispness ticked off each item, totaled the figures to his satisfaction, noted the absence of a garage letterhead on the bill, and said, "Yes, everything seems to add up."

He went to his car, opened the door on the passenger side, and slid into the seat. He unlocked the glove compartment with a key that hadn't been on the same ring with the ignition key. From the compartment, he took a handy-talkie, pressed a button, and spoke briefly into the radio's receiver, "This place checks. Come on in."

He reached into the compartment once more and drew from it a pair of dark glasses and a snub-nosed revolver. The former he put on after removing his pince-nez. The latter he pointed negligently at the attendant just as a Volkswagen microbus, tires screeching, pulled into the service station.

Jake Moonstreet sat shivering in the small office of Sheriff Oscar Roche of the county in which the Moonstreet Service Station and Garage was located. Moonstreet was shivering because he was barefoot. As a matter of fact, his only covering was a thin, worn blanket that inadequately covered his large frame, the blanket's nap-free pink surface harmonizing nicely with the flesh peeking through numerous worn spots. Next to him, in a state of identical dishabille, sat his employee, Pat Challoner, also shivering.

Jake was talking to the sheriff whose attention was frequently distracted by sneezing fits brought under control only by the application of a great white handkerchief thrown full into and over the face. Beside the sheriff, a police stenographer was juggling a steno pad upon which a network of meaningless squiggles had been impressed by a usually keen and careful hand, now rendered quivering and slack-wristed by the deep drama of what Jake Moonstreet had related.

Around the walls, straining the capacity of the small office, were a number of uniformed deputies, probably every one the county employed, called in from their patrols to hear testimony first-hand on what would become known as the Moonstreet Ripoff. At any particular moment, one or another of them would be facing toward the wall, wiping eyes suddenly filled with tears, as shoulders shook in the throes of some uncontrollable emotion brought on by the Moonstreet narrative.

"Tell it again, please, Jake," Sheriff Roche begged, motioning toward the stenographer. "I don't think Charlie here got everything."

Jake Moonstreet sighed, shivered a little more, and told his story all over again into the handkerchiefed face of the sheriff.

"Well, Sheriff," Jake began, "Pat there called me up and told me

there was a customer down at the station who wouldn't pay his bill until I come down personal like and talked to him. When Pat told me how much the bill was, I got into my pickup and got right down there. Well, when I got there, I saw a car, a late-model Chevy, and a Volks bus with four guys standing around it, all these guys wearing dark glasses. Pat motioned me into the office where I saw him standing with another guy, also with dark glasses on. As I go through the door, the group around the Volks breaks up. Three of them go into the garage and the other steps behind me and jams a gun in my back.

" 'What is this, a holdup?' I say.' The guy with the gun almost loses it in my back and I get the idea he wants me to keep moving, so I go into the office. That's when I get a good look at the guy with Pat, a small guy with very clean hands. Uh, I notice that sort of thing in my business."

"That tells you the guy doesn't know thing one about cars. Right, Jake?" one of the deputies asked.

"*That* tells me the guy can use my station's expert help if his car's in trouble," replied Jake loftily.

He went on. "So I get a look at this guy's face, what there is of it not hidden by the glasses, and believe me, fellahs, here's a hard case, a syndicate type."

"Why do you think a syndicate type, Jake?" the sheriff asked.

"I bet they got some racket going, getting all us honest operators outa business so they can set up a chain of ripoff stations," answered Jake, raising his voice somewhat to be heard over the outburst of exuberance that greeted the word "honest."

"Has the syndicate approached you? Offered to buy you out? This is the way they usually operate."

"Well, no, Sheriff. But what else could it be?"

"I don't know, Jake. I really don't know. But go on with your story."

"Anyway, the hard type in the office with Pat says to me, 'Jacob Moonstreet?' I say, 'Yeah.' He says, 'You and your man here, Patrick Challoner, have had a good thing going. Now it's over.'

"So, the guy with the gun in my back steps around and cleans out the register. Puts everything, bills and change, even checks, into a bag with a lock trap. After he snaps the lock on the bag, he gives it to Mr. Hard Face. Just then, another one of them comes in and says, 'All set.' Hard Face asks, 'This place too?' The other guy says, 'Wired.'

"We go out, then, and I notice that a guy's car we had in for a tuneup is parked across the road. They had moved it. Also moved was my pickup and Pat's Rambler, which are now in the garage bays. They manhandle Pat and I into the back of the Volks and we drive off aways, Hard Face leading in his Chevy. One guy stays behind hidden in back of an embankment and when he's sure no cars are passing on the road, he pushes down on a detonator he's got and up goes my station. Office, garage, gas pumps, the whole schmeer."

"And now tell us what happened after that," the sheriff urged.

"So, after the explosion, they drive like hell into Weaver's Lee, through the business district, and out into that new housing subdivision."

"Warrington Heights," the sheriff clarified. "The place where all the fat bankrolls go to rest up after a hard day in town."

"Yeah, that's it. On the way there, the guy with the gun tells us to undress, like completely. He's got a good argument in his hand, so we do as he tells us. And then they put us out right there in the middle of that Heights place."

"Without a stitch on?" queried the sheriff, busily working his handkerchief again.

"Right. Naked as jaybirds. But you'll catch 'em, won't you, Sheriff?" Jake inquired hopefully. "I gave you their license numbers and I got another lead I didn't tell you before. A clue, like."

"What's that?"

"I think a dame runs the gang. I heard one of the guys mention her name. Cora. He knowed he said something outa school because he clammed up pronto. Maybe this Cora dame was one of them disguised." Jake Moonstreet looked eagerly at the sheriff. "You'll catch 'em, won't you?"

"I dunno," the sheriff said, suddenly sober. "We'll put out a bulletin on the cars and plates. But they'll probably have switched plates or ditched the cars by now."

Besides, the sheriff asked himself, who's the criminal here?

He was remembering the time Jake Moonstreet, some years back, did a job on the Roche family car.

The small man, once in his motel room, pulled his suitcases off the overhead rack, opened them on the room's single bed, and began

packing. He packed carefully, slowly, a man who was sure of himself and what he did, and prided himself on the care and deliberation he brought to everything he did, including packing his clothes. He took a snub-nosed revolver from his pocket, hefted it briefly and then tucked it beneath some neatly folded, snow-white T-shirts.

As he went to the dresser for more clothes, he caught himself looking into the wide mirror above. He was mildly surprised to find a small smile of satisfaction creasing his normally stern features, betraying there a softness he usually exposed only to put the enemy off guard. He let the smile widen into a grin. Well, why not? he thought. It was a good operation; well-planned, smoothly carried out.

A rap on the door swept the grin from his face.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"Barton, sir."

"Come in, Sergeant. It's open."

The door was pushed in and a tall bulky man wearing dark glasses let himself into the room.

