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HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
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CONTENTS

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SHORT STORIES

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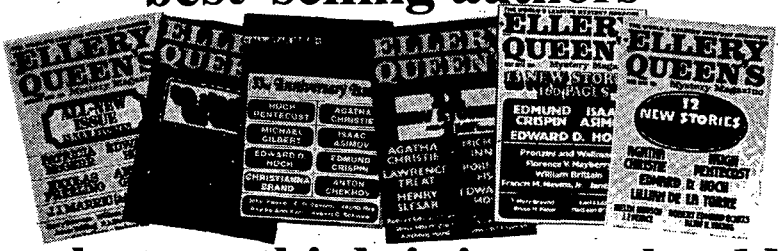

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November 1976

Dear Reader:

Wait until you read what we've lined up for you this issue, and wait until you see the places we take you—a distillery, bank, department store, an art gallery, a shoe-repair shop, greasy spoon, small-claims court, yacht, private plane, and several large estates. It's all here waiting for you.

And *what* is waiting for you? A little murder. And kidnapping, arson, spywork, shoplifting, grand larceny, petty larceny, and assault. But no plagiarism. We promise you no plagiarism.

But wait—come to think of it, there *is* a hint of it in the plot of Robert Bloch's "Crook of the Month," the lead story in this crimeful, funful issue.

Happy Thanksgiving to you.

And good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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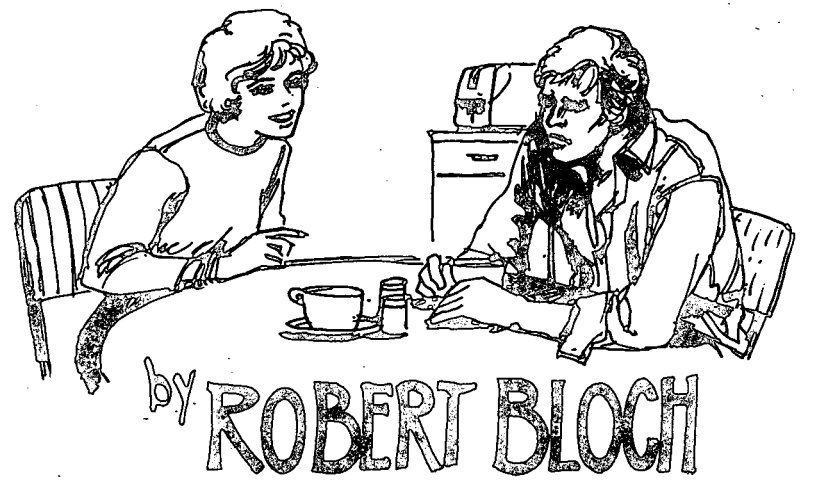
CROOK OF THE MONTH



by ROBERT BLOCH

Edison was right.

Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.

Jerry Cribbs started sweating long before the plane touched down in the Rio dawn and continued all through Customs inspection. But the black bag preserved its secret, and he hugged it in his lap during the long taxi ride to his Copacabana hotel. Anyone who survives a cab trip

through Rio de Janeiro traffic is entitled to feel relieved, but by the time Jerry checked into his room he was still perspiring. And a shower didn't help even though he took the bag into the stall with him.

Jerry dried off, only to find himself wringing wet again in the few moments it took him to dress and shave. Then he sat soaking and waiting for the phone to ring. He held the black bag on his lap, hugging his secret—and his genius—to him for reassurance.

Why didn't the call come?

A knock on the door answered his question. Of course they'd never risk using the telephone; they'd rely on personal contact.

Or would they?

Jerry shoved the bag under the bed and moved to the door.

A soft voice from the hall outside murmured, "Mr. Cribbs?"

Jerry flinched. He'd registered downstairs as Mr. Brown, figuring that any alias good enough for the late Al Capone should be good enough for him. And yet the stranger beyond the door knew his name. In a way it was reassuring, but he had to make certain.

"Who sent you?" he whispered.

"The Big Bird."

With a sigh of relief, Jerry opened the door.

A baldheaded black giant entered, nodding curtly. He was dressed in the ornate uniform of a Brazilian general or chauffeur—it didn't matter which, because the Big Bird could have sent either if he chose.

"Come with me, please," said the giant.

Jerry turned and started out, but a hand gripped his shoulder.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" the giant asked.

"Sorry." Jerry stopped and retrieved the black bag from its hiding-place beneath the bed. The giant reached for it but Jerry shook his head.

"I'll carry it," he said.

The giant shrugged. "As you wish." He followed Jerry through the doorway and down the hall. He didn't speak in the elevator or in the lobby below, and his silence continued as he led Jerry to the huge limousine parked insolently on the sidewalk outside the entrance.

Jerry slid into the back seat and his escort got behind the wheel.

If Jerry had any doubts about the black giant being a chauffeur, they were quickly dispelled as the car weaved through Rio's noonday traffic—from the way he drove, he was obviously a general.

Once aboard the waiting launch at the wharf the man proved himself to be an admiral too. The boat raced off across the harbor and out into the open sea while Jerry crouched in the bow with the black bag between his trembling knees.

The long sleek lines of the yacht loomed ahead, bobbing in the swell. As they pulled astern Jerry looked up at the gold-leaf lettering which identified the vessel as *The Water Closet.*

The black giant killed the engine and rose, cupping his hands. "Ahoy there!" he called.

A bearded seaman peered down from the deck above.

"Let down the ladder," the black man muttered.

Climbing a rope-ladder while holding the handle of the black bag in his teeth wasn't easy, but Jerry managed it. Once on deck he followed the giant along the deck, past an elegant array of staterooms, a sauna, a private projection-room, a bowling-alley. They stopped just beyond an outdoor bar, at an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

"He's expecting you," said the black man.

Jerry squinted at the pool. Over the stereophonic screech of raucous rock shrill shrieks rose from the pool, where a half dozen figures splashed and sported, stark naked in the sunlight.

Jerry had no trouble recognizing his host; he was the only male.

"Mr. Buzzard?" he murmured.

The scrawny balding little man climbed out of the water, scowling against the sun as a waiting attendant instantly draped a gold lamé robe over his shoulders.

The Big Bird nodded. "I'm Al Buzzard," he said. "You've met my wife." He gestured vaguely towards the naiades in the pool.

"Oh—sure."

"Come on then." Buzzard held out both hands. The alert attendant placed a frosted full triple-martini glass in one of the hands and a lighted Upmann in the other, then Buzzard turned and led Jerry aft.

From the appearance of the stateroom they entered, with its mirrored walls and ceiling and king-sized circular bed covered with leopardskin, Jerry decided he was in the Captain's cabin.

The scrawny man closed the door. With a lightning-fast gesture he swallowed his drink, then set the empty glass on the mink carpet. He sprawled back on the bed, puffing his cigar and staring moodily at his visitor.

"Did you ever have one of those days when nothing goes right?" he sighed. "Just look at that!" He gestured toward the empty glass. "A triple martini with only two olives in it! As soon as we get out into international waters, remind me to have the bartender keelhauled."

"Really, Mr. Buzzard, it isn't all that bad—"

"Hah!" Buzzard snorted and sat up. "You sound just like Barabass."

"Barabass?"

"My publisher. He was out here last week. We got into a conversation during the orgy and he said to me, 'Why don't you look on the bright side of things for a change? After all, you're the world's most popular author, next to Conway Mann, that is. Ten all-time best sellers, eight blockbuster movies, a hit television series that lasted almost an entire season—what more do you want? Why, your name is a household word—like Drano and Sani-Flush.' That's what he told me."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"No—it's a damnable lie! I'm much more popular than Con Mann. Him and his sexy romances—"

"But you're rich and famous." Jerry gestured at the mirrored walls. "You live on this big yacht, you have a lovely wife—"

Buzzard shrugged. "Boats make me seasick. I have to stay on board because the minute I set foot on land the I.R.S. will lay a suit on me for thirty-three million dollars in back taxes. And my wife isn't all that lovely—the first nine were much more attractive. Trouble is, none of them could understand me. This one doesn't understand me, nor do any of my mistresses. The shrinks all tell me we don't have the right chemistry. So what am I supposed to do about that?"

Sighing wearily, Buzzard rose and threw his cigar out of a porthole. When he turned back he was a different man; his shoulders straightened beneath the gold robe and his beady eyes matched its glitter. "Now, to business," he said. "Have you got it?"

"It's in the bag."

Jerry held out the black bag and Buzzard's twitching fingers closed around the handle. He carried it to the bed and scrabbled at the lock.

"The key!" he panted. "Where's the key?"

Jerry rolled up his trouser leg and ripped the adhesive tape from his right ankle. He handed the key to Buzzard, who inserted it in the lock with a vicious twisting motion. The bag sprang open and its contents tumbled out onto the leopardskin coverlet.

Buzzard stared down at the bed, rubbing his hands together.

"How many pages?" he whispered.

"Three hundred."

"It's all there then?"

"All but the last chapter. I expected to finish by the end of next week, but then your wire came—"

"You can knock off the ending when you get back," Buzzard said. "Just so's I get the whole thing to the publisher by the end of the month. We gotta hit the fall list before Conway Mann beats us to it. I hear he's got a big one coming up, but we'll show him." He paused, eying Jerry suspiciously. "It *is* a goodie, isn't it?"

"I think so."

"Think? I'm not paying you to think—I'm paying you to write." Buzzard made a face. "It better be good. After all, I've got a reputation to live down to."

"Don't worry, Mr. Buzzard. Just read it and you'll see for yourself."

"Yeah, yeah—later sometime." Al Buzzard gathered up the pages, hefting them. "Feels nice and thick, anyhow. Barabass likes them that way." He frowned. "Where's the carbon?"

"Home, in the safe."

"Good." Buzzard nodded. "Speaking of home, we better get you on the next flight out of here. I'd invite you to stay for lunch, but seeing as how you still have a chapter to go there's no sense wasting time. Besides, you can grab a sannich or something on the plane, right?"

"Uh—aren't you forgetting something, Mr. Buzzard?"

Buzzard scowled. "I know. That's the difference between guys like you and a creative artist like I am. All you writers ever think about is money."

Sighing, he reached under the bed and pulled out a locked metal box. "O.K., if that's the way you want it."

He fiddled with the combination until the box flew open, cascading a heap of glittering objects over the bed.

"Damn!" he muttered. "I told you this wasn't my day. Wrong box—I got the diamonds by mistake!"

Buzzard stooped and fumbled until he found a second metal container identical with the first. When its tumblers clicked and the lid rose, Jerry stared down at the stacks of currency.

"Petty cash," Buzzard explained. "Only fifties and hundreds." He

extracted a wad of bills and began to count. "Let's see now. Three hundred pages at ten dollars a page—"

"You promised me fifteen this time, Mr. Buzzard."

"Oh, yeah—fifteen times three hundred—"

"Forty-five hundred," said Jerry.

"What's the matter, don't you think I know how to count?" Scowling, Buzzard thrust a sheaf of currency into Jerry's hands. "That's a lot of loot, fella. If you ask me, you're being overpaid."

"But it took me almost six months to write the book, Mr. Buzzard. Nowadays a plumber can make that much in three weeks."

"So take the money and study plumbing," Buzzard told him. "Just so you finish up that last chapter first. If you got a pencil and paper, maybe you can write it on the plane."

But Jerry Cribbs did no writing on the return flight. He brooded.

The plane slipped between the crowded peaks, plunged into a few air pockets above Latin America, then sped like a thief up the Atlantic Coast. When it landed at Kennedy, Jerry was still brooding.

"Darling—what's the matter?"

Jerry halted at the terminal exit and stared at Ann Remington's troubled face. Then he kissed it. "I'll tell you later," he said.

Thanks to the marvels of modern technology Jerry got through Customs, into Ann's car, out of the airport, and through the city traffic in less time than it had taken him to fly from South America.

In the car he unburdened himself. "Don't you see?" he sighed. "It's the same old story."

"But it's a *good* story," Ann said. "I was reading one of your carbons just last night. I like that hero of yours, Lance Pustule. And having him murder his parents at the age of eight—it's going to win a lot of reader sympathy. Everybody has a kindly feeling for orphans."

"Ann, please—"

"That scene where he's raped by his grandmother is terrific! And all those killings and tortures he uses to get control of the television network—you really tell it like it is! The drugs and violence and kinky sex are dynamite. By the way, what's the title of the book?"

"*The Aristocrats.*"

"Perfect!"

Jerry shook his head. "Al Buzzard pays me forty-five hundred dollars for ghostwriting a book that will make him millions. What's so perfect

about that? All he does is sit on his big fat yacht, divorcing wives and having affairs with movie stars and throwing fashion models overboard—"

"But that's why he gets all that money," Ann said. "Doing those things makes him a celebrity. His life style is front-page news, so when he writes a book that's news too."

"Only he doesn't write books. *I* do, and I can't even earn enough for us to get married." Jerry sighed. "If I could just write my own book, under my own name—"

"Why don't you?"

"Because I can't find the time, or the money."

Ann smiled. "We could manage. There's my secretarial job at the travel agency."

"I'm not going to live off your salary."

Ann's smile faded as she gripped the steering-wheel and swung the car toward the curb in front of the dingy rundown apartment building where Jerry spent his dingy rundown life.

"I don't understand you," she murmured. "How can a man who writes such trendy modern porn have such old-fashioned ideas?"

"Because I *am* old-fashioned." Jerry lugged his bags out of the car. "And when I do write my book, it isn't going to be trendy either. A good novel doesn't need all that cheap sensationalism." Ann started to get out of the car, but he checked her with a gesture. "Sorry, you'd better not come up with me. I have to get to work on the last chapter right away. The big identity-crisis scene when Lance finally discovers where his head is at—he gets rid of his wife and girl friend and becomes a child-molester."

"When will I see you?"

"I should have everything wrapped up by tomorrow night. Suppose you come around and we'll have dinner together then. Make it about seven."

They clung together for a moment, then Ann drove away and Jerry hastened upstairs to commit a statutory offense on paper.

Neither of them noticed the little man crouching behind the pillars before the apartment-house entryway. "Seven o'clock," the little man whispered. "Tomorrow night."

It had been a good day's work, Jerry decided. Three thousand

words, many of which were four-letter; twelve pages of solid hardcore sex and violence. Al Buzzard and his readers would be happy, and Jerry was satisfied with a dishonest job, well done.

He showered, shaved and dressed, and when the doorbell rang shortly before seven he was ready.

He lifted the latch and the door swung open.

"Ann—" he said.

"Wrong." The little man stood in the doorway, staring him up and down.

Jerry frowned, perplexed. "Who are you?"

"Sorry, no time for introductions." The little man moved past him into the apartment. "You're coming with me."

"Now wait a minute—"

"I don't have a minute." The intruder crooked a commanding finger. "Let's go."

"No way," said Jerry, eying the stranger. Whoever he was and whatever he wanted, Jerry had no intention of being pushed around by this little character.

He turned, and that was his mistake.

Because a big man loomed up in the doorway behind him, raising a rubber truncheon.

As the weapon descended on Jerry's skull, the little man looked at his wristwatch and nodded approvingly.

"Six forty-nine," he said. "Right on schedule."

"Yah," said the big man, who was preoccupied by the task of stuffing Jerry into a large gunnysack. Grunting, he swung the sack over his shoulder and carried it down the hall to the backstairs exit of the building.

The little man followed and they descended the steps together.

The big man scowled at him apprehensively. "*Mach schnell,*" he panted. "Maybe somebody sees us."

"Don't worry." The little man nodded. "It's in the bag."

In the bag was no place to be, and when Jerry recovered consciousness he wanted out.

Voicing these sentiments through a mouthful of burlap he was conscious of a shuddering drone and a sound like faroff thunder, gradually fading.

Then a knife slashed through the cloth above his head, the gunnysack shredded and fell in folds about his shoulders, and Jerry emerged. He wobbled to his feet, blinking at his surroundings.

He stood in the capacious cabin of a private plane—a Lear jet, from the looks of it. Only a man wealthy enough to own such an aircraft could afford to decorate its interior with the original artwork exhibited on the walls.

Jerry recognized a Renoir, a Picasso, a Modigliani. And then, turning toward the far end of the cabin, he recognized the owner of the paintings.

There was no mistaking the identity of the bearded figure seated behind the ornate Chippendale desk, wearing an incongruously crumpled hat and peering at him through tinted glasses. The face would be instantly familiar to anyone who had ever watched a television interview program or *Bowling for Dollars.*

"Conway Mann!" gasped Jerry.