The occupant looked at the newcomer, glanced up at the glasses, and said, "You can take them off, Sergeant. No need to be in uniform now."

The tall man smiled, said briskly, "Right, Lieutenant!" and removed the glasses.

"All taken care of?" the lieutenant asked.

"In the vans and on their way to Sector B. Plates'll be changed enroute. They'll be used next week by team 31 for an operation similar to the one we completed today."

"Good. Has the rest of our team departed?"

"Yes, sir, they're on their way. We'll rendezvous with them day after tomorrow at the assembly point. I have a new car outside."

"Fine. I'll pack and we'll be on our way."

"Lieutenant Valore, sir?"

"Yes?"

"What are we going up against next?"

"One of those ghetto superettes. High prices. Extends credit. Interesting accounting practices. We'll meet the research squad tomorrow and hammer out the plan with them before the operations squad arrives the next day. This will be team 17's last action before we shut down for a month with our families."

"There's precious little family life once you're in the Consumer Reaction Army."

The lieutenant turned on Sergeant Barton, his face hard as when earlier, revolver in hand, he had faced Pat Challoner, the service station attendant. "Sergeant," Valore snapped, "you don't think of personal comfort when you're fighting a war."

"Sorry, sir."

"All right. It's tough on all of us but we don't make it easier by grousing about the hardships we knew would be a part of it."

Sergeant Barton, chastened and wishing to change the subject, said, "Of course, sir. Can I help you pack?"

The lieutenant snapped a suitcase shut and replied, "I've just about got it. A few more items." His eye fell on a bottle of Irish whiskey atop the dresser. He also took in Sergeant Barton's embarrassment at being chewed out. "Relax, Barton," the lieutenant said. "Grab a couple of those plastic glasses and pour each of us a good shot of Irish."

When they raised the tumblers, the sergeant asked, "Shall we drink to our families?"

The lieutenant's mouth was a slit of disapproval. "No, the Army," he ordered.

"To CORA, then," said the sergeant.

"To CORA," said the lieutenant.

Why does the wrong way so often seem more reasonable? . . .

How to turn a deaf ear

by GARROLL MAYERS

One of the first things I do when I finish my extended sojourn behind the state's masonry is to visit my sister Jo and her husband. Jo and Charlie own a small neighborhood bar. One of the stipulations of my parole is that I do not frequent any alcoholic oases, but I like Charlie and my sister, for all she's constantly bugging me, so I take a chance and drop by.

It's only mid-morning and there are no customers. Charlie is glad to

see me again, of course, but it's plain something is eating at him.

"It's Jo and me," he says when I press. "We're not communicating."

"Why not?"

His pale eyes blink behind thick lenses. "I want to buy a gun," he tells me. "Jo says no."

The thought of Charlie handling a gun—any kind of gun—chills me. "What do you want a gun for?" I ask him.

He gives the mahogany a deliberate swipe with his bar rag. "Marty," he says soberly, "no offense—I know you don't go in for any rough stuff—but this neighborhood is getting to be a jungle. There've been three bar holdups the past month, and there's only one solitary cop walking the beat in this neighborhood."

I am not offended. As Charlie intimates, I operate on a more peaceful share-the-wealth-after-dark level. Also, I have just about determined to make that "operate" past tense.

I say, "So the gun would be for protection?"

"Exactly."

"So you'll be able to thwart any holdup that might come up?"

"That's right."

I regard him with amazement; this whole bit is completely out of character. "Charlie," I tell him, "you are crazy. And Jo is right. You don't know anything about guns. You'll get yourself killed."

"I can learn," he rejoins. "I'll go to the police firing range, have them give me safety instructions."

"You'll need a permit. These days they're not all that simple to get. There's character-checking and red-tape."

"I'll still get one."

I say earnestly, "Charlie, your idea is all wrong."

"Not to me it isn't," he insists. "Maybe I've been a Milquetoast too long. If I have, this's where I stop."

I sigh, decide to ease off momentarily. I ask him, "Is Jo upstairs?"

He nods, gives me a tight look. "And don't think your siding with her will make me change my mind."

The apartment over the bar is a snug little layout—living room, bedroom, kitchenette, bath. My sister is dusting down the living room. She is a natural blonde with a tilt-tip nose and a generous mouth.

"Hi, kid," I say with a grin. "It's good to see you again."

Jo is not exactly ecstatic; we've always been at odds over my life

style. But she does come close and kisses me on the cheek. Then, as I hold her in my arms for a moment, she thaws a little. "It's good to see you too, Marty," she says with a catch in her voice, "but, damnit, when will you learn?"

I tell her how I've just about decided on some other means of livelihood.

Her hazel gaze is misty. "I'll bet."

"You'll see," I say. Then I get off that subject. I say, "I've been talking with Charlie about the gun."

She quirks her full mouth. "Marty, you've got to convince him he's wrong! If he tries to shoot it out with some heister, he'll be killed."

"I know. I tried to tell him that."

"I've been after him to get rid of this place, maybe buy a farm somewhere, raise chickens. He won't listen to me."

"I figure he's trying to prove something to himself," I say, "but he's going about it the wrong way. I'll talk to him again when I leave."

Which I do—but get nowhere. Charlie will not budge in his decision.

The situation bugs me; I can't get it off my mind.

Four days later I stop by the bar again and discover the script has worsened: Charlie has gotten his gun.

It's a chrome-plated .38 revolver and Charlie has stashed it below the bar at the far end, away from the register.

"I figured to hide it there," he informs me, "because I can move clear, wave any holdup punk to the register as if it was all his, then—"

I say simply, "Charlie, forget about the heroics. If there should be a holdup, let them have the money. Believe me, that's the only way. Nobody gets hurt."

Jo is downstairs with us. She says, "Marty's right, honey. Please."

Charlie turns a deaf ear. Jo is still pleading when I leave.

Essentially it's not my concern, but the whole bit continues to worry me. Before bed that night I get to pacing the floor over it. Literally pacing. Like a caged animal—

That's when it hits me. An animal! Specifically, a dog. With, say, a husky German shepherd tethered beside the register, any hot-shot heister is going to think twice before dipping into the till. True, Charlie's customers may not feel too comfortable either at first, but that will wear off; they'll come to appreciate the protection on the premises.

Once I get the idea, I'm really pepped up. I plan to buy the police dog for Charlie myself. I imagine he won't exactly be enthused over my solution but will come around, particularly when he realizes his customers will feel safer too. More, after Charlie is satisfied in his own mind that he has proven himself by standing up to the situation and not selling out, he will listen to Jo about that farm.

All of which proves to be the case, with one exception: I don't buy the dog; Jo does, when I subsequently get to tell her the idea. And two months later, Charlie does sell the bar and he and my sister purchase a place upstate.

I'm going up there as soon as I get out. Maybe they can use an extra hand with the chickens.

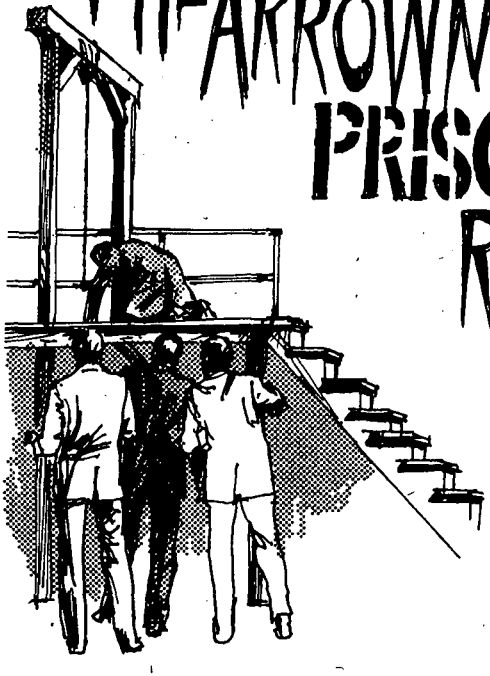
Out? That's right. Currently, I'm a guest of the state again.

You see, the night I dream up the dog bit, I'm still worried. Even if Charlie accepts the animal, I feel he still may insist on keeping that .38. I figure it will be safer if there is no .38 to insist on. Of course, Charlie can get a replacement, but that will take days, what with explanations, reregistration and all, and perhaps by that time he'll be reconciled to the dog alone.

Maybe I should've waited at least a day or told Jo what I had in mind, but I'm truly agitated and go ahead as soon as the notion strikes me. At 3:35 that morning I neatly break into Charlie's bar and steal his gun. At 3:39, just as neatly, that solitary cop Charlie discounted collars me as I leave.

"How many grains of sand in a single one of his footprints? . . ."

THE ARROWMONT PRISON RIDDLE



by BILL PRONZINI

I first met the man who called himself by the unlikely name of Buckmaster Gilloon in the late summer of 1916, my second year as warden of Arrowmont Prison. There were no living quarters within the old brick walls of the prison, which was situated on a promontory overlooking a small winding river two miles north of Arrowmont Village, so I had rented a cottage in the village proper, not far from a tavern known as Hallahan's Irish Inn. It was in this tavern, and as a result of a

mutual passion for Guinness stout and the game of darts, that Gilloon and I became acquainted.

As a man he was every bit as unlikely as his name. He was in his late thirties, short and almost painfully thin; he had a glass eye and a drooping and incongruous Oriental-style mustache, wore English tweeds, gaudy Albert watch chains and plaid Scotch caps, and always carried half a dozen looseleaf notebooks in which he perpetually and secretively jotted things. He was well read and erudite, had a repertoire of bawdy stories to rival any vaudevillian in the country, and never seemed to lack ready cash. He lived in a boarding house in the center of the village and claimed to be a writer for the pulp magazines—*Argosy, Adventure, All-Story Weekly, Munsey's*. Perhaps he was, but he steadfastly refused to discuss any of his fiction, or to divulge his pseudonym or pseudonyms.

He was reticent about divulging any personal information. When personal questions arose, he deftly changed the subject. Since he did not speak with an accent, I took him to be American-born. I was able to learn, from occasional comments and observations, that he had traveled extensively throughout the world.

In my nine decades on this earth I have never encountered a more fascinating or troubling enigma than this man whose path crossed mine for a few short weeks in 1916.

Who and what was Buckmaster Gilloon? Is it possible for one enigma to be attracted and motivated by another enigma? Can that which seems natural and coincidental be the result instead of preternatural forces? These questions have plagued me in the sixty years since Gilloon and I became involved in what appeared to be an utterly enigmatic crime.

It all began on September 26, 1916—the day of the scheduled execution at Arrowmont Prison of a condemned murderer named Arthur Teasdale . . .

Shortly before noon of that day a thunderstorm struck without warning. Rain pelted down incessantly from a black sky, and lightning crackled in low jagged blazes that gave the illusion of striking unseen objects just beyond the prison walls. I was already suffering from nervous tension, as was always the case on the day of an execution, and the storm added to my discomfort. I passed the early afternoon sitting at

my desk, staring out the window, listening to the inexorable ticking of my Seth Thomas, wishing the execution was done with and it was eight o'clock, when I was due to meet Gilloon at Hallahan's for Guinness and darts.

At 3:30 the two civilians who had volunteered to act as witnesses to the hanging arrived. I ushered them into a waiting room and asked them to wait until they were summoned. Then I donned a slicker and stopped by the office of Rogers, the chief guard, and asked him to accompany me to the execution shed.

The shed was relatively small, constructed of brick with a tin roof, and sat in a corner of the prison between the textile mill and the iron foundry. It was lighted by lanterns hung from the walls and the rafters and contained only a row of witness chairs and a high permanent gallows at the far end. Attached to the shed's north wall was an annex in which the death cell was located. As was customary, Teasdale had been transported there five days earlier to await due process.

He was a particularly vicious and evil man, Teasdale. He had coldbloodedly murdered three people during an abortive robbery attempt in the state capital, and had been anything but a model prisoner during his month's confinement at Arrowmont. As a rule I had a certain compassion for those condemned to hang under my jurisdiction, and in two cases I had spoken to the governor in favor of clemency. In Teasdale's case, however, I had conceded that a continuance of his life would serve no good purpose.

When I had visited him the previous night to ask if he wished to see a clergyman or to order anything special for his last meal, he had cursed me and Rogers and the entire prison personnel with an almost maniacal intensity, vowing vengeance on us all from the grave.

I rather expected, as Rogers and I entered the death cell at ten minutes of four, to find Teasdale in much the same state. However, he had fallen instead into an acute melancholia; he lay on his cot with his knees drawn up and his eyes staring blankly at the opposite wall. The two guards assigned to him, Hollowell and Granger (Granger was also the state-appointed hangman), told us he had been like that for several hours. I spoke to him, asking again if he wished to confer with a clergyman. He did not answer, did not move. I inquired if he had any last requests, and if it was his wish to wear a hood for his final walk to the gallows and for the execution. He did not respond.

I took Hollowell aside. "Perhaps it would be better to use the hood," I said. "It will make it easier for all of us."

"Yes, sir."

Rogers and I left the annex, accompanied by Granger, for a final examination of the gallows. The rope had already been hung and the hangman's knot tied. While Granger made certain they were secure I unlocked the door beneath the platform, which opened into a short passage that ended in a narrow cubicle beneath the trap. The platform had been built eight feet off the floor, so that the death throes of the condemned man would be concealed from the witnesses—a humane gesture which was not observed by all prisons in our state, and for which I was grateful.