The bearded author nodded. He smiled and beckoned Jerry to the Heppelwhite chair before the desk.

"Welcome to my humble digs," he said. "I trust you'll excuse the crudity of my invitation, but I had to see you, Mr. Gibbs."

"Cribbs."

"Exactly." The pudgy hand investigated the contents of a desk drawer, emerging with a fistful of yellow pills which disappeared between his bearded lips. He gulped and nodded. "I suppose you're wondering what brought you here."

"I already know," said Jerry. "Two goons and a gunnysack."

"My dear Hibbs—"

"Cribbs."

"Ah, yes." The hand fumbled in the drawer once more, then rose to extend a crumpled sheet of paper. "Please be good enough to read this proof of an advertisement scheduled to appear in *Publishers Weekly.* I think it may interest you."

Jerry stared down at the bold lettering of the full-page ad.

SHOCKING! SCANDALOUS!
SENSATIONAL!

Searing sex . . . vicious violence . . . raw and raunchy . . . a novel that rips aside the last shreds of convention to reveal the

hidden world of secret passions and unbridled lusts behind the locked doors of America's power-mad masters . . . as they move from boardroom to bedroom in their savage search for forbidden pleasures! Don't miss –

THE TASTE-MAKERS
by
CONWAY MANN
The best-selling blockbuster of the year from
SCRIBBLER'S & SONS

Jerry put the ad down on the desktop. "Your new novel?"

"Precisely so."

"Is it good?"

Conway Mann shrugged. "That's up to you. You're going to write it."

"Now hold on—"

"I am holding on, Mr. Dribbs. But I can't hold on much longer. The manuscript is due at the publisher's office by the end of the month."

"Let me get this straight. You mean to say you don't write your own books?"

"Why should that surprise you? That wretched Al Buzzard doesn't write his novels either."

"Then you know?"

"Of course. Why else would I bring you here?" Conway Mann shook his head. "Don't get me wrong. I'm perfectly capable of doing the job myself, but lately I've suffered from writer's block."

"When did it start?"

"In 1959." The pudgy hand popped red capsules into its owner's mouth. "I have a full schedule of commitments ahead of me—Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, *Hollywood Squares*—best-selling authors must live up to their responsibilities, even at the sacrifice of the creative impulse. And that's where you come in."

"That's where I get out," Jerry told him.

"At forty thousand feet in the air?" Conway Mann shrugged again. "Very well, suit yourself."

"Now see here," Jerry cried, "you kidnapped me! That's a federal offense. I can push charges."

"You'll push up daisies if you refuse."

"But why me?" Jerry said. "Surely you must have a regular ghost-writer. What happened to him?"

"He refused," Conway Mann murmured. "Would you like to see where he's buried?"

Conway Mann, with his royalties and reputation at stake, wasn't conning. When his hand again descended to the desk-drawer, Jerry expected it to reappear holding a revolver.

Instead it clutched a bundle of bills.

"Six thousand," said the bearded man. "In advance."

"Six thousand?"

"That's more than you get from that chintzy Buzzard, if my spies are correct." The pudgy hand extended. "Now take it and get out—you've got a deadline to meet."

"But I couldn't possibly write an entire novel by the end of the month," Jerry said.

"You can and you will," Conway Mann told him. "Unless you're awfully fond of daisies."

Jerry pocketed the bills, not an easy task for trembling hands. "I'll try," he said. "Only you haven't told me what the book will be about."

"Ninety thousand words, that's what it's about." Conway Mann gestured at the proof-sheet on the desktop. "This ad doesn't mention much about a plot, so you can suit yourself. You know what readers expect. Behind the scenes in politics and big business, and the further behind the better. Maybe a touch of necrophilia in San Francisco, a Black Mass at the U.N., orgies in the White House—I leave it to your discretion."

Jerry took a deep breath. "I'll do my best."

"Your best isn't good enough," Conway Mann said. "I want your worst."

He rose and came around the desk, glancing at his watch. "I'll tell the pilot to take us down, and the boys will see to it that you get home safely."

"That's not necessary."

"I think it is." Conway Mann's eyes narrowed behind the tinted lenses. "They're going to be keeping tabs on you until the book is finished."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then they'll finish you."

"I'm not afraid of your threats," Jerry said. "I can call the police—"

"That's already been taken care of. Your phone is dead. And unless you want to follow its example, you'll stay in your apartment from tonight until the manuscript is in the hands of my publishers." Conway Mann put his hand on Jerry's shoulder and smiled. "If you want to stay healthy, learn a lesson from the flowers. Daisies don't tell."

It was good advice, but Jerry couldn't take it. Not when he found Ann waiting for him outside the apartment door.

"It's after nine o'clock!" she told him. "I've been waiting here for two hours. Where on earth have you been?"

"I wasn't exactly on earth," Jerry said, looking toward the car from which he'd emerged. The headlights glared, the motor growled, and its sleek black length crouched at the curb like a panther waiting to spring.

Ann followed his gaze, noting the big man behind the wheel and his small companion beside him.

"Please, darling, come inside." Jerry gripped her arm and drew her through the doorway. "I can explain everything."

"It better be good."

But once inside the apartment, it wasn't good.

"Not good at all," Ann said, after she'd listened to Jerry's account of the evening. "It took you months to knock out the novel for Buzzard, and now Mann expects you to do one in a couple of weeks!"

"It's impossible." Jerry nodded. "But there's no way out."

"Not for *you*," Ann said. "But *I'm* free to come and go."

"Meaning?"

"It's simple." Ann smiled. "I'm going to leave now. The minute I get home I'll put through a call to the police. They'll get over here, you tell them what happened, and you're home free."

"Dynamite!"

Ann smiled reassuringly as she moved to the door and opened it. Then her smile faded. The little man stood in the doorway, his eyes bulging. There was another ominous bulge where his hand rested in his pocket.

"I heard what you just said, lady. Nobody's calling the fuzz."

Ann stared at him. "You mean you intend to keep me locked up here with Jerry?"

The man shook his head. "I didn't say that. Somebody's got to go for groceries and it might as well be you. But whenever you cut out, I go with you. And my buddy downstairs keeps an eye on your boy friend. Boss's orders."

Jerry faced him, frowning. "He thinks of everything, doesn't he?"

"You better believe it." The little man gave him a crooked smile. "Time for you to start thinking too, fella. You got a book to write."

The days that followed moved in a blinding blur. Ann spent most of her time in the living room, while Jerry's typewriter pounded away behind the bedroom door. Sometimes she read, sometimes she watched television, sometimes she just stood at the window and stared down at the black limousine. On occasion she took brief walks or shopped at the supermarket, but always under escort. She didn't talk to the little man and he didn't talk to her. She scarcely talked to Jerry when he came out of the bedroom for meals.

One look at his haggard face told the story. He was racing the deadline, racing for his life, and she resolved not to nag him with questions.

But as the end of the month inched closer there came a moment when she could keep silent no longer.

They were seated at the kitchen table over coffee, and the sight of Jerry's gaunt features and glassy stare was too much for her to bear. From her lips burst the age-old question, the question every writer dreads.

"How's it going?" she asked.

Jerry shook his head. "It isn't," he muttered.

"You mean you won't finish in time?"

"I haven't started."

"Haven't started?" Ann frowned. "But you've been in there typing night and day."

"I type at night because I can't sleep. And I can't sleep because of what I type during the day. Page after page of new beginnings—none of them making sense, all of them going into the wastebasket. I'm afraid it's finally happened, just the way it did to Al Buzzard and Conway Mann."

"What are you talking about?"

"When they started, they wrote their own stuff. Then gradually it got to them. No man can stand such a pace forever—a daily diet of

corruption, brutality, mayhem, incest, voyeurism, sado-masochistic satyriasis, all of it so hard to spell. So they hired ghostwriters, people like myself. The trouble is, now the same thing is happening to me." Jerry raised his anguished face. "All those rapes and murders—it's too much! Even Jack the Ripper had to quit in the end."

Ann rose and moved to the stricken man. "Listen to me," she said softly. "It's not that bad. All you have to do is get Buzzard's last chapter to the publisher. If you can only go on a little longer, until you do Conway Mann's novel—"

"Don't you understand?" Jerry slammed a clenched fist on the table. "It's too late now. Even if I stay at the typewriter twenty-four hours a day, I'll never beat the deadline. There isn't time."

Ann sighed, and walked to the living room. Jerry followed. Together they stared out of the window, down at the black car crouched and waiting. Neither of them said a word. Words wouldn't help now—unless Jerry could put ninety thousand of them onto paper within the next three days.

It was Ann who broke the silence, her face and voice thoughtful.

"Maybe it's all for the best," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Even if you could have finished on time, it wouldn't help. At first I hoped this would be a blessing in disguise. Forty-five hundred from Al Buzzard and six thousand from Conway Mann—that's ten thousand five hundred dollars in cash, enough to live on until you realized your ambition. With that much money you could finally write a novel of your own. But it doesn't matter now, does it? If you say you can't write any more—"

"I never said that!" Jerry gripped her hands tightly with his own. "I said I couldn't turn out any more sex and violence. The novel I want to write is different. No sensationalism, no cheap anti-heroes, no ripoff of celebrities disguised under other names. My book would be about ordinary people, coping with everyday problems that all of us have to face."

"But would such a book sell?"

There was doubt in Ann's voice, but none in Jerry's. "Why not? At least I'd give the readers some reality, something to think about and remember. Those porno fairy-tales Buzzard and Mann are credited with are just the same thing repeated over and over again—you can't

tell one from another in the long run. I'm talking about real literature."

Ann eyed him dubiously. "How would you promote it?"

"An honest book doesn't need promotion," Jerry told her. "A good writer doesn't need notoriety. Think about it—did Thackery have a yacht? Did Henry James wear a funny hat and fly around in a Lear jet? Did Jane Austen sleep around? Did Shakespeare ever appear on a late-night talk show?"

"I am thinking about it," Ann told him. An odd note crept into her voice. "Jerry, do me a favor. Come into the bedroom with me for a minute. I want you to show me where you keep your files."

Together they went to the bedroom. "Right here in this cabinet," Jerry said.

"I see." But Ann's glance strayed from the filing-cabinet to Jerry's desk—the typewriter, the paper, the carbons resting under a heavy paperweight. Her eyes narrowed. "Jerry—about this book of yours. Do you really want to write it?"

"More than anything in the world."

"And you're sure it could sell?"

Jerry nodded, then turned away. "If I'm wrong, may I be struck dead on the spot."

It was then that Ann hit him with the paperweight.

"Dead," Jerry mumbled. "Well, I asked for it—"

"Wake up." Ann was shaking him by the shoulders. "You're not dead."

Jerry opened his eyes. The room was dark and he could just make out Ann's shadowy face peering anxiously over him.

"Why did you do it?" he said, sitting up and rubbing the lump on the side of his left temple.

"I'll explain later. Right now there isn't time. We've got to get out of here."

"What about the goon squad?"

"See for yourself."

Legs shaking, Jerry allowed her to lead him back into the living room and over to the window. He stared down.

The black limousine was gone. Ann's car stood in its place.

"Come on," Ann said. "We've got to get to the airport. Your bags are packed and in the car."

"Where are we going?"

"Costa Rica."

Jerry frowned. "I don't get it."

"You will."

And once the plane took off, he did.

"What you said about writing your own novel convinced me," Ann told him. "That's when I got the idea. I'm sorry about knocking you out, but I knew you'd never agree to go through with it on your own."

"Agree to what?"

"Delivering Conway Mann's new novel to his publisher."

"But there is no new novel!"

"There is now. I took one of the carbons of Al Buzzard's manuscript. All I did was go through it and change the names of the characters."

"You mean you gave both publishers the same book?"

"Including the last chapter." Ann nodded. "You said yourself that these things are all alike."

"So that's why Conway Mann's goons let us go."

"Right. Once the manuscript got to the office of Scribbler's and Sons, they took off. And so have we."

"But why Costa Rica?"

"They don't have an extradition law. Even if Mann and Buzzard find out, you can't be touched. You've got the cash, enough to keep us going for a year. And you can write your book." Ann smiled. "Besides, darling, if what you say is true, nobody will find out. Not Buzzard, or Mann, or the publishers, and certainly not the readers."

Jerry groaned. "I hope you're right," he whispered.

Ann patted his hand. "I know I am," she said.

And she was.

In the months that followed, *The Aristocrats* hit the best-seller lists with such force that Al Buzzard bought a new yacht, with two swimming pools, one of which he kept filled with champagne. If anything, *The Taste-Makers* was an even bigger success. Conway Mann was able to purchase a Jackson Pollock, a Van Gogh, a Rembrandt, and another hat.

Best of all, Jerry Cribbs finally wrote his own novel, which was duly published under his own name. You may have read it.

Then again, you may not. It sold 148 copies.

"I've never done anything like this before . . ."

THE CHALLENGE

by CARROLL MAYERS

On a bright May morning, at age forty-three, Mrs. Margate committed a successful crime. Not that she regarded her act as a felony; it was, rather, a bold spur-of-the-moment impulse which, once completed, left her breathless and deliciously exhilarated.

Her prize—a silvered brooch on sale at Hansen's Department Store for $12.95—was nothing she truly needed. But fondling the shiny pin at home, Mrs. Margate again shivered with pleasure. What would the

girls at the bridge club say if they knew what she'd done! For that matter, what would her husband George say! Stolid stuffy old George, who essentially was only a clerk in a brokerage house and who hadn't done or said anything exciting in fifteen years.

Mrs. Margate hummed gaily as she prepared dinner that night. It was simply unbelievable she'd never tried anything like that before. A challenge was what it represented. Something to buoy her and change her very existence.

And *fun*!

On ensuing days, Mrs. Margate visited Hansen's three more times. Coincident with her visits, her collection of trophies grew: a lovely golden compact, fortuitously monogrammed *M*, a tiny phial of expensive French perfume, a lady's scarf . . .

Never had her days been so pleasurable. She could scarcely wait for each successful foray. Her pride of accomplishment surged. Could she dare hint of her activity to the bridge club? Mrs. Margate could just hear their incredulous gasps.

Unfortunately, such speculation was premature. On an afternoon of the following week, an unobtrusive little man in a conservative grey business suit quietly followed Mrs. Margate as she left Hansen's. He touched her arm.

"One moment, ma'am."

She turned and regarded her accoster. "Yes?"

"I must ask you to step back into the store with me."

Mrs. Margate bridled. "I most certainly will not," she rejoined.

There was a glint in the little man's gaze which belied his mild manner. "After you, ma'am," he said. At the same time, his touch on her arm firmed.

A spate of uneasiness washed over Mrs. Margate, but she steeled herself against it. No one could have seen her. She'd been too clever, too deft—

"Very well," she said, mustering haughty distaste. She permitted the little man to take her back inside Hansen's and escort her to an office on the second floor. The office door was inscribed *Manager*.

"My name is Castle, madam," the heavy-set man occupying the office said soberly, rising and indicating a chair beside his desk. "This is most unpleasant."

Mrs. Margate seated herself, aware that her disquietude was growing

slightly, but still feeling in command of the situation. "I have no idea what you're implying," she said. "I've been brought up here—"

The little man who'd done so cut her short. "There's a pair of ladies' evening gloves in her purse, Mr. Castle," he said simply. "Not paid for."

A chill traced Mrs. Margate's spine. So she *had* been seen . . .

Manager Castle smoothed an incipient bald spot. "Would you care to open your purse?" he said.

How could she refuse the request? Indignation, perhaps. Mrs. Margate tossed her head. "I see no need to."

The manager sighed. "As I said, this is most unpleasant. The police could make it more so."

The police! Dismay flooded Mrs. Margate. Until that moment she had not fully credited that possibility. They *could* make her open her purse.

Her mind raced. Perhaps if she temporized a bit—

Mrs. Margate allowed her shoulders to slump. She unsnapped her purse and withdrew the ladies' evening gloves. "I don't know what came over me," she said, her lips trembling. "I've never done anything like this before."

Manager Castle shook his head. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Barrand here has been watching you, madam . . ."

His words trailed off. "May I have your name?"

She could lie, of course. But such a tactic might only intensify her predicament. A lie could be exposed.

"Mrs. Margate," she acknowledged. "Mrs. Arlene Margate."

Manager Castle made a notation on a scratch pad. When he resumed, a thread of regret laced his speech. "You're clearly a refined cultured woman, Mrs. Margate," he told her. "But shoplifting is a crime, a serious problem that's sweeping the country. Merchants are losing millions of dollars every year and it's getting worse."