After I had made a routine examination of the cubicle, and relocked the door, I mounted the thirteen steps to the platform. The trap beneath the gibbet arm was operated by a lever set into the floor; when Granger threw the lever, the trap would fall open. Once we tried it and reset it, I pronounced everything in readiness and sent Rogers to summon the civilian witnesses and the prison doctor. It was then 4:35 and the execution would take place at precisely five o'clock. I had received a wire from the governor the night before, informing me that there wasn't the remotest chance of a stay being granted.

When Rogers returned with the witnesses and the doctor, we all took chairs in the row arranged some forty feet opposite the gallows. Time passed, tensely; with thunder echoing hollowly outside, a hard rain drumming against the tin roof, and eerie shadows not entirely dispelled by the lanternlight, the moments before that execution were particularly disquieting.

I held my pocket watch open on my knee, and at 4:55 I signaled to the guard at the annex door to call for the prisoner. Three more minutes crept by and then the door reopened and Granger and Hollowell brought Teasdale into the shed.

The three men made a grim procession as they crossed to the gallows steps: Granger in his black hangman's duster, Hollowell in his khaki guard uniform and peaked cap, Teasdale between them in his grey prison clothing and black hood. Teasdale's shoes dragged across the floor—he was a stiffly unresisting weight until they reached the steps; then he struggled briefly and Granger and Hollowell were forced to tighten their grip and all but carry him up onto the gallows. Hol-

lowell held him slumped on the trap while Granger solemnly fitted the noose around his neck and drew it taut.

The hands on my watch read five o'clock when, as prescribed by law, Granger intoned, "Have you any last words before the sentence imposed on you is carried out?"

Teasdale said nothing, but his body twisted with a spasm of fear.

Granger looked in my direction and I raised my hand to indicate final sanction. He backed away from Teasdale and rested his hand on the release lever. As he did so, there came from outside a long rolling peal of thunder that seemed to shake the shed roof. A chill touched the nape of my neck and I shifted uneasily on my chair.

Just as the sound of the thunder faded, Granger threw the lever and Hollowell released Teasdale and stepped back. The trap thudded open and the condemned man plummeted downward.

In that same instant I thought I saw a faint silvery glimmer above the opening, but it was so brief that I took it for an optical illusion. My attention was focused on the rope: it danced for a moment under the weight of the body, then pulled taut and became motionless. I let out a soft tired sigh and sat forward while Granger and Hollowell, both of whom were looking away from the open trap, silently counted off the passage of sixty seconds.

When the minute had elapsed, Granger turned and walked to the edge of the trap. If the body hung laxly, he would signal to me so that the prison doctor and I could enter the cubicle and officially pronounce Teasdale deceased; if the body was still thrashing, thus indicating the condemned man's neck had not been broken in the fall—grisly prospect, but I had seen it happen—more time would be allowed to pass. It sounds brutal, I know, but such was the law and it had to be obeyed without question.

But Granger's reaction was so peculiar and so violent that I came immediately to my feet. He flinched as if he had been struck in the stomach and his face twisted into an expression of disbelief. He dropped to his hands and knees at the front of the trap as Hollowell came up beside him and leaned down to peer into the passageway.

"What is it, Granger?" I called. "What's the matter?"

He straightened after a few seconds and pivoted toward me. "You better get up here, Warden Parker," he said. His voice was shrill and tremulous and he clutched at his stomach. "Quick!"

Rogers and I exchanged glances, then ran to the steps, mounted them, and hurried to the trap, the other guards and the prison doctor close behind us. As soon as I looked downward, it was my turn to stare with incredulity, to exclaim against what I saw—and what I did not see.

The hangman's noose at the end of the rope was empty.

Except for the black hood on the ground, the cubicle was empty.

Impossibly, inconceivably, the body of Arthur Teasdale had vanished.

I raced down the gallows steps and fumbled the platform door open with my key. I had the vague desperate hope that Teasdale had somehow slipped the noose and that I would see him lying within, against the door—that small section of the passageway was shrouded in darkness and not quite penetrable from above—but he wasn't there. The passageway, like the cubicle, was deserted.

While I called for a lantern Rogers hoisted up the rope to examine it and the noose. A moment later he announced that it had not been tampered with in any way. When a guard brought the lantern I embarked on a careful search of the area, but there were no loose boards in the walls of the passage or the cubicle, and the floor was of solid concrete. On the floor I discovered a thin sliver of wood about an inch long, which may or may not have been there previously. Aside from that, there was not so much as a strand of hair or a loose thread to be found. And the black hood told me nothing at all.

There simply did not seem to be any way Teasdale—or his remains—could have gotten, or been gotten, out of there.

I stood for a moment, staring at the flickering light from the lantern, listening to the distant rumbling of thunder. *Had* Teasdale died at the end of the hangman's rope? Or had he somehow managed to cheat death? I had seen him fall through the trap with my own eyes, had seen the rope dance and then pull taut with the weight of his body. He *must* have expired, I told myself.

A shiver moved along my back. I found myself remembering Teasdale's threats to wreak vengeance from the grave, and I had the irrational thought that perhaps something otherworldly had been responsible for the phenomenon we had witnessed. Teasdale had, after all, been a malignant individual. Could he have been so evil that he had

managed to summon the Powers of Darkness to save him in the instant before death—or to claim him soul *and* body in the instant after it?

I refused to believe it. I am a practical man, not prone to superstition, and it has always been my nature to seek a logical explanation for even the most uncommon occurrence. Arthur Teasdale had disappeared, yes; but it could not be other than an earthly force behind the deed. Which meant that, alive or dead, Teasdale was still somewhere inside the walls of Arrowmont Prison.

I roused myself, left the passageway, and issued instructions for a thorough search of the prison grounds. I ordered word sent to the guards in the watchtowers to double their normal vigilance. I noticed that Hollowell wasn't present along with the assembled guards and asked where he had gone. One of the others said he had seen Hollowell hurry out of the shed several minutes earlier.

Frowning, I pondered this information. Had Hollowell intuited something, or even seen something, and gone off unwisely to investigate on his own rather than confide in the rest of us? He had been employed at Arrowmont Prison less than two months, so I knew relatively little about him. I requested that he be found and brought to my office.

When Rogers and Granger and the other guards had departed, I escorted the two civilian witnesses to the administration building, where I asked them to remain until the mystery was explained. As I settled grimly at my desk to await Hollowell and word on the search of the grounds, I expected such an explanation within the hour.

I could not, however, have been more wrong.

The first development came after thirty minutes, and it was nearly as alarming as the disappearance of Teasdale from the gallows cubicle: one of the guards brought the news, ashen-faced, that a body had been discovered behind a stack of lumber in a lean-to between the execution shed and the iron foundry. But it was not the body of Arthur Teasdale!