He paused, trading a brief glance with his security man. "Here at Hansen's, we've been reluctant to prosecute, but we simply cannot continue to absorb these losses."

Mrs. Margate's dismay eased a bit. The rueful note of the manager's mini-sermon was not lost on her; patently he had no relish for prosecution. He'd said that calling in the police could make the incident more unpleasant. *Could*. Not *would*.

His next words confirmed his aversion to precipitate action. "Perhaps you'd care to phone your husband?"

She seized upon the offer. The very stolidity and stuffiness she deplored in George nonetheless suggested the impeccable respectability that might tip the scale and firm the manager's obvious reluctance, provided satisfactory restitution was forthcoming.

Mrs. Margate permitted her lips to tremble once more. "Yes, I would," she murmured.

George arrived on the scene in twenty minutes. Having assimilated but a smattering of the situation over the phone, he reacted with stunned disbelief when Manager Castle and Mr. Barrand documented his worst fears.

"But this is incredible!" he protested. "There must be some mistake. My wife is no shoplifter!"

The manager shook his head. "We have to disagree, sir, There have been at least four instances—"

George gaped at Mrs. Margate, who in turn calculatedly dropped her gaze. "You're positive?" George queried the manager.

"Quite."

George drew a breath. He was a pudgy individual, almost roly-poly, with plump cheeks. "Have you notified the police?"

Manager Castle sighed in turn. "Not yet, Mr. Margate. As I told your wife, Hansen's finds these occurrences most unpleasant but—"

"I appreciate your position," George interrupted, "but certainly you can allow for a temporary aberration on my wife's part. I assure you, you'll receive full reimbursement."

Mr. Barrand started to say something but his employer interrupted. "I'm not fully convinced the store should not bring charges, sir," he said slowly, "but on the other hand . . ." He hesitated, fingers drumming the desk top. Finally, he capitulated. "Very well. But I must insist that Mrs. Margate does not enter these premises again."

At the pronouncement, the lady in question remained discreetly silent.

George built a tight smile. "She won't, Mr. Castle," he said firmly. "And thank you. Now—what is the amount of your losses? I will personally bring you a check in the morning."

Once home, George sought a full explanation. "In heaven's name,

Arlene, whatever made you do such a thing?" he protested. "Think of my position!"

Now that the crisis was past, Mrs. Margate saw no reason for excessive repentance. "Think of *my* position," she countered. "You're colorless, George. You're stolid and dull. We never do anything exciting. I wanted some fun! I wanted a little spice in my life—"

He blinked in total astonishment. "Good Lord! Shoplifting? Spice?"

It was not a compatible evening. In the morning, George wrote a check for the amount Mr. Castle had mentioned, then stopped by Hansen's on his way to the brokerage office to deliver the check personally as he'd promised.

Early as it was, the aisles were crowded with shoppers. Threading his way through, George noted that the countertops were littered with merchandise. He frowned. Damn it, no wonder Arlene had been tempted!

That evening Mrs. Margate went to her bridge club.

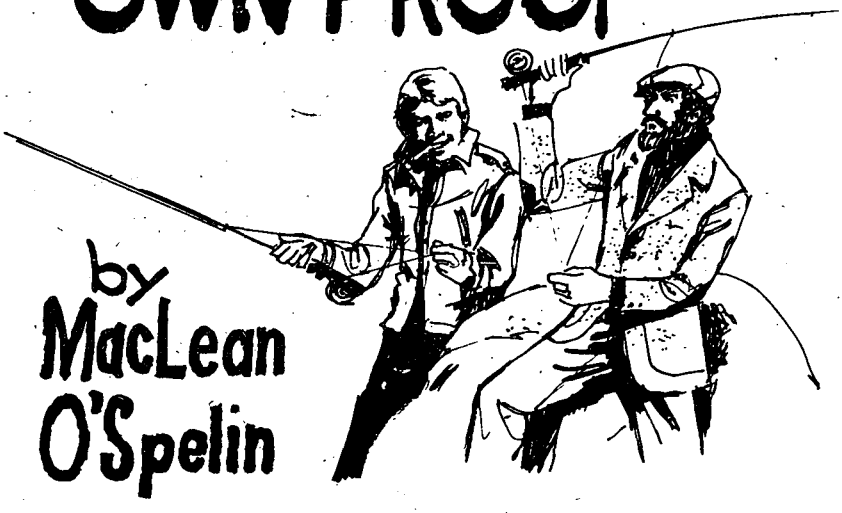
Alone, George settled down with the afternoon paper but found concentration difficult. In bed the night before and all day today he'd been nagged by his wife's disparaging characterization of him. Perhaps he *was* stolid and colorless. Perhaps he *had* allowed himself to settle into a rut. That was wrong, at any age. A man should guard against that.

Turning a page, George plucked a cigarette from a pack on the coffee table, then withdrew a lighter from his pocket. The lighter was new, heavily chromed, shafting warm highlights.

He regarded it appreciatively as he fired his cigarette, then returned the gadget to his pocket. If a man *were* to change, George reflected, he had to start somewhere.

As he brews, a rare man said, so shall he drink . . .

CRAIGELOCHIE'S OWN PROOF



by MacLean O'Spelin

This time I hadn't had to force myself to go to work. For one thing, the Chief Executive Officer of CanAm Distilling Corp. of Montreal, Canada, wasn't a bad sort. Sure, he had the usual CEO's trappings. You know, the keen eye, the slightly ponderous good looks, the gaggle of sycophantic vice-presidents, the wife owning 200,000 voting shares in her own name.

But he'd agreed to my fee (large) without a whimper. Without even

bemoaning the state of the North American economy. "I won't mince words, O'Spelin," he said in the straightforward tone of a CEO about to mince words. "CanAm has maintained quality. The consumer deserves quality. But those J&B Rare people . . ." his voice trailed away expressively.

I murmured sympathetically. What he meant was that CanAm's top-of-the-line Scotch whisky, Scholar's Choice, had lost first place in the largest market in the world, the U.S.A. Lost it to J&B Rare.

So it wasn't a question of quality. It was a question of profits—sliding profits, a CEO's nightmare. Stockholders, CEO's wives included, resent sliding profits.

So he did what CEOs often do when plunging profits bring on cold sweat. He called in a freelance industrial spy. Me, MacLean O'Spelin, top rank espion industriel (we negotiated in French-speaking Montreal).

No, I'm not a braggart. I've worked long and hard to become top rank. Simply because I need the money.

My real vocation, my calling, is fly angling. I'd far rather fish than work. But my style of fishing is expensive. For example, I lease a lodge plus a half mile of fishing rights on Scotland's River Tweed, and, believe me, Scots can squeeze dollars from renters with the best of them.

This job for CanAm would take me to Aberdeen, where, in minutes, I could fish the River Don—or, in two hours my own water on the Tweed.

Best of all, I could fish with Pibroch Craigelochie. In line of duty too. Because my old friend Snifter, as he was known universally (and mercifully), had these priorities in life: a. Scottish nationalism; b. fly angling; c. being chief whisky blender for Rob Roy Distilleries, Ltd., Aberdeen, Scotland.

So before I left Montreal, I sent Snifter a cable setting up a fishing date. We'd talk business, of course. But mostly we'd fish the Don.

To reach Snifter's fishing beat, you go north out of Aberdeen. Bear east on the road past the bacon factory, take the next right, cross the stone bridge, park on the verge, and walk upstream a hundred or so yards.

Then you joint up your split-cane fly rod, rig your line, bend on the fly of your choice (Greenwell's Glory is always good), and enjoy living.

I hit streamside about six in the evening, and it wasn't long before

Snifter's broad figure appeared, pushing heavily through the undergrowth.

I waved. "Howdy, ol' hoss, how's tricks?" (Scots expect Americans to talk like that.)

He grumbled something sounding like, "Och, mon, fair foul." I was surprised. Like the Dad who'd christened him Pibroch, "Scotland Forever Free!" was his battle cry. But he'd never been one of the dour ones . . .

It occurs to me that the Scotch drinkers among you will have got the drift of my mission for CanAm and how Snifter fit in, but that the teetotalers and Grasshopper drinkers may not have.

Quickly stated, then: beg, borrow or steal the secret formula for J&B Rare. Deliver it to CanAm's CEO. Then, in time, Scholar's Choice would taste like J&B Rare—maybe even a tad better. Giving Scholar's Choice a fighting chance to shove its nose out in front once again.

With Scotch whisky, noses are all important. Which is where my friend, P. Craigelochie, came in. One of the braw lads, Snifter—champion caber tosser, talented piper whose skirling pibrochs skirled the blood, gifted fly angler, accomplished tippler when the mood was on him. A big braw Scot whose finest attribute was his big braw nose.

The Scotch whiskies sold in your favorite liquor store are blends. Blends of from fifteen to fifty different straight whiskies. They can't be blended, thank the guid Laird, by computer. They are blended by nose.

But this evening, Snifter's craggy and talented nose was, so to speak, dragging. His heavy shoulders drooped, his sandy head sagged, and his means of livelihood pointed more or less at my feet. He sank wearily to a boulder. "Aye, laddie, e'en the wee fishies scorn auld Snifter."

He wasn't old and he could speak the Queen's English with scarcely a trace of burr when he cared to. Obviously, he didn't now. I reeled in my fly line and found another boulder. Sitting, I offered him a Kent. He waved it away.

"Tell your old fishing pardner all, hoss. Girl thrown you over?"

"Nay, Mac. Still true blue, she is." He stared at me bleakly. He touched his big nose. " 'Tis the snifter. Gone all wonky."

Bad news. I needed that nose.

Regretfully I glanced at the sparkling Don where moments before a big Loch Leven brown had leaped clear of the water as if challenging

me. "Snifter," I said, "we've got to buck you up. A dram or two of Rob Roy's best will help."

"Sworn off." Glumly he rolled his rod case between his big hands.

Worse news.

"*I* haven't, hoss. So buy me two. Or even three."

He glanced at me in alarm. While it's not true that *all* Scots have difficulty untying the knots in their purse strings, Snifter did lean toward the all-thumbs category. But at least I'd got his mind off his wonky nose.

"On Rob Roy, Limited," I said. "Expense account stuff."

His face cleared. "Aye, then. They've no sacked me yet. Not that ruddy bloody Cumberland hasna tried."

Cumberland. That explained a lot. I'd run across long lank W. Augustus Cumberland on other jobs. Quality-control consultant, sort of an administrative counterspy. "Damn Limey sherry drinker," I said sympathetically. "He and his pocket calculator after you again, eh?"

He grunted sourly and rose. "Hasna left the blending vats since he drove up from London. Dipping. Stirring. Measuring. Bloody ruddy fool. Says my blends are sour. *My* blends!"

"Are they?"

With a sharp pang, I saw something close to panic in his eyes. "Mac," he said, dropping the burr. "It scares me. My blends *are* off. The big blends. The one we age twenty-one years. My prides, my joys."

"Snifter, let's get out of here. Fishing can wait." It was a wrench, believe me. The big brown trout had just risen again with a tantalizing splash. But Snifter was in a fix—and I was beginning to need those drinks. This job wasn't going to be much fun after all.

In the early 1920s Rob Roy Distilleries had moved its blend-house next to one of its then newer warehouses, and both buildings were grey stone, windowless, and ironically grim considering the thousands of gallons of good cheer within. When we got there, Snifter lumbered into the blend-house and I followed as he headed for the vats holding the blend he'd worked on that day.

In concession to the 1970s the interior was well lit, clean, and fitted out with modern equipment. And, this evening, encumbered with quality-control consultant W. Augustus Cumberland.

Long lank body shrouded in a white surgical smock, he was dipping

whisky from beakers to test tubes, adding chemicals, stirring, heating, and in general playing scientist. "Ah, Craigelochie," he said, mispronouncing it. "And your American (Ameddican) friend . . . Spelvin, isn't it?"

"Yup. Us Spelvins is out checking up on our colonies."

He looked through me—then turned back to his chemical set. Hundreds of chemists, physicists, statisticians, etc., had tried to reduce whisky blending from art to science. Fruitlessly. But W. A. Cumberland had that marvelous English obliviousness to everything but his own notions. He'd whip Rob Roy Royal into shape or die trying.

Like General Gordon at Khartoum. Same unquenchable spirit.

From a cabinet, Snifter produced his own equipment. Two crystal stem goblets. A pitcher of special spring water (chlorine, fluoride, etc., disfigure the flavor of good Scotch). The most important machine, his sensitive, educated, Highland crag of a nose, he carried with him.

He drew whisky from the big vat, poured it into the goblets, cut each portion by exactly half with water. I took the one he handed me and watched him hang his snifting machine over the rim of his. Closing his eyes, he inhaled gently.

After blending, Rob Roy Royal is aged twenty-one years in great oak casks. Something like forty-five different straight whiskies go into it. Over fifty percent, Snifter once confided, were expensive malt whiskies from pot stills scattered throughout the Highlands. The exact percentages and the exact blending proportions were secrets known only to Snifter and two or three high Rob Roy executives—closely guarded secrets, as are all whisky formulas, good, poor, or lousy.

Connoisseurs agree that at least half the straight whiskies in a superior blend must be malt whiskies, preferably barley malt. The other fifty percent will be cheaper grain whiskies—unmalted whiskies made from a mixture of grains.

An average grade Scotch contains about thirty-five percent malt whisky, sixty-five percent of the cheaper brews. So if a blend runs in that less distinguished range . . . well, that's another reason to keep the formula secret, right?

"And what does the nose know?" Cumberland said suddenly, peering slyly at Snifter. "Surely that remarkable organ knows that the mix is off?"

And that was it, you see. Like wines, straight whiskies have good

and bad years. But it takes a genius of a nose like Pibroch Craigelochie's to sniff out just where a superior blend may be the tiniest bit off—and thus not superior. Art over science.

Snifter glowered at him. "I'll no tumble in that fowsty trap. Any mon wi' tongue enough can tell the mix's off." He grinned balefully. "For a' that, nae London sherry-smeller's mon enough."

Cumberland laughed, a thin whinny. "You're finished, Craigelochie. That great red beak doesn't know why the mix is off, does it?"

Snifter growled deep in his throat and rushed him.

I watched with interest. The long lank Limey might well be ripped limb from limb. Despite my Scots and Irish forebears, I often like Englishmen. But quality-control counterspies are a breed apart. Far apart.

Cumberland was surprisingly nimble. In a flash he put the workbench holding his equipment between him and Snifter.

Like an angry grizzly, Snifter padded swiftly around one end. Skipping like an ungainly but spry stork, Cumberland maintained his distance.

I found a tall stool out of the way and sat down to sip my drink.

As a symbol of Scots Nationalism, Snifter always wore the traditional sgean dhu in the top of his tartan stocking. And from the glare in his eyes, he might just choose to use the razor-keen "black knife."

If so, he'd get one back for the many Craigelochies lost long ago to the English at Culloden when they'd finished off Bonny Prince Charlie's last supporters.

Cumberland might look like a stork but, unlike the real thing, he couldn't fly. I took another interested sip of my drink.

Crash! Beakers and test tubes shattered as Snifter bounded heavily up on the workbench. Thick arms reaching, he advanced on the Englishman.

Cumberland's voice was shrill. "You'll pay for this!"

The big Scot looming over him took the words literally and abruptly halted. I grinned. That'd hit Snifter where it hurt, in the pocketbook.

Then, realizing Cumberland hadn't been talking money, he again moved forward. Edging away from the bench, Cumberland was brought up short by the mixing vat. Oddly, his shrill voice echoed my unspoken thought: "Bloody Nationalist! You want a reply of Culloden? You'll get it."

His hand slid inside his surgical smock, reappeared instantly holding

a .32 Belgian Colt. A practised move. And totally unexpected.

Snifter hesitated, expression changing from ferocity to shock . . . to ponderous calculation. He was weighing the odds on whipping out the sgean dhu and leaping before Cumberland could pull the trigger.

I tossed down the rest of my drink and stood up. "Truce!"

Startled, both instinctively glanced my way. Swiftly I moved into Cumberland's line of fire. "Put that damfool toy away. You, Pibroch—cut the King of the Cairn act."

Cumberland recovered first. Smiling palely, he put away the gun. "Forgive, old boy. Frightful taste, internecine warfare in public."

I turned my back on him. Snifter was wagging his head from side to side like a big mountain ram wondering how he'd got on the particular peak.

"Laddie," I said mildly. "You still owe me two drinks."

Slowly his face cleared. "Company owes, Mac, not me."

As he climbed down, I swung back to Cumberland. "Fun's over, chum."

He hesitated. Maybe he thought English honor demanded that he not quit the field of battle. To me, though, he was just a guy with test tubes and calculators for feelings. Whatever he was, he decided to leave after a parting shot: "I shall recommend that the blending of Rob Roy Royal be transferred to Galway."

"Galway?" Snifter's face was stricken. "Galway? Ireland?"

"Irish monks taught the heathen Scots to make uisge beatha in the fifteenth century, old chap." He whinnied smugly as he opened the door.

"Scotch is nothing but Irish whiskey made acrid by peat smoke."

I braced myself to intercept Snifter's charge. Insulting Scotland's whisky was as unforgivable as an insult to Bonny Charlie himself.

But he just stood there, defeated. I went to him. "Friend Snifter, what you need now is a dram of Scots uisge—with peat smoke."

" 'Tis a terrible thing the English bastard said. Terrible. And terrible true." He burred the r's like the death rattle of a grizzly.

I lost my patience. "You cairn-head, all whisky's the same. Your damn peat smoke adds the character. Scots whisky is not Irish whiskey. Hell, the scalpeens even spell it wrong—with an e."

"Aye," he said tentatively. Then, brightening, "So do the Yanks."

"Attaboy." I pulled out my Kents, took one, and held out the pack.

"Be your old self, hoss. Smoke. Drink. Pipe merry tunes."

Waving the cigarettes away, he turned and lumbered off and I followed him out the door and into the damp air of the old stone warehouse.

He went down a long aisle flanked by oak aging casks. Unlike bourbon, Scotch is aged in old casks to avoid the absorption of too much wood flavor, and these were dark and scarred and stamped with myriad cabalistic marks. Here and there one of the blenders had carved in a nickname for a blend he had a special feeling for.

There on my left was five hundred liters of Rob Roy Red (to be aged twelve years), inscribed Gentle Annie. Sounded light and smooth. On my right, farther along, was Stout Hamish—might be just the thing for a cold winter night.

On a cask of Rob's Regal Proof (meaningless—virtually all blended Scotch is 86 proof, i.e., forty-three percent ethyl alcohol) was carved in large letters: Lord Randal, My Son.

I shuddered. You remember the old poem—and what young Lord Randal was given to drink by his ever lovin' lady friend. Spoiled young Lord Randal's chances of ever becoming old Lord Randal. So Rob's Regal Proof might be too strong for our sophisticated palates, right?

I caught up with Snifter in an alcove in one of the old walls. In it were a small table, a couple of wooden stools, and a small cask about the size of a beer keg. He was drawing whisky from it into two crockery cups.

"This'll gi' us the real Hieland flavor, laddie."

It did. So smoky as to be tangy, so dark it seemed thick, it damn near pinned my scalp to the stone roof. Whamo! —

Gasping, I peered through watering eyes at Snifter. Then I coughed painfully. My performance seemed to cheer him.

When he stopped laughing, he drank half his cupful without blinking an eye. Impressive.

When I could talk, I asked, "What is it? Toe of toad, bile of bat?"

"Too brusque for ye, is it?" He laughed again. "Straight barley-malt, me bairn. 140 Proof."

Seventy percent ethyl alcohol. "Not for milksops. Or sherry-smellers."

That was a mistake. His face lengthened. "Yon English bastard'll cost me this wee private niche. And me job and me pride too. And the part

of me wages as goes to The Cause. Ruddy bloody milksop!"

"For God's sake, hoss. Your nose is in a slump, that's all."

"Nay," he said morosely, "been wonky for weeks." He pointed at the cask directly across from the alcove. "Rob Roy Royal. Only Chief Blender Pibroch Craigelochie blends that, Mac. Only mon who can. But look there at what I've carved."

I peered at the big cask. Cut in the oak was: Stinkin' Billy.

Unappetizing, I had to admit, wondering who Billy was.

"Cask's waiting for the mix outside. It's no a sweet brew, lad."

Then it dawned on me. More of his damned Nationalism. The English had dubbed a flower Sweet William. So naturally the Scots called it Stinkin' Billy.

I took another drink of the 140 Proof. When my eyes returned to their sockets, I said, "You'll beat that pistol-packing snooper, old friend. So then, settle down and listen to my problems."

The change of pace helped. A gleam of professional interest sparked in his eye as I outlined what I needed. Downing his whisky, he drew another. "CanAm imports straight whiskies and blends them in Montreal, right, laddie?"

I nodded. He said, "J&B blends right here in Scotland. Up River Spey way. I know their Chief Blender well. He'll no gi' out secrets. No more than I'd gi' you Rob Roy's formulas."

"There'd be a handsome contribution to The Cause."

He mulled it over. "Aye, J&B's secrets're none o' mine to keep." The gleam left his eye. "No easy task, Mac. Even with a good nose."

"And with yours?"

"Impossible. Ruddy bloody shame. The Cause needs money, lad."

Sighing, I finished off my whisky. And found I was getting used to it. Not that I liked it any more than I like molten lava. But the warehouse was damply chill—aging whisky loses strength in dry air—and Snifter's private stock was nothing if not warming. I held out my cup.

While he filled it, and his too, I lit another Kent. Again he refused one. Irritated, I said, "God's sake, you're back on booze—" I took a sip of mine "—why not baccy?"

"Losing me wind. Canna pipe a proper pibroch wi'out wind, laddie."

I took another sip and looked at him sharply—as sharply as I could, that is. "Don't believe you." I snapped my fingers—more or less.

"Company pays for whisky. But you pay for cigarettes. Right?"

He had the grace to look sheepish. "Pay ten bob for twenty, Mac."

I had to laugh. So damn pat. A tight Scotsman. And, I saw, getting tighter. I flourished my cup. "Pibroch!"

"Aye?"

"Pibroch, a pibroch. Pipe me a proper pibroch, Pibroch." I was pleased I'd said it—you'd have been too—all those p's and Scotch ch's.

He gave a shout of laughter. "Bloody well will, MacLean. Up The MacLean! Up The Craigelochie! Up The O'Spelin! Look lively, bucko."

And look lively we did. First he filled a stoneware jug with molten lava. Then we were off to his "wee housie" to fetch his pipes. From there we went to fetch his true-blue girl. Plus a bonny friend of hers for me. Then we skirled our way into and out of pubs. And up and down streets, he piping and I—I confess it—dancing the auld Celtic dances.

My mother was a MacLean of Duart. And the Irish dance to pipes too. That 140 Proof lava brought out much more of the braw bravura Celt than I'd had any idea was in me.

Snifter could pipe, no mistake. He and I and the lassies too livened up those pubs. And those streets. A braw piper and a dancing half-Scots half-Irish Yank were looked at indulgently in Aberdeen, I found.

Or I think I did. The last I remember at all clearly was Snifter piping that stirring old pibroch "The Big Spree" in the lobby of my hotel, pausing now and then to bellow, "Up The Cause! Down the spies! Up The IRA! Down the sherry-smellers!"

Despite being a spy of sorts, I thought his sentiments were well worth sharing. Or at least well worth bellowing . . .

Right about then, a curtain seemed to drop. And when I awoke the next morning in my room, there was no Pibroch, no true-blue girl friend, and no bonny lassie. I hoped I hadn't let the side down. But from the size of my headache I suspected that you had to be a hundred percent Scot to handle 140 Proof uisge beatha.

When I went down to the lobby, I found myself trying to slink inconspicuously through the motions of checking out. No use. My Highland Fling had made me a celebrity.

The staff and several of the guests nodded and smiled. One gaffer in kilts and Glengarry bonnet waved and said "Up The Cause" and cackled approvingly.

At the desk a red-cheeked lassie dimpled at me as she toted up my bill. "Snifter Craigelochie's a bonny piper," she said in a soft burr. "An' ye ken well our dancin', Mr. O'Spelin."

So all in all I felt some better when I headed north and west out of Aberdeen. Snifter would be working on sniffing out J&B Rare's blending proportions, but there was no way I could count on his wonky nose. I'd have to get down to hard work myself. Ruddy bloody hard work.

Still, I'd be near the River Spey. Surely I needn't spend all my time cultivating prospective informants, developing solid sources.

But for the next eleven days that's what I did. Being part MacLean of Duart was an asset. And Scots are among the friendliest of people once you get past their initial gruff reserve.

But I wasn't after friends. I was after sources, the bread and butter of detectives, journalists, spies, reformers, and backyard gossips.

All I could do was plug away. I found a bookkeeper here, a drayman there. Plus a pretty secretary to wine and dine and elicit from.

I even made clandestine midnight entries into the J&B blendhouses. And found nothing. Blending formulas are not left lying around.

Bits and pieces. That's what I was getting. A picture of sorts was emerging, but nothing the CEO of CanAm would pay a large fee for.

Slow, slow going, and too much like dog work for my taste. The pretty secretary helped ease my pain, but the trouble was she had next to nothing to offer (nothing relevant to my mission, that is).

So every evening I prodded Snifter by telephone. And I doubletalked any new clues I picked up. But he was making no progress at all.

In fact, after our Aberdeen version of The Big Spree, he seemed to lose what little heart he had left. Cumberland had left for London without further incident, Snifter said, but he'd taken with him a thick swatch of charts, graphs, and chemical analyses. In his words, he'd shortly be issuing a report that would sink Chief Blender Pibroch Craigelochie.

My own morale began to slip. So I took a day off to fish.

And there, at Speyside, inspiration hit. Which goes to show, doesn't it? All work and no play, I mean.

The narrow twisting roads of Scotland favor trim low-slung cars. I

was glad I'd pampered myself by renting a fine-tuned Aston-Martin. Almost before I'd unjointed my fly rod I was pulling up in front of Snifter's "wee housie."

It was early evening but he wasn't there. His "daily" was, and her cheerful middle-aged face lengthened as she told me she was just putting his supper in the oven to keep warm. "Willna eat enough to keep a wee birdie alive. Just works, works, works—"

Rudely, I'm afraid, I turned and ran back to the car. A fine old girl, but talk your leg off . . .

I found him in the blend-house, mooning over his vats. "I've solved your problem!" I cried. "Drinks on the house!"

He groused, he grumbled, but finally he led the way to his private alcove. When I'd told him of my inspiration, he looked at me as if I'd gone daft. "Try it," I insisted. "Those years of smoking put an overlay of tobacco on your sense of smell. Ever since you've been a blender, you've been sniffing whisky through a layer of baccy."

Comprehension slowly dawned. Then hope. "Och, mon. Could you be right? Aye . . . sma' wonder the ruddy bloody whisky smelled wrong to me."

"I'm right, you'll see." I grinned cheerily. "You'll snift, rather."

"Gi' us your Kents. Quick now!"

Lighting up, he inhaled the way a man lost in the desert would gulp cool clear water. As a smoker, seeing him perk right up did my heart good (not literally—we've all heard, ad infinitum, what smoking does to hearts).

Cigarette between his lips, he poured us two drams of his private stock of liquid lava. Cutting his by half with water, he put down the cigarette and sniffed. "It's comin' back. It's comin' back, lad!"

I don't deny that tobacco is a filthy weed (I won't confirm it either), but it worked on Snifter like a miracle drug.

From the butt of the first, he lit a second and, closing his eyes, drew in rapturously. I rose to stroll about while he enjoyed himself.

There wasn't much to see. Just ranks and files of oak casks. I wandered back and found Snifter's eyes still closed. Out of respect for his quiet ecstasy, I turned my back. Nothing to see in that direction either except the cask he'd nicknamed Stinkin' Billy.

Sweet William. A pretty little flower. So why Stinkin'? Why Billy?

The cask just lay there inertly, giving no clue. I gave it a half-

annoyed thump. Then another. A third. Yes, it was full now.

Suddenly I recalled why the Scots called a Sweet William by any other name . . .

William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland. Commanded the victorious forces at Culloden—so the English named a flower in his honor. He'd presided over the post-battle massacre of Scottish civilians. Stinkin' Billy Cumberland.

I swung around. Snifter was eying me levelly. I eyed him in return. Had he got one back for the long ago slain Craigelochies?

"I ken your thoughts." He felt in a pocket and handed me a folded newspaper clipping. "I hated yon William Augustus Cumberland. And he was MI-5, Mac. But I'd no spoil good Rob Roy Royal wi' the likes o' his skin and bones."

"MI-5 counterspy, eh? It figures." I unfolded the clipping.

"Spying on The Cause for Whitehall. Trying to break us up."

The clipping was from *The Scotsman* of three days before. It told in terse journalese of the motoring death of one W. A. Cumberland of London. Dark narrow road in West Lothian. Big clumsy car. A skid. Multiple fractures, internal injuries—DOA.

I handed the clipping back. "Just a passing thought, old hoss. You weren't overfond of the sherry-smeller." I lifted my drink. "Cheers."

And that wrapped it up.

Between us we'd saved Snifter's job and between us we worked out just what the CEO of CanAm needed. I debated spending a few days on my beloved Tweed, but time was too short. Regretfully, I caught a jetliner instead.

The CEO was too much the chief executive to leap with joy. But he did come up with a handsome bonus which, unbeknownst to him, I shared with Snifter—or, rather, with The Cause. Up The MacLean!

I can't give you the formula, obviously. But I will say that J&B Rare, according to my various sources, was blended of thirty-five percent malt whiskies, sixty-five percent grain. Right on the average. Neither good nor bad. Average.

Oh, one last thing. Another passing thought. When one of their operatives disappears, MI-5 always covers it up as an accident. A question of operational security. A question, too, of saving face. So that terse piece in *The Scotsman* wasn't quite the reliable 200 Proof tale that Snifter Craigelochie implied it was.

He'd said he'd never spoil good Rob Roy Royal. And I believed him. But the batch that went into the cask nicknamed Stinkin' Billy was blended before we unwonked his nose.

It wouldn't faze Snifter for a moment to spoil bad Rob Roy Royal.

I don't know how ethyl alcohol and Sweet William A. Cumberland might blend. Would the result be 86 Proof? 100 Proof?

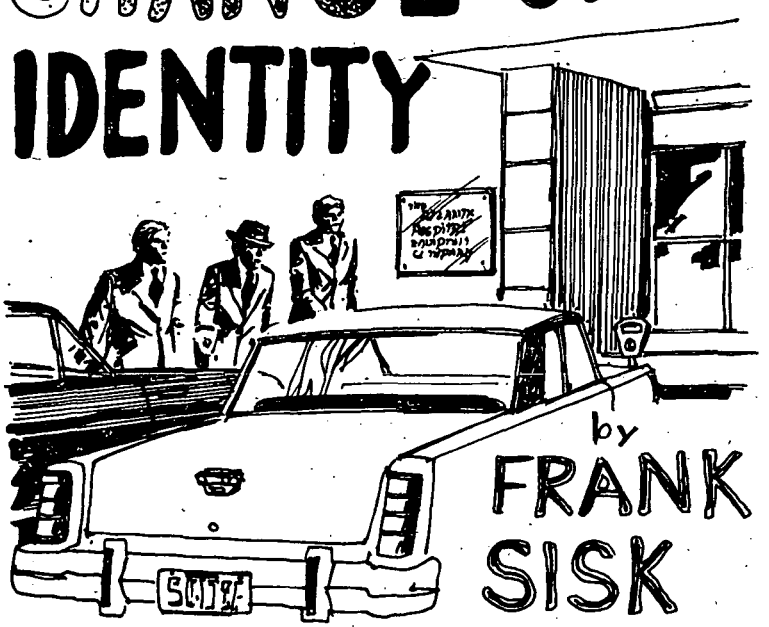
No matter. I'll always think of what's in the big cask called Stinkin' Willy as being Craigelochie's Own Proof.

And if I'm around in twenty-one years, I won't be drinking any Rob Roy Royal.

Will you?

Sometimes one must lose oneself to achieve identity . . .

CHANGE OF IDENTITY



by FRANK SISK

Take a look in the mirror. See the Sheik of Orange Street. Yeah, man. James L. Pellegrino in person. Jimmy the Sheik. Nuzzo Morrone had hung the monicker on him years ago when they were kids at Hillhouse High. Years ago is right. Nuzzo's been dead six-seven years already, knifed in a ginmill hassle, but the goddamn name lingers on. Sheik.

He remembered how he'd hated it at first. A couple of times he'd slapped Nuzzo around for using it. Lot of good that did. Always a

mulish little bastard, Nuzzo was, and knocking his nose out of joint just helped promote the name through half of New Haven.

Sheik Pellegrino.

It was a definite part of him now, like the trim black mustache, the mane of wavy black hair prematurely grey, the tinted eyeglasses, the gold signet ring on the third finger of the left hand, the big diamond on the adjacent pinkie. Yeah, the nickname not only personified him, it acted like a magnet on certain chicks. And, oh, some of the chicks he'd had . . .