It was that of Hollowell, stabbed to death with an awl.

I went immediately. As I stood beneath the rain-swept leanto, looking down at the bloody front of poor Hollowell's uniform, a fresh set of unsettling questions tumbled through my mind. Had he been killed because, as I had first thought, he had either seen or intuited something connected with Teasdale's disappearance? If that was the case, whatever it was had died with him.

Or was it possible that he had himself been involved in the disappearance and been murdered to assure his silence? But how could he have been involved? He had been in my sight the entire time on the gallows platform. He had done nothing suspicious, could not in any way I could conceive have assisted in the deed.

Might his death have been part of Teasdale's vow to destroy us all?

No. My instinct for logic fought for the upper hand.

How could Teasdale have survived the hanging?

How could he have escaped not only the gallows but the execution shed itself?

The only explanation seemed to be that it was not a live Arthur Teasdale who was carrying out his warped revenge, but a dead one who had been embraced and given earthly powers by the Forces of Evil . . .

In order to dispel the dark reflections from my mind, I personally supervised the balance of the search. Tines of lightning split the sky and thunder continued to hammer the roofs as we went from building to building. No corner of the prison compound escaped our scrutiny. No potential hiding place was overlooked. We went so far as to test for the presence of tunnels in the work areas and in the individual cells, although I had instructed just such a search only weeks before as part of my security program.

We found nothing.

Alive or dead, Arthur Teasdale was no longer within the walls of Arrowmont Prison.

I left the prison at ten o'clock that night. There was nothing more to be done, and I was filled with such depression and anxiety that I could not bear to spend another minute there. I had debated contacting the governor, of course, and, wisely or not, had decided against it for the time being. He would think me a lunatic if I requested assistance in a county or statewide search for a man who had for all intents and purposes been hanged at five o'clock that afternoon. If there were no new developments within the next twenty-four hours, I knew I would have no choice but to explain the situation to him. And I had no doubt that such an explanation unaccompanied by Teasdale or Teasdale's remains would cost me my position.

Before leaving, I swore everyone to secrecy, saying that I would

have any man's job if he leaked word of the day's events to the press or to the public-at-large. The last thing I wanted was rumor-mongering and a general panic as a result of it. I warned Granger and the other guards who had come in contact with Teasdale to be especially wary and finally left word that I was to be contacted immediately if there were any further developments before morning.

I had up to that time given little thought to my own safety. But when I reached my cottage in the village I found myself imagining menace in every shadow and sound. Relaxation was impossible. After twenty minutes I felt impelled to leave, to seek out a friendly face. I told my housekeeper I would be at Hallahan's Irish Inn if anyone called for me and drove my Packard to the tavern.

The first person I saw upon entering was Buckmaster Gilloon. He was seated alone in a corner booth, writing intently in one of his notebooks, a stein of draught Guinness at his elbow.

Gilloon had always been very secretive about his notebooks and never allowed anyone to glimpse so much as a word of what he put into them. But he was so engrossed when I walked up to the booth that he did not hear me, and I happened to glance down at the open page on which he was writing. There was but a single interrogative sentence on the page, clearly legible in his bold hand. The sentence read:

If a jimbuck stands alone by the sea, on a night when the dark moon sings, how many grains of sand in a single one of his footprints?

That sentence has always haunted me, because I cannot begin to understand its significance. I have no idea what a jimbuck is, except perhaps as a fictional creation, and yet that passage was like none which ever appeared in such periodicals as *Argosy* or *Munsey's*.

Gilloon sensed my presence after a second or two, and he slammed the notebook shut. A ferocious scowl crossed his normally placid features. He said irritably, "Reading over a man's shoulder is a nasty habit, Parker."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry—"

"I'll thank you to be more respectful of my privacy in the future."

"Yes, of course." I sank wearily into the booth opposite him and called for a Guinness.

Gilloon studied me across the table. "You look haggard, Parker," he said. "What's troubling you?"

"It's . . . nothing."

"Everything is something."

"I'm not at liberty to discuss it."

"Would it have anything to do with the execution at Arrowmont Prison this afternoon?"

I blinked. "Why would you surmise that?"

"Logical assumption," Gilloon said. "You are obviously upset, and yet you are a man who lives quietly and suffers no apparent personal problems. You are warden of Arrowmont Prison and the fact of the execution is public knowledge. You customarily come to the inn at eight o'clock, and yet you didn't make your appearance tonight until after eleven."

I said, "I wish I had your mathematical mind, Gilloon."

"Indeed? Why is that?"

"Perhaps then I could find answers where none seem to exist."

"Answers to what?"

A waiter arrived with my Guinness and I took a swallow gratefully.

Gilloon was looking at me with piercing interest. I avoided his one-eyed gaze, knowing I had already said too much. But there was something about Gilloon that demanded confidence. Perhaps he could shed some light on the riddle of Teasdale's disappearance.

"Come now, Parker—answers to what?" he repeated. "Has something happened at the prison?"

And of course I weakened—partly because of frustration and worry, partly because the possibility that I might never learn the secret loomed large and painful. "Yes," I said, "something has happened at the prison. Something incredible, and I mean that literally." I paused to draw a heavy breath. "If I tell you about it, do I have your word that you won't let it go beyond this table?"

"Naturally." Gilloon leaned forward and his good eye glittered with anticipation. "Go on, Parker."

More or less calmly at first, then with increasing agitation as I relived the events, I proceeded to tell Gilloon everything that had transpired at the prison. He listened with attention, not once interrupting. I had never seen him excited prior to that night, but when I had finished, he was fairly squirming. He took off his Scotch cap and ran a hand roughly through his thinning brown hair.

"Fascinating tale," he said.

"Horrifying would be a more appropriate word."

"That too, yes. No wonder you're upset."

"It simply defies explanation," I said. "And yet there has to be one. I refuse to accept the supernatural implications."

"I wouldn't be so skeptical of the supernatural if I were you, Parker. I've come across a number of things in my travels which could not be satisfactorily explained by man or science."

I stared at him. "Does that mean you believe Teasdale's disappearance was arranged by forces beyond human ken?"

"No, no. I was merely making a considered observation. Have you given me every detail of what happened?"

"I believe so."

"Think it through again—be sure."

Frowning, I reviewed the events once more. And it came to me that I had neglected to mention the brief silvery glimmer which had appeared above the trap in the instant Teasdale plunged through; I had, in fact, forgotten all about it. This time I mentioned it to Gilloon.

"Ah," he said.

"Ah? Does it have significance?"

"Perhaps. Can you be more specific about it?"

"I'm afraid not. It was so brief I took it at the time for an optical illusion."

"You saw no other such glimmers?"

"None."

"How far away from the gallows were you sitting?"

"Approximately forty feet."

"Is the shed equipped with electric lights?"

"No—lanterns."

"I see," Gilloon said meditatively. He seized one of his notebooks, opened it, shielded it from my eyes with his left arm, and began to write furiously with his pencil. He wrote without pause for a good three minutes, before I grew both irritated and anxious.

"Gilloon," I said finally, "stop that infernal scribbling and tell me what's on your mind."

He gave no indication of having heard me. His pencil continued to scratch against the paper, filling another page. Except for the movement of his right hand and one side of his mouth gnawing at the edge of his mustache, he was as rigid as a block of stone.

"Damn it, Gilloon!"

But it was another ten seconds before the pencil became motionless. He stared at what he had written and then looked up at me. "Parker," he said, "did Arthur Teasdale have a trade?"

The question took me by surprise. "A trade?"

"Yes. What did he do for a living, if anything?"

"What bearing can that have on what's happened?"

"Perhaps a great deal," Gilloon said.

"He worked in a textile mill."

"And there is a textile mill at the prison, correct?"

"Yes."

"Does it stock quantities of silk?"

"Silk? Yes, on occasion. What—?"

I did not finish what I was about to say, for he had shut me out and resumed writing in his notebook. I repressed an oath of exasperation, took a long draught of Guinness to calm myself, and prepared to demand that he tell me what theory he had devised. Before I could do that, however, Gilloon abruptly closed the notebook, slid out of the booth, and fairly loomed over me.

"I'll need to see the execution shed," he said.

"What for?"

"Corroboration of certain facts."

"But—" I stood up hastily. "You've suspicioned a possible answer, that's clear," I said, "though I can't for the life of me see how, on the basis of the information I've given you. What is it?"

"I must see the execution shed," he said firmly. "I will not voice premature speculations."

It touched my mind that the man was a bit mad. After all, I had only known him for a few weeks, and from the first he had been decidedly eccentric in most respects. Still, I had never had cause to question his mental faculties before this, and the aura of self-assurance and confidence he projected was forceful. Because I needed so desperately to solve the riddle, I couldn't afford *not* to indulge, at least for a while, the one man who might be able to provide it.

"Very well," I said, "I'll take you to the prison."

Rain still fell in black torrents—although without thunder and lightning—when I brought my Packard around the last climbing curve

onto the promontory. Lanternlight glowed fuzzily in the prison watchtowers, and the bare brick walls had an unpleasant oily sheen. At this hour of night, in the storm, the place seemed forbidding and shrouded in human despair—an atmosphere I had not previously apprehended during the two years I had been its warden. Strange how a brush with the unknown can alter one's perspective and stir the fears that lie at the bottom of one's soul.

Beside me Gilloon did not speak; he sat perfectly erect, his hands resting on the notebooks on his lap. I parked in the small lot facing the main gates, and after Gilloon had carefully tucked the notebooks inside his slicker we ran through the downpour to the gates. I gestured to the guard, who nodded beneath the hood of his oilskin, allowed us to enter, and then quickly closed the iron halves behind us and returned to the warmth of the gatehouse. I led Gilloon directly across the compound to the execution shed.

The guards I had posted inside seemed edgy and grateful for company. It was colder now, and despite the fact that all the lanterns were lit it also seemed darker and filled with more restless shadows. But the earlier aura of spiritual menace permeated the air, at least to my sensitivities. If Gilloon noticed it, he gave no indication.

He wasted no time crossing to the gallows and climbing the steps to the platform. I followed him to the trap, which still hung open. Gilloon peered into the cubicle, got onto all fours to squint at the rectangular edges of the opening, and then hoisted the hangman's rope and studied the noose. Finally, with surprising agility, he dropped down inside the cubicle, requesting a lantern which I fetched for him, and spent minutes crawling about with his nose to the floor. He located the thin splinter of wood I had noticed earlier, studied it in the lantern glow, and dropped it into the pocket of his tweed coat.

When he came out through the passageway he wore a look mixed of ferocity and satisfaction. "Stand there a minute, will you?" he said. He hurried over to where the witness chairs were arranged, then called, "In which of these chairs were you sitting during the execution?"

"Fourth one from the left."

Gilloon sat in that chair, produced his notebooks, opened one, and bent over it. I waited with mounting agitation while he committed notes to paper. When he glanced up again, the flickering lanternglow gave his face a spectral cast.

He said, "While Granger placed the noose over Teasdale's head, Hollowell held the prisoner on the trap—is that correct?"

"It is."

"Stand as Hollowell was standing."

I moved to the edge of the opening, turning slightly quarter profile.

"You're certain that was the exact position?"

"Yes."

"Once the trap had been sprung, what did Hollowell do?"

"Moved a few paces away." I demonstrated.

"Did he avert his eyes from the trap?"

"Yes, he did. So did Granger. That's standard procedure."

"Which direction did he face?"

I frowned. "I'm not quite sure," I said. "My attention was on the trap and the rope."

"You're doing admirably, Parker. After Granger threw the trap lever, did he remain standing beside it?"

"Until he had counted off sixty seconds, yes."

"And then?"

"As I told you, he walked to the trap and looked into the cubicle. Again, that is standard procedure for the hangman. When he saw it was empty he uttered a shocked exclamation, went to his knees, and leaned down to see if Teasdale had somehow slipped the noose and fallen or crawled into the passageway."

"At which part of the opening did he go to his knees? Front, rear, one of the sides?"

"The front. But I don't see—"

"Would you mind illustrating?"

I grumbled but did as he asked. Some thirty seconds passed in silence. Finally I stood and turned, and of course found Gilloon again writing in his notebook. I descended the gallows steps. Gilloon closed the notebook and stood with an air of growing urgency. "Where would Granger be at this hour?" he asked. "Still here at the prison?"

"I doubt it. He came on duty at three and should have gone off again at midnight."

"It's imperative that we find him as soon as possible, Parker. Now that I'm onto the solution of this riddle, there's no time to waste."

"You have solved it?"

"I'm certain I have." He hurried me out of the shed.

I felt dazed as we crossed the rain-soaked compound, yet Gilloon's positiveness had infused in me a similar sense of urgency. We entered the administration building and I led the way to Rogers' office, where we found him preparing to depart for the night. When I asked about Granger, Rogers said that he had signed out some fifty minutes earlier, at midnight.

"Where does he live?" Gilloon asked us.

"In Hainesville, I think."

"We must go there immediately, Parker. And we had better take half a dozen well-armed men with us."

I stared at him. "Do you honestly believe that's necessary?"

"I do," Gilloon said grimly. "If we're fortunate, it will help prevent another murder."