"All right, Casanova." Bower's voice carried its usual gritty sarcasm. "I've got a few things here requiring your signature, if you can pull yourself away from that mirror."

Bower was the special FBI agent who had been working on the Mazzarelli case since the beginning of time. He was a tall wiry man with crisp copper-colored hair, ice-blue eyes and a coldly humorous mouth. Even before Vito Mazzarelli's conviction Bower had never been one to treat Pellegrino with kid gloves. With the Sheik's testimony a clincher in the trial Bower was, if possible, a little more abrasive. A painful duty—that's how he seemed to regard protecting Pellegrino from possible reprisals of the Mazzarelli family.

"You know what," Pellegrino said, turning from the mirror and looking across the large hotel room at Bower who sat hunched over a coffee table he was using as a desk. "You know what, gumshoe? When I finally see the last of you it still won't be soon enough."

"You ought to be writing one-liners," Bower said. "But come over here and try writing your new name instead."

Pellegrino walked past the king-size bed he'd demanded and stood looking down at the attaché case lying open on the coffee table. "Well, what's first?"

"Take a seat here." Bower patted a cushion on the divan he occupied. "We've got a number of details to dispose of before Hoffman picks us up."

Putting a cigarette in his mouth, Pellegrino sat down and reached in the pocket of his blue velure jacket. He took out a silver lighter, snapped up the flame and said as he prepared to light the cigarette, "O.K., Bower. Just tell me where to begin."

"You begin by not smoking that cigarette," Bower said.

"This'll be my last."

"The one before that was your last, Sheik."

"Jeez, but you're—"

"You heard me. Feed the butt to that ashtray. As of this minute, you are Herman P. Vallet and Herman P. Vallet does not smoke cigarettes. He smokes a pipe. Uses an aromatic tobacco too. Here—" Bower burrowed under a manila folder in the attaché case and came up with a shiny briar and a plastic pouch—"start practising."

Shaking his head, Pellegrino snubbed out the cigarette. "Herman P. Vallet. Comes to pickin' names, you Feds take the cookie. Herman. Not once I ever hear a Herman they din't call him Vermin too."

"That's because you've always run with a witty gang."

"You got a real bad mouth, Bower."

"Don't you forget it."

"I made your case against Vito. If I woon't a took the witness stand he'd be out on the street right now, doin' what he does best."

"If Vito was loose, Herman, you'd be in a box. You better keep remembering that. And say a prayer for Uncle Sam every day. Now let's have your John Hancock—your Herman P. Vallet—on these gasoline credit cards."

"Want me to try left-handed again?"

"No. Do it the way I showed you yesterday. Pen between the first and second finger of your right hand. That's how you'll write from now on."

"What kind a car you givin' me?" Pellegrino asked as he signed the cards.

"We haven't decided yet."

"I don't want no compact."

"You don't have much to say about it. Realize this. Your life is undergoing a radical change. Herman P. Vallet is a conservative bachelor who works quietly as assistant manager in a motel. His total income is just what it says on his W-2 form. Nothing under the table. Unlike the old Sheik, Herman lives clean and looks clean."

"A klutz."

"A live klutz. That's better than a dead k'nocker, mister. You know what a k'nocker is, don't you?"

"Draw me a pitcher."

"The late Jimmy the Sheik was a k'nocker."

"So already I'm buried."

"The self-appointed ladies' man, the little big shot."

"Always the bad mouth."

"A bartender in a second-rate saloon, working for peanuts, cadging for tips. Still he sports flashy wheels. Does he tap the till when the boss steps out? I wouldn't put it past him. But our k'nocker has other sources. You want a woman? See the Sheik. Need some smack? The Sheik knows a dealer. Low-cost booze? The Sheik has a warehouse address. Place a bet, float a loan, hire a hit? Contact the Sheik. The insider's outside man."

"Whyn't you let up, for cry sake?"

"A born k'nocker." Bower's steady grin was sadistic. "He owns a loose mouth. He likes to hint broadly about his influential connections. He enjoys executing the know-it-all wink, the wise-guy grimace. He swaggers too much. In short, he upstages the backstage managers. The Mazzarellis finally review this business association. They find it getting risky. They vote an early foreclosure. But before the padlocker reaches the Sheik, comes a tipoff. The Sheik runs. He runs right into our waiting arms. And he begins to sing right from the soul."

"You really get a charge outa hashin' it over, don't ya?"

"Back to business." Bower slid two slips of paper, each a different color, along the coffee table. "Please affix your former signature to these."

"What the hell are they?"

"Withdrawal slips on banks where you have savings accounts."

"What's the idea?"

"We're closing you out and transferring the funds to the account of Herman P. Vallet. To start a new life you'll need every penny."

"What about the ten K Uncle Sam's suppose to—"

"That'll be deposited in the same account. And before I forget—" Bower reached into the attaché case "—here's another form to sign with your new signature."

"What's it for?"

"It's known as a depositor's signature card. We'll file it with your new savings account in the Coffeyville bank."

"Coffeyville." Pellegrino's brown eyes narrowed. "What's with Coffeyville?"

"I guess we haven't mentioned it to you yet."

"No, you ain't."

"It's the town in which you'll be making a fresh start."

"Where the hell is it?"

"It's a pretty little petal in the Sunflower State. Kansas, in case you don't know."

"Kansas." Pellegrino's eyes widened now. "Ain't that way the hell out West somewhere?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"Why the hell Kansas, man? A million miles from nowhere?"

"We thought it was safer than settling you in the Bronx."

"Jesus H. Christ!"

"Our first choice was Shanghai but the Chinese turned thumbs down."

"Go ahead. Play it for chuckles."

Bower gathered up the signed forms. He checked each one before returning it to the attaché case. "Now let's have your pretty rings and your fancy wristwatch."

"Where you goin' to hock 'em?"

"Whatever we get for them will be added to the sum we got for your Lincoln and will be deposited to the account of Herman P. Vallet. You're going to be fairly well off for an assistant manager of a motel, Herman."

"That's another laugh. About motels I know from nothin', except to shack up in."

"You'll learn fast. It's kind of like being a bartender. You just stand behind a counter and smile. Anyway, the manager of your particular motel likes to cooperate with representatives of the government. He'll overlook your inexperience. Now what I want you to do next, Herman—"

There was a discreet knock on the door. Bower rose from the divan. Walking to the door, he drew a snub-nosed revolver from a hip-pocket holster. He took a position to the right of the jamb and said, "Who is it?"

"Hoffman," said a muffled voice.

Bower eased the revolver back in the holster, lifted the chain bolt, turned the knob, opened the door.

Albert Hoffman, special assistant U.S. attorney, strode into the room. He was a stocky young man with thinning blond hair. In his right hand he carried an attaché case exactly like Bower's. He looked

questioningly at Pellegrino and said to Bower, "What about his clothes?"

"I was just telling him to change when you knocked," Bower said, closing the door and bolting it again.

"Get into that brown suit that was delivered yesterday," Hoffman said briskly.

"Strictly from Clydesville, them threads," Pellegrino said, rising with a sigh from the divan.

"A Coffeyville original," Bower said. "And while you're at it, don't forget that brown fedora. We want it to hide every strand of your wavy hair."

Mumbling, Pellegrino began to unbutton the velure jacket as he went to the closet.

Hoffman set his case on the coffee table beside Bower's and unlocked it with a key from his vest pocket. "I think we've got everything in order now," he said. "Social security card, birth certificate, certificate of graduation from Saint John's Parochial, diploma from Madison High, driver's licence—"

"Ya know," Pellegrino commented from halfway inside the closet, "I never stood around Hillhouse long enough to graduate and here I'm—"

Oblivious, Hoffman continued to enumerate . . .

A few minutes later, appareled in stodgy brown, fedora established squarely on his head, Pellegrino walked to the mirror and surveyed his reflection, registering marked distaste.

"Those eyeglasses," Hoffman said.

"You're right, Bert," Bower said. "Take off your glasses, Sheik. You won't be needing them."

"Let's call him Herman, Steve."

"Your glasses, Herman."

"I can't read nothin' without my glasses."

"At the sanatorium you'll be fitted with contact lenses," Hoffman said. Then: "That mustache."

"I guess so," Bower said. "Break out your electric razor, Herman, and destroy that stuff on your upper lip."

"I don't hardly recognize myself now," Pellegrino said.

"That's the general idea."

At 10:15 the three men emerged from the hotel room. Bower and Hoffman carried their GI cases. Pellegrino, externally transformed into

a colorless Herman P. Vallet, was carrying the only thing they'd let him take—a small canvas bag containing nothing but essential toilet articles.

They rode the elevator in silence down to the underground garage. In a nearby parking stall a blue four-door car awaited them. Bower got into the front seat with the driver, a burly man who acknowledged his presence with an almost imperceptible nod; Hoffman and Pellegrino climbed into the back.

The car wound its way up the grey exit ramp, coming out into the dazzling brightness of a May morning. Pellegrino looked eagerly at the city streets which for him had been off limits the last few months.

"Where's this sanatorium at?" he asked after a while.

"About a forty-minute ride from here," Hoffman said.

"Am I gonna be cooped up there long?"

"Depends. A couple of weeks anyway."

"A couple weeks? What's on the program that takes a couple weeks?"

"Even minor plastic surgery requires time to heal."

Pellegrino's brow roughened in painful thought. "Jeez, I don't know," he siad.

"Don't know what?"

"This whole shoofly gig's startin' to get me down. I mean—"

"Listen," Hoffman said tartly. "Under the Organized Crime Act we're empowered to take certain steps for the protection of cooperative witnesses, but we can't force this protection on anyone who doesn't want it. So if you prefer to go it alone, just say the word. We'll stop the car right here and let you out. Otherwise shut up."

"Amen," Bower intoned.

Pellegrino retreated behind a wordless scowl.

The car progressed from the glittering heart of the city through an area that gradually deteriorated into a static slum and then moved into a zone of high-rise apartment housing where there was an occasional glimpse of trees and grass. They were skirting a park when Pellegrino abandoned his dark scowl and took appreciative notice of a shapely young lady who was running bouncily toward a bus stopped at a red light.

"A pair of pippins," Pellegrino said, craning his neck to look through the rear window.

"Let me give you some advice," Hoffman said. "For the next six months you should behave like a fasting monk."

"That's easy for you to say."

"And it's the last time you'll hear me say it. After today you won't be seeing me anymore. Nor, for that matter, Mr. Bower."

"What's the matter? Ain't you guys suppose—"

"Listen again. In the minds of certain parties—the Mazzarelli family, for instance—we're closely associated with Jimmy the Sheik. As a result, it might be fatal for Herman P. Vallet if we were ever connected with him. Hence, when you cross the threshold to the sanatorium other officials will take over, men whose faces are unknown to the former friends of the Sheik. Understand?"

"I get it."

Ten minutes later the car decelerated in front of a granite-faced building that was separated from the sidewalk by a swath of unhealthy grass several feet wide. On either side of the entrance was a bronze plaque: *Atlantic Hospital Equipment Co.* In front of the building and most of the way up the block the metered parking spaces were occupied. The car finally eased against a red-painted portion of curb beside a hydrant.

"Fine," Bower said, opening his door. "We'll only be gone five minutes."

The driver cleared his throat and nodded.

"I don't see no sanatorium," Pellegrino said querulously as he got from the back seat.

"We don't identify it as such," Hoffman said.

Three abreast, Pellegrino in the middle, they set off toward the granite-faced building. They had taken less than a dozen steps when they were accosted by a fairly young lady, modishly dressed, who was hovering beside a parking meter, a dollar bill in her hand.

She spoke actually to Hoffman, who was walking on the outside, but her imploring glance was all-inclusive. "I wonder if any of you gentlemen could give me change for—"

"Sorry, ma'am," Hoffman said, giving her a quick meaningless smile without breaking his stride.

Bower ignored her completely.

Pellegrino, however, shot her a beaming white smile and, plunging a hand into a pocket of his trousers, came to an abrupt halt.

Propelled by the momentum of inner self, the government men went on another seven or eight before they realized what was happening. Bower wheeled around first. Already it was too late.

Pellegrino was in the act of handing the lady a coin. His body was inclined slightly forward in an obeisance one sees in head waiters of the old school. This courtly posture was suddenly marred by a great twitch, comic in a way, which sent him slouching sidewise and then falling hunched at the lady's feet. The coin rolled into the gutter. The canvas bag was an inch out of reach of the hand that had held it.

The lady was shielding her open mouth with the hand that still clutched the dollar.

"What in all hell!" Hoffman said.

"Our pigeon's been pegged," Bower said, going down beside Pellegrino on one knee.

"Where did it come from?"

"From any number of those windows in the buildings across the street."

"How could they recognize him from that distance?"

"They didn't have to. They recognized us and took it from there."

A crowd was materializing. A few cars were already double parked, the occupants gaping at the tableau.

"Damn it all," Hoffman said. "Is he definitely dead?"

"Definitely." Bower got back on his feet and scanned the faces in the crowd. "Where's the lady with the buck?"

"Why, she's—"

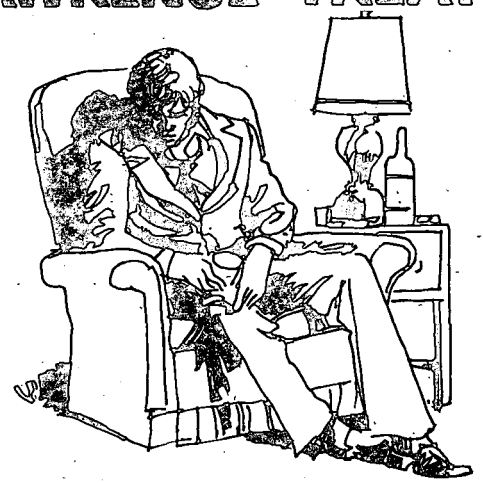
"Gone." Bower shrugged fatalistically. "A hook. She pulled him away from us into the firing line. Well, I guess we better call the cops."

"I guess so," Hoffman said. "But first let's agree on one thing." With lowered voice he spoke into Bower's ear. "The dead man is Herman P. Vallet. That way, we'll keep the Mazzarellis off balance. Besides, if it became generally known that Pellegrino was wasted while in protective custody it would be bad for the future of our program. Check?"

"Check," Bower said.

Some are destroyed by fire, some illuminated . . .

THE SECOND ONE by LAWRENCE TREAT



He was a tall, rangy man who seemed to surround you with an easy good nature. He had a Kansas drawl, and with it a kind of largesse, so that you trusted him on sight, and rightly so. For he turned down all kickbacks, cheated no one and had firmly resolved never to commit another murder.

When he answered the knock on the door of his real estate office that Saturday afternoon in May, his mind was at peace. He would have

preferred staying in the TV room watching the ball game, but he was a businessman and this was business. He opened the door casually, nodded to the stranger whom he assumed to be a customer, and glanced past him.

She was sitting out there in the car that was bathed in sunshine, and he recognized her instantly. His immediate impulse was to push the customer away and say, "No. The office is closed. Try somewhere else."

That, however, would have been a mistake; once you panic, you're through, you're on the defensive, every move gets you in deeper. So—control yourself and brazen it out. Since she hasn't seen you yet, make sure she doesn't. Find out why this man came to the office. He may be her husband or he may be a detective who managed to pick up the trail and has brought her here to make the identification.

After all these years?

He said, in his quiet, easy drawl, "I'm Sweet." He grinned, the pleasant, friendly grin of a man who has the reputation of being an upstanding, respectable citizen. He was a licensed realtor, wasn't he? He was an influential member of the Stuarton Chamber of Commerce, and he'd married into one of the best families. Viola was a Madden, and the Maddens owned the lumber yard, the oil company and just about everything else that counted locally.

"John R. Sweet," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Walter Esmond," the customer said, introducing himself. "My company is opening an office here. I'm going to set it up, and my wife and I drove East so that we could line up a home to buy, if we can find the right thing."

Sweet noted the eastern accent, probably New York. Chances were that Esmond had moved out to Kansas a few years ago, long after Sweet had left. He'd certainly never seen Esmond before—he was no threat.

Partly to stall, partly to be conversational, Sweet said, "You came East? From where?"

"Emporia, Kansas. My wife was brought up there, but I come from New Rochelle, in New York. Only been in Kansas a couple of years. Why?"

"Hobby of mine, placing people by their accents. Tell me, what brought you here to my office?"