The six-mile drive to the village of Hainesville was charged with tension, made even more acute by the muddy roads and the pelting rain. Gilloon stubbornly refused to comment on the way as to whether he believed Granger to be a culpable or innocent party, or as to whether he suspected to find Arthur Teasdale alive—or dead—at Granger's home. There would be time enough later for explanations, he said.

Hunched over the wheel of the Packard, conscious of the two heavily armed prison guards in the rear seat and the headlamps of Rogers' car following closely behind, I could not help but wonder if I might be making a prize fool of myself. Suppose I had been wrong in my judgment of Gilloon, and he *was* daft after all? Or a well-meaning fool in his own right? Or worst of all, a hoaxster?

Nevertheless, there was no turning back now. I had long since committed myself. Whatever the outcome, I had placed the fate of my career firmly in the hands of Buckmaster Gilloon.

We entered the outskirts of Hainesville. One of the guards who rode with us lived there, and he directed us down the main street and into a turn just beyond the church. The lane in which Granger lived, he said, was two blocks further up and one block east.

Beside me Gilloon spoke for the first time. "I suggest we park a distance away from Granger's residence, Parker. It won't do to announce our arrival by stopping directly in front."

I nodded. When I made the turn into the lane I took the Packard onto the verge and doused its lights. Rogers' car drifted in behind,

headlamps also winking out. A moment later eight of us stood in a tight group in the roadway, huddling inside our slickers as we peered up the lane.

There were four houses in the block, two on each side, spaced widely apart. The pair on our left, behind which stretched open meadowland, were dark. The furthest of the two on the right was also dark, but the closer one showed light in one of the front windows. Thick smoke curled out of its chimney and was swirled into nothingness by the howling wind. A huge oak shaded the front yard. Across the rear, a copse of swaying pine stood silhouetted against the black sky.

The guard who lived in Hainesville said, "That's Granger's place, the one showing light."

We left the road and set out laterally across the grassy flatland to the pines, then through them toward Granger's cottage. From a point behind the house, after issuing instructions for the others to wait there, Gilloon, Rogers, and I made our way downward past an old stone well and through a sodden growth of weeds. The sound of the storm muffled our approach as we proceeded single-file, Gilloon tacitly assuming leadership, along the west side of the house to the lighted window.

Gilloon put his head around the frame for the first cautious look inside. Momentarily he stepped back and motioned me to take his place. When I had moved to where I could peer in, I saw Granger standing relaxed before the fireplace, using a poker to prod a blazing fire not wholly comprised of logs—something else, a blackened lump already burned beyond recognition, was being consumed there. But he was not alone in the room; a second man stood watching him, an expression of concentrated malevolence on his face—and an old hammerless revolver tucked into the waistband of his trousers.

Arthur Teasdale.

I experienced a mixture of relief, rage, and resolve as I moved away to give Rogers his turn. It was obvious that Granger was guilty of complicity in Teasdale's escape—and I had always liked and trusted the man. But I supposed everyone had his price—and I may even have had a fleeting wonder as to what my own might be.

After Rogers had his look, the three of us returned to the back yard, where I told him to prepare the rest of the men for a front-and-rear assault on the cottage. Then Gilloon and I took up post in the shadows

behind the stone well. Now that my faith in *him*, at least, had been vindicated, I felt an enormous gratitude—but this was hardly the time to express it. Or to ask any of the questions that were racing through my mind. We waited in silence.

In less than four minutes all six of my men had surrounded the house. I could not hear it when those at the front broke in, but the men at the back entered the rear door swiftly. Soon the sound of pistol shots rose above the cry of the storm.

Gilloon and I hastened inside. In the parlor we found Granger sitting on the floor beside the hearth, his head buried in his hands. He had not been injured, nor had any of the guards. Teasdale was lying just beyond the entrance to the center hallway. The front of his shirt was bloody, but he had merely suffered a superficial shoulder wound and was cursing like a madman. He would live to hang again, I remember thinking, in the execution shed at Arrowmont Prison.

Sixty minutes later, after Teasdale had been placed under heavy guard in the prison infirmary and a remorsefully silent Granger had been locked in a cell, Rogers and Gilloon and I met in my office. Outside, the rain had slackened to a drizzle.

"Now then, Gilloon," I began sternly, "we owe you a great debt, and I acknoweldge it here and now. But explanations are long overdue."

He smiled with the air of a man who has just been through an exhilarating experience. "Of course," he said. "Suppose we begin with Hollowell. You're quite naturally wondering if he was bribed by Teasdale—if he also assisted in the escape. The answer is no: he was an innocent pawn."

"Then why was he killed? Revenge?"

"Not at all. His life was taken—and not at the place where his body was later discovered—so that the escape trick could be worked in the first place. It was one of the primary keys to the plan's success."

"I don't understand," I said. "The escape trick had already been completed when Hollowell was stabbed."

"Ah, but it hadn't," Gilloon said. "Hollowell was murdered *before* the execution, sometime between four and five o'clock."

We stared at him. "Gilloon," I said, "Rogers and I and five other witnesses *saw* Hollowell inside the shed—"

"Did you, Parker? The execution shed is lighted by lanterns. On a

dark afternoon, during a thunderstorm, visibility is not reliable. And you were some forty feet from him. You saw an average-sized man wearing a guard's uniform, with a guard's peaked cap drawn down over his forehead—a man you had no reason to assume was not Hollowell. You took his identity for granted."

"I can't dispute the logic of that," I said. "But if you're right that it wasn't Hollowell, who was it?"

"Teasdale, of course."

"Teasdale! For God's sake, man, if Teasdale assumed the identity of Hollowell, whom did we see carried in as Teasdale?"

"No one," Gilloon said.

My mouth fell open, and there was a moment of heavy silence. I broke it finally by exclaiming, "Are you saying we did not see a man hanged at five o'clock this afternoon?"

"Precisely."

"Are you saying we were all victims of some sort of mass hallucination?"

"Certainly not. You saw what you believed to be Arthur Teasdale, just as you saw what you believed to be Hollowell. Again let me remind you: the lighting was poor and you had no reason at the time to suspect deception. But think back, Parker. What actually *did* you see? The shape of a man with a black hood covering his head, supported between two other men. But did you see that figure walk or hear it speak? Did you at any time discern an identifiable part of a human being, such as a hand or an exposed ankle?"

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, mentally re-examining the events in the shed. "No," I admitted. "I discerned nothing but the hood and the clothing and the shoes. But I *did* see him struggle at the foot of the gallows, and his body spasm on the trap. How do you explain them?"

"Simply. Like everything else, they were an illusion. At a preconceived time Granger and Teasdale had only to slow their pace and jostle the figure with their own bodies to create the impression that the figure itself was resisting them. Teasdale alone used the same method on the trap."

"If it is your contention that the figure was some sort of dummy, I can't believe it, Gilloon. How could a dummy be made to vanish any more easily than a man?"

"It was not, strictly speaking, a dummy."

"Then what the devil was it?"

Gilloon held up a hand; he appeared to be enjoying himself immensely. "Do you recall my asking if Teasdale had a trade? You responded that he had worked in a textile mill, whereupon I asked if the prison textile mill stocked silk."

"Yes, yes, I recall that."

"Come now, Parker, use your imagination. What is one of the uses of silk—varnished silk?"

"I don't know," I began, but no sooner were the words past my lips than the answer sprang into my mind. "Good Lord—balloons!"

"Exactly."

"The figure we saw was a *balloon*?"

"In effect, yes. It is not difficult to sew and tie off a large piece of silk in the rough shape of a man. When inflated to a malleable rather than a fully expansive state with helium or hydrogen, and seen in poor light from a distance of forty feet or better, while covered entirely by clothing and a hood, and weighted down with a pair of shoes and held tightly by two men—the effect can be maintained."

I gaped.

"The handiwork would have been done by Teasdale in the relative privacy of the death cell. The material was doubtless supplied from the prison textile mill by Granger. Once the sewing and tying had been accomplished, I imagine Granger took the piece out of the prison, varnished it, and returned it later. It need not have been inflated, naturally, until just prior to the execution. As to where the gas was obtained, I would think that there would certainly be a cylinder of hydrogen in the prison foundry."

I nodded.

"In any event, between four and five o'clock, when the three of them were alone in the death annex, Teasdale murdered Hollowell with an awl Granger had given him. Granger then transported Hollowell's body behind the stack of lumber a short distance away and probably also returned the gas cylinder to the foundry. The storm would have provided all the shield necessary, though even without it the risk was one worth taking.

"Once Granger and Teasdale had brought the balloon-figure to the gallows, Granger, as hangman, placed the noose carefully around the

head. You told me, Parker, that he was the last to examine the noose. While he was doing so, I expect he inserted into the fibers at the inner bottom that sharp sliver of wood you found in the trap cubicle. When he drew the noose taut, he made sure the sliver touched the balloon's surface so that when the trap was sprung and the balloon plunged downward the splinter would penetrate the silk. The sound of a balloon deflating is negligible; the storm made it more so. The dancing of the rope, of course, was caused by the escaping air.

"During the ensuing sixty seconds, the balloon completely deflated. There was nothing in the cubicle at that point except a bundle of clothing, silk, and shoes. The removal of all but the hood, to complete the trick, was a simple enough matter. You told me how it was done, when you mentioned the silvery glimmer you saw above the trap.

"That glimmer was a brief reflection of lanternlight off part of a length of thin wire which had been attached to the clothing and to the balloon. Granger concealed the wire in his hand, and played out most of a seven- or eight-foot coil before he threw the trap lever.

"After he had gone to his knees with his back to the witness chairs, he merely opened the front of his duster, hauled up the bundle, and stowed it back inside the duster. No doubt it made something of a bulge, but the attention was focused on other matters. You did notice, Parker—and it was a helpful clue—that Granger appeared to be holding his stomach as if he were about to be ill. What he was actually doing was clutching the bundle, so that it would not fall from beneath his duster. Later he hid the bundle among his belongings and transported it out of the prison when he went off duty. It was that bundle, incidentally, that we saw burning in the fireplace in his cottage."

"But how did *Teasdale* get out of the prison?"

"The most obvious way imaginable," Gilloon said. "He walked out through the front gates."

"What!"

"Yes. Remember, he was wearing a guard's uniform—supplied by Granger—and there was a storm raging. I noticed when we first arrived tonight that the gateman seemed eager to return to his gatehouse, where it was dry. He scarcely looked at you and did not question me. That being the case, it's obvious that he would not have questioned someone who wore the proper uniform and kept his face averted as he gave Hollowell's name. The guards had not yet been

alerted and the gateman would have no reason to suspect trickery.

"Once out, I suspect Teasdale simply took Granger's car and drove to Hainesville. When Granger himself came off duty, I would venture to guess that he obtained a ride home with another guard, using some pretext to explain the absence of his own vehicle.

"I did not actually *know*, of course, that we would find Teasdale at Granger's place; I merely made a logical supposition in light of the other facts. Since Granger was the only other man alive who knew how the escape had been worked, I reasoned that an individual of Teasdale's stripe would not care to leave him alive and vulnerable to a confession, no matter what promises he might have made to Granger."

"If Teasdale managed his actual escape that easily, why did he choose to go through all that trickery with the balloon? Why didn't he just murder Hollowell, with Granger's help, and then leave the prison *prior* to the execution, between four and five?"

"Oh, I suppose he thought that the bizarre circumstances surrounding the disappearance of an apparently hanged man would insure him enough time to get safely clear of this immediate area. If you were confused and baffled, you would not sound an instant alarm, whereas you certainly would have if he had simply disappeared from his cell. Also, I would guess that the prospect of leaving all of you a legacy of mystery and horror afforded him a warped sense of revenge."

"You're a brilliant man," I told him as I sank back in my chair.

Gilloon shrugged. "This kind of puzzle takes logic rather than brilliance, Parker. As I told you earlier tonight, it isn't always wise to discount the supernatural; but in a case where no clear evidence of the supernatural exists, the answer generally lies in some form of illusion. I've encountered a number of seemingly incredible occurrences, some of which were even more baffling than this one and most of which involved illusion. I expect I'll encounter others in the future as well."

"Why do you say that?"

"One almost seems able after a while to divine places where they will occur," he said matter-of-factly, "and therefore to make oneself available to challenge them."

I blinked at him. "Do you mean you *intuited* something like this would happen at Arrowmont Prison? That you have some sort of prevision?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps I'm nothing more than a pulp writer who enjoys traveling." He gave me an enigmatic smile and got to his feet, clutching his notebooks. "I can't speak for you, Parker," he said, "but I seem to have acquired an intense thirst. You wouldn't happen to know where we might obtain a Guinness at this hour, would you?"

One week later, suddenly and without notice, Gilloon left Arrowmont Village. One day he was there, the next he was not. Where he went I do not know: I neither saw him nor heard of or from him again.

Who and what was Buckmaster Gilloon? Is it possible for one enigma to be attracted and motivated by another enigma? Can that which seems natural and coincidental be the result instead of preternatural forces? Perhaps you can understand now why these questions have plagued me in the sixty years since I knew him. And why I am continually haunted by that single passage I read by accident in his notebook, the passage which may hold the key to Buckmaster Gilloon:

If a jimbuck stands alone by the sea, on a night when the dark moon sings, how many grains of sand in a single one of his footprints? . . .

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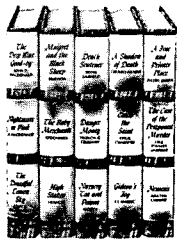

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