"Pure chance. We got to Stuarton about five minutes ago and saw your sign. Haven't even checked into a motel yet."

"Well," Sweet said, telling himself that nobody had seen the Esmonds, they'd spoken to nobody. If they disappeared without a trace, if he could manage it—

"Well," he said, "we'll fix you up somehow. Care to come into the office, so you can tell me exactly what you're looking for?"

"Sure. I'll get my wife and you can tell her, too."

Sweet nodded. He'd face it out somehow. A couple of years ago he'd passed some Emporia people in a hotel lobby. They'd glanced at him casually, without recognition. He had no worries about most people, but Lucy, who was now Mrs. Walter Esmond, was a different matter.

He saw that Esmond was hesitating and had some embarrassment before he spoke. "It's been a long trip," Esmond said. "Mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Go right ahead," Sweet said. "First door to the left."

Alone, he tried to think things through. First of all, he'd be a fool to bank on Lucy's failure to recognize him; therefore he had to get rid of her. As for his fine resolve never to kill another human being, it was an admirable idea, but impractical. The question was not whether to kill her, but how.

Stated as baldly as that, he was dismayed, for he'd always thought of himself as a kindly man. Viola called him soft, she criticized him for refusing to pressure people into buying something they didn't really want.

"You're throwing money away," she always said. And he shrugged and told her he liked people to be satisfied.

"Why worry about that?" she said. "All that nonsense about a satisfied customer coming back is fine if you're selling clothes or housewares, but how many people ever buy houses twice?"

"Some of them do," he'd said. But his real reason was that he liked to be liked, he wanted to walk down Main Street and feel that he belonged here, amongst friends and neighbors. Which had nothing to do with Lucy Esmond, who was the only person in the world who could connect John R. Sweet with Arthur Kendall, an Emporia bank clerk wanted for embezzlement, arson and murder.

He sighed. That plan of his had been perfectly conceived and beautifully executed. He'd foreseen every detail and made no mistakes. For

ten years he had lived here in Stuarton, a man above suspicion.

He recalled how he'd set up the Sweet identity long before he'd made his move. He came here during vacations. He always arrived as a man with a red beard, which nobody dreamt was artificial. He had a part-time job and a social security card under the Sweet name. He rented a post office box to which he sent mail addressed to himself, and he even paid a small income tax on a fictitious income. He made friends, bought a car and announced that he was a real estate broker and would set up an office as soon as he had his state license. He went to the local dentist, ostensibly because he intended to settle here, but more importantly, so that no dental records of his would exist in Emporia.

There, he was experimenting, embezzling small amounts at the bank and perfecting his methods, so that when the opportunity came he could make his big coup. Money makes money, and he needed at least a hundred thousand to get started in Stuarton. He knew how to launder it, so that when it ended up in the John R. Sweet bank account, there would be no way of checking back to the source.

A hundred thousand. He was perfectly aware that the annual audit would expose him, but what of it? Before the discovery was made, he'd no longer exist. Arthur Kendall would presumably be a charred corpse, burnt beyond recognition in the fire that destroyed the building where he'd once lived. No Kendall dental records would be available. And even if the police went looking for him, why would they think of a man with a thick red beard who was driving East.

The night he'd made his move had been ticklish, but he got away with it. A trip downtown. A derelict sitting on a stoop. Kendall, still Kendall, calling out, "Hey, you—want to make a few bucks?"

The wino staggered over. "What do I do, boss? What's the gag?"

"Hop in the car, and I'll tell you."

"Naah! You got some kind of a trick."

Kendall-Sweet took ten dollars out of his wallet and put the bill on the seat next to him. The wino climbed in.

Back in his apartment, Kendall-Sweet gave him a few drinks and made up a story about needing an alibi. "All you have to do is shave, dress up in my clothes and sit here. Don't turn on the lights. If anybody knocks on the door, open it but don't talk. Act drunk and they'll think it's me."

The wino agreed. A few drinks later he passed out, whereupon Kendall changed into Sweet. He pasted on his beard, picked up his bag with the hundred thousand, soaked the wino in kerosene and dropped a match on him.

The flames shot up, and Sweet dashed for the door, raced out, and there she was, on the landing. The girl from upstairs, Lucy Patton.

She'd moved in about ten days ago and he'd seen her a few times, but they'd never spoken. She saw the flames in his room, she saw a big man with a red beard, and she screamed.

"Get out of my way!" he yelled, and he shoved her. She staggered back and fell. Then a wall of smoke and flame blotted her out, and he made his escape.

Five minutes later he was driving East in his own car, registered in the name of Sweet and bearing Massachusetts plates. He'd stop off in Chicago and complete the arrangements for transferring a large sum of money to his account in the Stuarton National Bank. Back in Emporia there was a burnt-down house and the body of a man, supposedly that of Arthur Kendall. It would be assumed that the money he'd embezzled had been completely destroyed. As far as the girl was concerned, he believed she died in the fire. Instead, here she was, alive and sitting in a car outside his office.

Esmond came out of the bathroom. "I'll get my wife," he said. "She'll be wondering why I took so long."

"Just step to the door and call her," Sweet said, edging towards his desk, where he kept his gun.

But Esmond shook his head. "I have to get her," he said. "She's blind."

"Blind?" Sweet said, stunned at the news. "Blind?"

"She was in a bad fire about ten years ago," Esmond said. "The burns she suffered—she's been blind ever since."

"How terrible!" Sweet said. "How did it happen?"

Esmond shrugged. "It's a long story," he said. "I'll bring her in."

Sweet nodded. Just as the image of her face seen for a single moment was engraved forever in his mind, so the image of his face must be engraved on hers.

He smiled slowly, contentedly. He'd find them a house, they'd settle here, they might even become friends. And some day, perhaps, she'd tell the story of a man with a red beard and of Arthur Kendall, who

had gotten away with a hundred thousand and then perished in a fire. She'd never connect the two men, and it would be a nice tale to hear, some winter evening in front of a fireplace.

All of which was a nice fantasy. But John R. Sweet, being a realist, took his gun from the desk drawer. He caressed the barrel for a moment, then stuck the gun in his pocket. When Esmond led his wife into the office, Sweet was holding out a chair, anxious to help.

The years had made little change in the features of Lucy Esmond. Her eyes had been brown, he recalled, and her mouth had seemed to linger in a smile. But her lips were closed now, there was no suggestion of a smile, and the dark, oversized glasses concealed her eyes and the upper part of her face.

"This is my wife, Lucy Esmond," Esmond said. "Mr. Sweet."

Her voice was high and clear. "Mr. Sweet," she said, and held out her hand.

He hesitated, somehow afraid that his touch, her touch, would give him away. The blind develop strange faculties, they sense things that their eyes deny them. Nevertheless he took her hand, held it for a moment, then almost pushed it away.

She turned to her husband. "What does he look like?"

"Tall and lanky," Esmond said. "He has blue eyes and a mustache and beard." Esmond didn't say red, perhaps because the blind no longer think in terms of color, perhaps because it didn't matter.

After that, it was business. Sweet took out his work book, described houses, found out the Esmond price range, their requirements. Nevertheless he was obsessed with the idea of something wrong, something he'd done, some train of thought he'd ticked off.

Voice? He'd yelled at her, there on the stairs. Did she remember? A yell, but now his easy, conversational tone—could she connect the two? Or was there something else he'd done, had some aura been emitted?

He shouldn't have touched her. He kept thinking that that was the moment, the instant that had started recognition.

While he showed pictures, quoted prices, described neighborhoods and mentioned land values and building restrictions, his mind kept analyzing his problem. The Esmonds had spoken to no one in Stuarton, no one had seen them enter his office. A car with Kansas plates was parked on the street. He could move the car, he could drive it to

Boston, meet Viola, tell her he'd been lonesome, that he'd come on impulse.

And the Esmonds? How get rid of them? Shoot them, stab them. Easy enough to kill. The problem would be disposing of the bodies. Burying them in a cellar would be a temporary solution, and eventually Esmond's firm would make enquiries. They probably knew he'd come to Stuarton to find a house. The police would concentrate on real estate men, on restaurants and motels. They'd look for the car, they'd trace it—

When the idea struck him, Sweet practically oozed with charm.

"I think I know exactly the place for you. It's simple, easy to get around in. Mrs. Esmond will have no trouble."

"You're so considerate," she said.

"Not at all," said Sweet. "I'm looking forward to having you both stay here in Stuarton. Permanently." He liked that touch, it contained a truth. "We have a club here, you'll probably want to join. You play golf, Mr. Esmond?"

"Tennis is more my game."

"You're lucky, we have excellent courts."

Sweet was at ease now, for Lucy seemed relaxed. Maybe the blind have a sixth sense, but so does a real estate man. All the years he'd caught the feelings of people, whether they were really interested in a house, or a piece of property, whether they had money, what their tastes were. And he was sure of himself. He was convinced that even if Lucy had been alerted, if her mind had gone back to the red-bearded man on the stairs, she was no longer thinking of him, her suspicions had quieted down. For the moment, he was safe.

"The place I'm going to show you," he said, "was originally the cottage belonging to a big estate, but the main house burnt down about five years ago and has never been rebuilt."

"Don't talk about fires," Lucy said.

"Why not?"

"That's how I became blind. I was caught in a fire, I was knocked down, and the burns made me blind."

"You were knocked down?" Sweet said, and wished he hadn't asked.

"A man," she said, "on the stairs."

"Don't talk about it," Esmond said. "Don't keep thinking about it. You'll only have a headache tonight, you know that."

"I shouldn't have asked," Sweet said, "but I'm curious. Somebody knocked you down?"

"A man with a red beard," she said. "He came rushing out to the landing and he saw me and pushed me out of the way. Nobody's sure who he was, but I keep seeing his face. It's the last thing I ever saw. I keep seeing it, I can't help myself."

"Don't think about it," Esmond said.

Sweet felt the gun weighing down his pocket. "I shouldn't have asked," he said.

"The way you speak," Lucy said to Sweet. "You have a Kansas accent."

"Never been there in my life, ma'am," Sweet said. "Iowa, yes, but not Kansas."

He noticed that Esmond was studying him, and Sweet felt he'd almost given himself away. Red beard, red mustache. Esmond must be making a connection. Sweet had to keep dyeing it, people had to believe the color was natural. That, and his Kansas accent. Never been there in my life, ma'am.

And she'd heard his voice, there on the stairs. He'd yelled at her. Yelled with a Kansas accent? Was his speaking voice so different from a shout?

He swung into the driveway of the Valery house. "Well, here it is. Your future home."

"The blossoms," Lucy said. "I can smell them. Wisteria and lilac, and that lovely spring air!"

Inside the house, Sweet made no sales pitch. He was too busy watching Lucy, wondering whether he'd been wrong about her suspicions, wrong about Esmond reading something into Sweet's questions about the fire, about the man on the landing.

Perhaps, Sweet told himself, after all these years of contentment and security, he was too vulnerable. The Esmonds had no reason to connect him with Lucy's tragedy. Best stop worrying. Still, could he take chances?

He kept thinking of what the Esmonds might say tonight when they were alone.

"That real estate man," Lucy would say. "Did you notice anything about him?"

"No. Why? Just because he asked questions about the man who

knocked you down doesn't mean anything. People are curious, you know that. He seemed pleasant enough. I think he went out of his way to be helpful. What do you think about the house?"

"I don't know, but there's something about him. Maybe his voice. I can't quite place it, but it seems to me I've heard it before."

"What of it?"

"Describe him again."

"Tall, lanky, with blue eyes and a red mustache and beard."

"Red? Did you say red?"

"Sure, but so do thousands of men. That doesn't prove anything."

"I know, but Walter—there's something wrong."

Sweet saw the scene over and over again, and each time he envisaged it, the words changed but the suspicion remained.

"Walter," she'd say. "Did you notice his eyes? Did he have a kind of dark line across the iris of the left eye?"

Had Esmond noticed? And if he hadn't, would he notice it next time? The voice, the red beard, the blue eye with that dark line—how could the Esmonds not be suspicious and not go to the police? And how long before they did?

Meanwhile two people, one of them blind, were inspecting a house that they might buy. Because Lucy was blind, Esmond kept describing it to her.

"The fireplace is cater-cornered and has louvres, and one side of the living room has glass doors that slide."

"Is the view nice?"

"Lovely. You can see hills and a lake in the distance."

"I'd like that, I'll keep seeing it," she said, as if she wasn't blind. "Now tell me what the kitchen is like."

"It's long and narrow, you can reach out and touch both sides at the same time. The sink is stainless steel, and the counter is tiled."

"What color?"

"Red."

"And the stove? What is it?"

"Electric, with four burners."

"Where are the controls? You know they have to be in the front, so that I don't reach out and burn myself when something's turned on."

"The controls are at the front, and the oven is a separate unit built into the wall."

"It sounds just right for me," she said. "And no stairs—"

"Except to the cellar," Sweet said. "And what a cellar!"

"Yes?" she said. The clear, bell-like voice so innocent, so trusting. "Can we see it?"

"Of course," he said. He kept marveling at the way she used the word *see*. As if she could.

He turned on the main entrance switch before he led the way. Esmond held his wife's arm and guided her. "There's a bannister on one side," he said. "We'll have to put one on the other side, too."

He described the basement. "There's a workbench, and some of the tools are still on it. There's a rusty saw, a soldering iron, and a drill, and over here there's an electric timer. Lots of odds and ends, too. I wonder why whoever it was left all that stuff."

"Mr. Valery died," Sweet said. "His wife moved the household effects, but about all she took from here was a hammer and a screw driver."

"What did Valery do?" Esmond asked.

"He was a banker. Which reminds me—I knew a few of your Emporia bankers. Jim Foster, for instance. Is he around?"

"He got fired after the Kendall embezzlement. They said Foster should have checked up on things more carefully."

"Kendall—who was he?" Sweet demanded. His voice snapped sharply, as if he was yelling, and he turned to Lucy to see if she'd noticed. But her blind face was expressionless, and she answered his question in a flat monotone.

"Nobody," she said. "Let's not talk about him."

"Sure," Sweet said, and this time his drawl came easy and natural. "Forget about him, he's probably dead and buried."

"What?" Esmond said.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Now take a look at this root cellar. Real old-fashioned kind, you don't find them like this any more. Just step in, there's a pull cord for the light."

"Never mind," Esmond said. "I'll take your word for it." And Lucy said, "I can smell the earth."

"Go on in," Sweet said again.

Esmond shook his head. "It gives me the creeps. And this door—I've never seen anything like it. It must be at least three inches thick. And the bolt on the outside—I'd certainly want to take that off."

"Why?" Sweet said, not liking the sound of his own voice.

"Because," Esmond said slowly, "somebody could be locked in."

Sweet took the gun from his pocket. "Exactly," he said.

Lucy cried out. "Walter—what's happening?"

"He has a gun," Esmond said, "and he's pointing it at us."

"What for? What have we done?"

"Nothing," Sweet said, "except guess who I am."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"You know perfectly well, and you guessed long ago. All those questions."

"Please," she said. "Who are you?"

"Stop pretending," Sweet said. "All that business of asking what I looked like. Then talking about the fire and telling me I had a Kansas accent. As if you didn't know I was Arthur Kendall."

"But—you can't be!" she exclaimed. "Arthur Kendall died in the fire, they found his body."

"It wasn't mine," Sweet said. "I'm here."

"Then you—you pushed me?" she said. "You?" She gasped. "I know what you look like, and I still see you. I see you practically every day of my life. You have a long nose, and there's a smudge on it. Your beard hides the rest of your face, all except the eyes. They're light blue. The right one is a little bloodshot, and the left one has a dark streak across it, like a tiny rod."

"Real good observation," Sweet said drily. "It's just too bad you happened to come here and identify me."

"We didn't," Esmond said. "We had no idea. You're making this up. Let's forget about it and we'll go away and never mention this—this paranoia of yours."

"I'm not paranoid or even mad," Sweet said, "that's why I have sense enough not to let you go."

"What are you going to do?" Esmond asked nervously.

"Lock you in, set the timer for an hour or so from now, and plug in the soldering iron. I'll wrap it up in paper soaked in kerosene. When the fire starts, I'll be halfway to Boston."

Lucy screamed. "No—not fire! I can't—I won't!" She started to break away, but Esmond grabbed her and held her tightly against him.

"Please," he said quietly. "I'll think of something to help you out, to help us all out."

"It won't be so bad," Sweet said. "The smoke will get you, you'll cough a little and that will be all. And once the fire really gets going, the beams of the root cellar will collapse and the earth will fall in. Nobody will even dream you were here, and you'll be nicely buried. As for the fire, we've had a few incendiaries lately. This will be chalked down to just one more."

"Let us go!" Esmond pleaded. "For God's sake—"

"Get in there before I shoot you both," Sweet said. "You'd rather get locked in with the hope of getting out, wouldn't you? You don't want to be shot down right now, do you? Let me have your ignition key. Just drop it on the floor, and step inside the root cellar."

Ten minutes later, driving the Esmond car through a back street, sitting low, with the sun visor down for extra concealment, Sweet wished that he could have given them more comfort than just the illusory hope that somehow they could survive.

There was, however, no possibility of escape. Without tools, and there were none in the root cellar, you couldn't break down that three-inch door. With a pen knife, you might cut through it in the course of a week. With a pen knife, you might hack a hole in the floorboards and reach the floor above, and that, too, would take days.

A little more than an hour, and then death from smoke inhalation. All in all, he was a kindly man and had treated them with compassion. He liked to be liked, and he hoped they'd realize he might have given them a far worse fate.

Sweet drove carefully, within the speed limit. If he was ever questioned, he'd claim he went to Boston by bus. If the bus driver couldn't remember seeing him, it merely showed that he had a bad memory. And why suspect John R. Sweet, a respected Stuarton business man? In fact, why suspect that the Esmonds had ever reached Stuarton, when nobody had even seen them?

Sweet parked their car on a Boston street near the hospital, left the key in the ignition and walked off. When he came back an hour later, the car was gone. Whether it would show up somewhere in the city or whether it would go to an automobile theft ring for a cosmetic job, Sweet did not know. His only risk was that the bodies would be discovered. But the risk was remote, nobody would dig into the mound of earth. And at the time of the fire, Sweet was fifty miles away. . .

Viola was pleased to see him, pleased at his attentiveness.

They returned to Stuarton the next day. Viola remarked that he seemed unusually happy, and he told her it was because he'd had a day off, with her. She smiled in the certainty that he was a good, faithful husband, and had apparently missed her.

"How did you get here, when I had the car?" she asked.

"There are buses," he said. "Remember?"

She was a stupid woman, which was one of the reasons he'd married her. He'd stayed away from anyone clever, who might have picked up clues or sensed something wrong. But Viola accepted him as he was. She had slight interest in his past and asked few questions about it.

On the outskirts of Stuarton he stopped for gas. As usual he was genial, bent on communicating with others and making friends.

"That must have been quite a fire you had yesterday," he said.

"Fire?" the attendant said. "What fire?"

"Nothing. Just something I heard."

Sweet was slightly on edge. The kind of fire he'd set should have flamed high and provoked comment. He told himself he wouldn't mention the fire again, he'd wait for somebody else to bring up the subject.

A state trooper did. He and Sam, the local cop, were waiting at the Sweet house. The trooper made the formal arrest and charged Sweet with attempted arson and attempted homicide.

"Kansas will probably want to extradite," he said, "but the attempt charge ought to hold you here for a while."

"What are you talking about?" Sweet demanded.

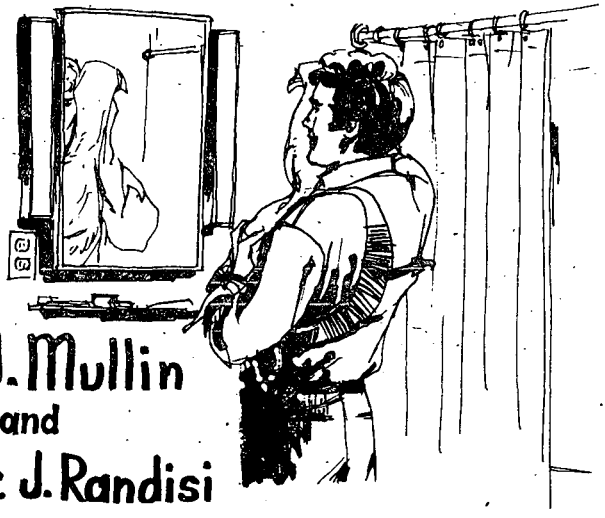
"I guess you don't know," the trooper said. "But when you closed the main switch in the Valery house, it turned on a couple of upstairs lights that shouldn't have been on. The caretaker saw them around evening, went to investigate and smelt kerosene down in the cellar. You know what he found there. Then, when he heard banging at the door of the root cellar, he went down and learned the whole story. Clever guy, this Esmond. A lot cleverer than you."

"Clever? How?"

"He unscrewed the bulb in the root cellar and then shorted the socket with a ball pen. Metal, and plastic to insulate. That killed the whole circuit, so the timer didn't work. No juice, no fire. Never thought of that, did you?"

Is self-illusion part of the game. . . ?

MIRROR IMAGE



by
John J. Mullin
and
Robert J. Randisi

He walks slowly down the darkened street, a well trained killer, secure in the knowledge that he is the best there is in his particular line of work, secure in the knowledge that he can handle anything that might come along at any time.

He can kill as well with his hands and feet as he can with a bullet. Beneath his left arm he wears a 9mm Smith & Wesson which he can draw and fire in the same instant.

The night is damp, but the dampness cannot dim his satisfaction; his job is done. He reaches his hotel and steps confidently into the lobby. He checks his surroundings with steely blue eyes. All seems peaceful. The night clerk, a balding, watery-eyed man, is reading the evening paper with a bored expression. There is a slight cut on his chin, no doubt from his morning shave.

Through the door to his left the killer sees a young couple seated at the bar. Satisfied that no threat to him exists, and quite sure that if one did he would have no problem handling it, he walks toward the elevator and presses the button to summon it.

When the elevator door opens he is glad to see it is empty. He steps in and presses the faded "18."

There is the odor of cigar in the air. He smiles to himself, identifying it by brand. He figures the smoker left the elevator five minutes before, no more, and no less.

The door slides open at 18, revealing the hallway. He walks down it to his apartment thinking it was a good assignment. One dead, plus two agents removed from the scene. He hadn't even had to blow his cover!

What execution!

He opens the door and steps into his apartment soundlessly, expertly drawing his gun. Bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, all the closets. All safe.

Good to be home.

The reflection in the bathroom mirror reveals blond hair, a slim face. He is pleased with what he sees—the cool polished exterior of a cool polished killer. He splashes water on his killer's face and reaches for a towel.

From the corner of his eye he catches the movement of the shower curtain and his superb reflexes take over. He drops the towel and draws his gun with lightning speed.

As his finger starts to squeeze the trigger he feels numb, his body trembles ever so slightly.

No!

The gun hits the floor . . .

I'm the best!

The cold marble tile meets his face . . .

The world has gone crazy!

He cannot move . . .

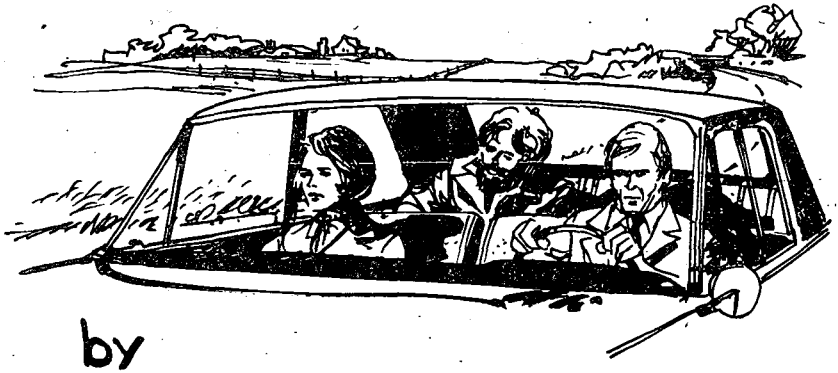
I'm . . . the . . .

A thin man with thick goggles and a protective mask steps nimbly from behind the shower curtain, pocketing a gas gun. The gas acts instantly on the nervous system, destroying it completely.

He steps over the still body on the marble floor, catching his image in the mirror above the sink. I'm the best, he thinks. Absolutely the best there is.

To be truly adventurous one must act within the laws of convention . . .

VARIATIONS ON A THEME



by
STEPHEN WASYLYK

Byer Griffin squinted his eyes against the glare of the early morning sun already reflecting warmly from the sidewalk beneath his feet, regretting for the tenth time since awakening his solitary celebration the night before of his fiftieth birthday. He hadn't wanted to let it pass unmarked, fifty being something of a milestone in a man's life, but he hadn't felt like having company either so he had finished the bottle of champagne by himself. His slight headache and fuzzy tongue reminded

him with every step that he had made a mistake.

Making mistakes was unusual for Byer Griffin.

He turned down the narrow side street that led to the entrance of the branch office of the bank, digging in his pocket for the keys he might need, depending on whether Collins, the elderly guard, had arrived before him.

A poster in the window of the travel agency next to the bank caught his eye and he stopped, looking over the colorful display of brochures that promised excitement, exotic food, and delirious fun to be had in foreign travel.

Griffin sighed. He had been on several Caribbean cruises and one hurried tour through Europe with his wife before she had divorced him, but that wasn't the way he wanted to travel. He had always dreamed of a leisurely odyssey around the world, with unlimited funds and time, spending what he pleased and staying in one place only as long as it suited him—but even though his income was above average he didn't make *that* kind of money. Now, at fifty, he felt the dream was slipping away from him like the years, and he would soon be too old to enjoy it even if by some miracle it became reality.

He sighed again and moved to the bank door, his steps reluctant because he was bored—had been bored ever since they had transferred him to this branch as manager and lettered his name on the door, an action he had first considered to be a promotion and then realized was the hierarchy's way of burying him until retirement.

The door was locked. Evidently Collins hadn't arrived yet.

Griffin inserted his key, pushed when he heard the lock click, and stepped into the cool interior of the bank, noting with surprise that the lights were on and the overnight alarm turned off.

Impossible, he thought. He was last to leave the night before and he was positive he had flicked off the lights and set the alarm.

Griffin locked the door behind him and walked across the carpeted lobby past the tellers' counters and through the waist-high door that partitioned off the clerical section, between the rows of desks to his windowed office at the rear, again noting with surprise that the drapes were drawn. Yet he personally opened those drapes each night.

He hesitated, uneasy that something was wrong.

Then he made another mistake. He went through the open door. Something hard immediately poked him in the ribs. Griffin half

turned, his eyes sweeping across the office, settling on the guard bound and gagged in the chair.

Griffin raised his hands, his mouth dry.

"That was wise," said a soft voice.

Griffin slowly turned his head. The man at his side was a few inches shorter than Griffin's six feet, somewhat obscurely under thirty. The long hair curling down over his forehead and ears, flowing mustache, full beard, tightly fitted denim jacket and faded jeans contrasted sharply with Griffin's thinning hair and conservative suit.

Griffin cleared his throat. "I suppose this is a holdup," he said.

"Now it doesn't take a great brain to come up with that," said the man.

"You're wasting your time," said Griffin. "There is no money available at this hour."

"Ah," said the man, "but there will be at nine when the vault can be opened."

"By that time all the employees will be here and probably a few customers. You won't be able to handle them by yourself."

The man nudged Griffin with the gun. "Do you want to bet?"

"I guess not," said Griffin. The revolver jammed against his ribs was building tension within him and his headache was worse.

"I didn't think you would," said the man. "Now I'll tell you how it will happen. You will let in the next person to arrive. If several come at the same time, you'll let them all in. Then you will lock the door. Everyone else will stay outside."

"They'll see the lights on and they'll knock," said Griffin.

"Let them."

"Eventually they'll call the police."

"Let them," the man repeated.

"Then I suppose you don't intend to get away."

The man smiled. "Oh, I'll get away all right. I'll have you and the next person who comes through that door— Speaking of people coming through the door, I want you to put your hands down now. You can be seen and I wouldn't want to frighten anyone off."

Griffin lowered his hands carefully. "That will happen when they see you holding a gun on me."

"They won't see that. I'll watch you from the office."

"At the risk of seeming argumentative, there will then be nothing to

prevent me from telling them to run and taking off myself."

"Except that I will probably shoot you before you can get through the door and, if I should miss, I still have the guard. However . . ." The man motioned with the gun toward Griffin's big walnut desk. "I don't suppose you noticed that little bag?"

Griffin looked. The brown paper sack was small, well packed and full.

"Look inside," said the man.

Griffin walked to the desk and peered into the open top. Half buried in cotton was a small, wide-mouthed bottle, tightly corked and filled with a colorless liquid.

"Have you ever seen nitroglycerin before?" asked the man.

Griffin shook his head, his mouth drier than ever. "I have only heard how powerful it is."

"And unstable," said the man. "It must be handled with extreme care. There is enough there not only to destroy the bank but the stores on either side and the ones across the street, not to mention all the windows for some distance around. Do you have any more questions?"

Griffin took a deep breath. "Only one," he said. "I can understand that Collins here would die and I would die, and I don't know how many others, but how are *you* going to avoid it?"

The man smiled coldly. "I'm not. I want you to understand that. It is very important."

"I understand," said Griffin. "I thought that this was another routine robbery-hostage scheme but I can see you have added something new."

"In music, it would be called a variation on a theme," said the man. "I assume you will cooperate."

"I never had any other intention," said Griffin. "As far as I'm concerned, all the money in the world isn't worth one person's life. If I could open the vault now and give you the money, I would so so. All I ask is that you hurt no one."

The man patted his shoulder. "I was told you were levelheaded and sensible. My information was correct."

Griffin looked at him closely. "You don't talk like a holdup man."

"Poor grammar and diction were never requirements for a thief," said the man. "You work for a living. I choose to steal. Each job calls on us to do things that we dislike. You may have to turn down some-

one asking for a desperately needed loan. I may have to kill someone."

"I would hardly equate the two," said Griffin drily.

"That depends on your viewpoint," the man said.

Someone tapped sharply at the door. Griffin turned. Standing outside the plate glass was Kristie Lincoln, the new employee who ran the recently installed computer.

"Let her in," said the man, "and remember, lock the door after her. I won't be needing anyone else."

Griffin walked slowly through the bank. For a moment, he wished Kristie hadn't been the one to arrive first and then realized it made no difference at all. If it hadn't been her, it would have been one of the others and none of them deserved *this*.

He opened the door. She stepped through and turned to him, her blue eyes puzzled. "Why is the door locked? Where is Collins?"

Griffin studied her. Kristie was an attractive widow in her early forties with silvered dark hair and a body still trim enough to show off her colorful, well tailored pants suit. She was extremely efficient at her job, which for the time being was programming and operating the computer that was slowly ingesting all of the information kept in the books and files, burying it deep in its bowels of transistors, printed circuits and tape.

Griffin disliked the computer. The chirping noises it made when it was fed, the maddening jerkiness of its memory tapes, the clatter it created when it spewed out information set his teeth on edge. He particularly disliked it because its impersonal efficiency made him feel stupid.

"We have a problem," he said. "I'm sorry to let you walk into it but there is nothing I can do. Just follow me and say nothing."

The startled look in her eyes told him she understood. "All right," she said softly.

Griffin glanced at the clock on the wall. It was ten minutes to nine. As he and the woman walked to his office, he heard someone rap sharply at the door behind them and ignored it. Within the next five minutes, there would be twelve people out there wondering what was going on and there was nothing to prevent them from seeing Griffin and the man opening the vault at nine o'clock.

And then, the police, thought Griffin, for all the good it would do.

The police might conceivably be able to handle a lone man carrying

a gun. The situation would develop into a stand-off, which had happened before and would probably happen again, but that little bottle of nitro added a new dimension.

When they entered the office, the man looked at Kristie approvingly. "Fine," he said. "Just what I needed."

"You could have done without her," said Griffin. "You already have two hostages."

The man smiled. "True, but I need all the leverage I can get. Men are fine but you need a child or a woman if you really want to stop the police. Now I want you to call them. Explain the situation. Tell them to clear the area and to risk nothing. You and I and the woman will leave with the money, using the car at the curb. I don't want to be followed or hindered in any way. I am sure you can make the point that no amount of money is worth the death and destruction that the nitro will cause if they should force me to throw it. And I will throw it if pressed. I want that understood very clearly. To me it is simply a matter of win or lose, and if I must lose I will do it in a way to make them regret it."

"I believe you," said Griffin. "But then what? When can Mrs. Lincoln and I expect to be released?"

"When I am sure I am in the clear. I assure you there is nothing to worry about. Unless the police cause a change, my plans guarantee your safety." He pushed the phone on Griffin's desk forward. "Now make the call."

Griffin dialed. The man who answered said, "Sergeant March."

Griffin explained.

March said, "Hold on, Mr. Griffin. If what you say is true, I'll transfer you to the chief."

The phone made strange little buzzing and clicking noises and Griffin realized that someone was cutting in a tape recorder and then a man's heavy voice said, "This is Chief Hopewell, Mr. Griffin. I'd like you to tell it all to me from the beginning."

Griffin repeated his story.

"Are you sure it is nitro?" asked Hopewell.

"I didn't drop it to find out," said Griffin.

"Do you think he would really use it?"

"I wouldn't want to challenge him," said Griffin. "If I was wrong . . ."

"I understand. Is there any way he can be prevented from using it?"

"None," said Griffin. "He also has a gun."

"What do you recommend?"

"We have no choice. We are speaking only of money that is insured, which is not important. The people involved are."

"I agree," said Hopewell. "There is one more point to be considered. What guarantee do we have that he will eventually release you and the woman?"

"Only his word," said Griffin.

"That isn't good enough."

"What do *you* suggest?"

There was a long silence. "Do you believe him?"

"Yes," said Griffin.

"Then I'll have to go along with you. Will the man talk to me?"

"I'll ask," said Griffin. He extended the phone to the man questioningly. The man took it and listened.

"All right," he said. "I'll spell it out for you so that there are no mistakes."

As he talked, Griffin walked over to Collins. "Are you all right?"

Collins nodded.

Griffin turned to Kristie. "And you?"

She shrugged slightly. "I just want to get it over with."

"So do I," said Griffin.

The man replaced the phone. "We'll keep the line open in case anything turns up."

After a few minutes, several uniformed men arrived and dispersed the people at the front door. Griffin could see a few more urging others from the stores across the street until the area became quiet and deserted.

"Let's go," said the man. He carefully picked up the bag with the nitro and herded Griffin and Kristie out of the office.

Griffin led the way to the vault, spun the dial back and forth and pulled the heavy door open. Inside was a thickly barred gate he opened with a key. The man nodded in satisfaction.

"How much money is in there?" he asked.

"I would say a hundred thousand," said Griffin.

The man chuckled. "A fair reward for a fair risk." He indicated the canvas bags lying on the floor. "Fill one of those."

Griffin went to work, Kristie helping. Finished, he hefted the bag. "Not too heavy," he said. "You shouldn't have any difficulty."

The man chuckled again. "You have it wrong. Why do you think I need you? I handle the gun and the nitro. You handle the money."

Griffin indicated Kristie. "And her?"

"She just rides along and looks pretty," said the man. "Let's go. Don't worry about your guard. Someone will take care of him after we leave."

They walked to the front door, Griffin in the lead.

"Tell me what you see," said the man.

"Nothing," said Griffin.

"All right," said the man. He positioned the bag with the bottle in the crook of his arm, tucked the revolver in his belt and carefully removed the bottle, holding it high. "Just in case they planted a sniper somewhere," he said. "I hope they realize there is no way I can be killed without this bottle hitting the pavement." He nodded to Griffin. "You go first. Place the bag on the floor of the rear seat, then get behind the wheel. The woman will sit beside you. I'll get in the rear."

Griffin felt a tension that caused his muscles to stiffen. He walked woodenly through the door to the car at the curb and followed the man's instructions. Behind the wheel, he glanced at Kristie beside him, her face a mask.

If the police were going to make any sort of move, it would be in this short time span and both of them knew it.

The man closed the car door and rolled down the window, holding the bottle outside the car so that anyone watching could see it plainly.

"Just go straight ahead," he told Griffin. "I warn you to drive carefully. Your imagination can tell you what will happen if someone runs into us."

Griffin started the car. A pair of policemen standing behind a police car impassively watched, another pair stepping out to stop traffic at the intersection.

"Turn left," said the man.

Griffin obeyed as the light turned green and they were on the main street leading out of town.

The man restored the bottle to the bag carefully. "Just keep moving," he said. "No hurry. Obey all signals and keep your eyes open."

Griffin's palms were wet on the wheel.

The street gradually sloped to the bridge crossing the river.

The man had been keeping watch. "No one following," he said.

"Then there is no reason why Mrs. Lincoln can't get out," said Griffin. "She has served her purpose."

"Not quite," said the man. "It is possible the police have a helicopter spotting us. We'll know later."

They crossed the bridge and headed south, moving along at the speed limit, leaving the town behind and heading into open country. Griffin felt a reluctant admiration for the man. The road they were on bisected a long, broad, green valley, running straight for miles, with only flat farmland on either side and no cover ahead where a roadblock could be placed without being spotted long before it was reached.

Kristie sat beside him almost primly, her hands folded in her lap.

"Are you all right?" asked Griffin.

"Yes," she said.

"It seems to me your concern extends somewhat beyond the usual employer-employee relationship," said the man. "Am I right?"

"No," said Griffin.

"You're a fool," said the man, "the lady is very attractive. But then perhaps a husband or wife stands in the way. Is either of you married?"

"No longer," said Griffin.

"Then I don't understand at all," said the man. "I have traveled the world and have met many beautiful women. To meet one unencumbered by a husband, lover or fiancé is a rarity and an opportunity not to be overlooked." He tapped Kristie gently on the shoulder. "Would you like to go along with me?"

"No," said Kristie.

The man smiled. "Perhaps you will change your mind."

He looked through the rear window, then out the sides, peering upward. "I think I'm ready to believe the police were content to let us get away without causing any damage."

The road curved up the side of a mountain. Griffin wondered how far they would go. Once over the crest, they would descend into the next town and he had a feeling the man would stop before then.

As they rounded a curve, the man said, "You will see the entrance to a logging road in that grove of trees up ahead. Take it."

Griffin slowed and turned into it. The car bumped sharply over deep ruts and Griffin's breath caught in his throat. He'd have to do better or this thing would end in one big blast. He slowed the car to a crawl, picking his way along the road, looking for smooth spots, weaving between the big trees that almost met overhead. The road ended in a clearing partially covered with tree stumps. Parked among them was a small, foreign two-seater sports car that had a reputation for quick, easy handling and excellent speed.

"Here we are," said the man. "Everybody out."

It was cool on the mountainside, the wind strong. Griffin saw Kristie shiver. He slipped off his coat and draped it over her shoulders. She pulled it around her gratefully.

The man smiled. "Very commendable. Now take the money and put it in the trunk of the other car. Here are the keys."

Griffin caught the leather case the man tossed to him, pulled the money bag from the sedan and stuffed it into the trunk of the sports car. "What now?" he asked.

"Stand over there," said the man. He lowered the bag with the nitro to the ground, unlatched the hood of the sedan and, watching Griffin warily, reached in, worked for a few minutes, then straightened, holding a small black cylinder.

"Do you know anything about cars?" he asked.

"A little," said Griffin.

"This is the distributor rotor. The car won't run without it." His arm flicked forward, the rotor arching into the trees. "I'll leave you here. I'm sure you'll find the rotor eventually. Replace it and you can drive back. Of course, by that time I'll be long on my way."

"I may never find it," said Griffin.

"Then walk," said the man. "I did when I brought the car here. Someone will pick you up if you're lucky."

Griffin glanced at Kristie's light sandals. "She can't walk very far over rough ground," he said.

"She doesn't have to walk at all," said the man. "She's coming with me."

The wind had suddenly grown colder. "No," said Griffin, moving toward the man. "She doesn't go."

The man's hand went into the bag and came out holding the small bottle. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked.

"She doesn't go," said Griffin stubbornly.

"Why not ask her what she thinks?"

"That isn't necessary," said Griffin, stepping forward.

The man lifted his arm. "You asked for it," he said. The arm flashed forward, throwing the bottle directly at Griffin. Griffin ducked and threw himself flat on the ground. The bottle sailed past and shattered against a stump.

Griffin lifted his head, the taste of dirt in his mouth.

The man was standing there, grinning.

"You have a great deal of nerve," said the man. "More than I gave you credit for. I am happy to see you would fight for the woman but not the money. Now I can tell you that was ordinary glycerin. I didn't expect you to know that commercial nitro is straw-colored. Only the pure is white, difficult to obtain. I told you it was nitro and as long as I handled it that way, you believed it and so did the police. Not that it mattered, really. The police are dedicated to the protection of lives and property and they had no choice but to assume it was real and I was crazy enough to throw it. I suppose you could call it an exercise in basic psychology."

Anger flashed through Griffin's body and he pulled himself into a crouch.

The man caught the expression on his face and the gun was suddenly in his hand. "This was to control you and anyone else in the bank," he said. "It isn't like the nitro. It's real."

Griffin rose to his feet slowly. The man was perhaps five feet away, too far to do anything about the gun and too close for the man to miss.

"She doesn't go," he said.

"Oh, yes, she does," said the man. "The gun says she does."

Griffin shifted his gaze to a spot over the man's shoulder and smiled. "You were too hasty when you threw that bottle," he said.

"I had no further use for it and it really was amusing to see you attempt to dig a hole with your face," said the man.

"I hope you enjoyed your laughter," said Griffin. "You said the bottle was to control the police because one man with a gun can't." Still gazing over the man's shoulder, he nodded slowly. "I don't know how but they followed us here. How are you going to control them now?"

The man stiffened, visibly resisting the temptation to glance over his shoulder.

"NOW!" yelled Griffin.

The man's will power broke. He spun, the gun ready. Griffin dove, one hand clawing desperately for the gun, the other flailing awkwardly into the man's stomach. The man fell backward, Griffin on top, the man's head cracking against a stump and Griffin, pulling the gun free, rolled to one side and came up on his knees, pointing the gun in both hands.

The man lay still.

Griffin took a deep breath, hearing his heart pound and feeling his hands tremble. He inched forward cautiously, reached for the man's wrist and found a strong pulse, aware that Kristie was standing alongside.

Something about the man had been bothering Griffin and he now realized what it was. He reached down and pulled at the man's hair. The wig came off easily, exposing dark hair streaked with grey.

"He didn't talk like a young man," he said. He pulled at the beard and mustache, stripping them from the man's face. The man was middle-aged, with a firm square jaw, a high forehead, an almost handsome face.

"He wanted the police to be looking for someone young," said Griffin. "That explains the jacket and jeans."

He rose to his feet and tucked the gun into his belt. He felt tired, the tension gone now. The feeling he'd had before he entered the bank came back; that fifty was old and he was running out of time. The events of the morning had been only a slight break in the pattern. The fear would be completely erased by the days and the weeks to come and his life would return to normal. Yet, the thought remained that he could have been killed and it would have been all over; it could happen again at any time; there was no way ever to prevent men from stepping into his bank and threatening him. Suddenly Griffin didn't want it any more. None of it; not the routine, the tasteless existence, the possibility of dying, the years passing one after another, none any different from the ones before. He wanted to leave, free himself to go and do as he pleased before it was too late. And he wanted to do it now. The feeling that he *had* to do it now was overpowering.

The sun polished the gleaming finish of the two seater with the bag of money in the trunk.

"I'm leaving," he said abruptly.

Kristie pulled his coat closer around her. "I don't understand."

Griffin waved a hand. "The car. And the hundred thousand. I'm taking them. The man was right. By the time you walk out of here or someone finds you, I will be far away."

She indicated the man. "What about him?"

"Leave him. He'll come around eventually."

"You'll be caught."

"I think not. I'm at least as clever as he is."

"Once he changed his clothes and took off the wig and beard, the police wouldn't be able to identify him. They'll know you."

"I can change."

She frowned a little. "Why? If you're going to leave me here with an injured man, at least I ought to know why."

Griffin looked at her. Her face showed neither shock nor disappointment, only a gentle curiosity, and Griffin suddenly felt that he had to tell someone, that he had to leave someone behind who would understand. He explained as well as he could.

"I see," she said when he finished. "I know exactly what you mean. I felt the same way when I reached forty. What I don't understand is why you're willing to give up everything on such a hasty decision." She indicated the man on the ground. "To be a successful thief takes time and planning. How long do you think he worked on it? Weeks, probably. And if he had just left instead of making an issue of taking me with him, he probably would have never been caught. Yet, in spite of his planning and the risks he took, he would have made only a hundred-thousand dollars. It may have been enough for him. It would hardly be enough for you. How long would it last? A few years? Then what would you do?"

Griffin stared at her. "I don't know what you're driving at."

"I've heard many people say that if you are going to steal, steal big. Would you prefer a million dollars, with little risk and an almost foolproof chance of getting away with it?"

Griffin rubbed his jaw. "Who wouldn't?"

"Exactly," she said. "Consider this. If you take the money now, you can be accused of being a co-conspirator in an armed robbery because the police took your word that the nitro was real and the penalty for armed robbery is a great deal more severe than for embezzlement."

"Just where does embezzlement fit in?" asked Griffin carefully.

"The computer," she said. "All the entries I make, all the programming, has to be approved by you. You know the system, the accounts, the details. I can do little that you wouldn't spot in a short time. But you have the knowledge and the authority. With your approval, I can divert funds, set up a dummy account. Working together, we can skim off as much money as we please in a very short time. You know the usual methods of embezzlement require months, even years, before you can accumulate a sizeable amount which increases the risk and the likelihood of getting caught. The computer has changed that. Even if we are caught, we simply make restitution and probably get probation. If we are not, we will be in Brazil or somewhere else where there is no extradition before the bank knows what has happened. If we find we are compatible, we can stay together. If we don't get along, we split the money and separate."

Griffin stared at her, then laughed. "You must have been thinking about it for some time."

"A long time," she admitted. "But as I told you, I couldn't manage it alone."

"And if I agree?"

"First, we return the hundred thousand and turn the man in. You will be the manly hero and I will be the modest heroine. I don't have to point out that everyone will have implicit faith in us in the future. We can get together and work out the details. It shouldn't take longer than six months. We'll spend the winter in Brazil where it will be nice and warm."

Griffin thought for a moment. Embezzlement was nothing new. But with the computer . . .

He smiled. She seemed more attractive than ever.

"All right," he said. "But first we put an end to this. I'll look for the rotor. We'll have to use the sedan because we'll have to take him with us. He won't fit in the sports car."

"Why bother?" she asked. "I can take the two seater and bring back the police. You can wait here. You'll have the gun when he comes to."

Griffin nodded. "I suppose that is as good a solution as any." He handed the keys to her. "Hurry back."

He watched her wheel the car around and disappear down the road. The man on the ground stirred and sat up slowly, holding his head. Griffin pulled the gun from his belt and held it loosely at his side.

The man looked around. "Where is the woman?"

"Gone for the police," said Griffin.

"In the small car?"

"It was quicker than looking for the rotor."

The man smiled and rubbed his head gingerly. "My head aches but I do remember that you put the money in the trunk. Did you take it out before she left?"

"What for?" asked Griffin.

The man started to laugh and stopped suddenly, groaning. "Lord, that hurts. What makes you think she'll be back?"

"Why not?" asked Griffin.

"There are a hundred thousand reasons," said the man.

It took Griffin a moment to understand. "I see," he said.

"*Now* you see," said the man. "Where did you think my information to set this up came from? I wasn't forcing her to go with me. Everything was planned so that if anything went wrong she would not be suspected. As a gentleman, I was keeping my part of the agreement. She must have been quite upset when you played the hero, but I'm sure she's happy now. She has it all instead of just half."

He probed his head with his fingers, found a tender spot and winced. "I hope you realize that you are going to appear very stupid. How did she con you into letting her take the car and the money?"

How? Griffin smiled. By using the greatest sales appeal in the world—fulfillment of a dream. But there was no way he could explain that.

"I'll look for the rotor," he said.

"Do that," said the man. "You'll never see her again."

Griffin shrugged. Suddenly, he realized he really didn't care.

Her idea of using the computer in an embezzlement scheme intrigued him. As the man had said, in music it would be called a variation on a theme and if he learned how that infernal, impersonal collection of electronic components operated, he could make it play his tune.

The challenge gave him a purpose in life, something to look forward to each day.

The wind blew cold and he wished she had left his coat.

But the thought of a million dollars waiting for him was enough to keep him warm.

Be slow to tempt the Fates . . .

ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

by BRUCE M. FISHER

He was strictly a break-and-entry man, he told himself, but he had done what was necessary to make the murder look like the work of a sex maniac. Three ravaged female bodies had been found during the past year. One more might spur the police to catch that lunatic strangler. But his main reason had been to direct suspicion away from his own particular line. He didn't even feel like a murderer, so complete was his assurance that another would be blamed.

It was a large estate. From the busy highway a broad black-topped driveway led to the big copper-roofed stone house in the restricted building area five miles from town. The grounds were beautifully landscaped—shade trees, flowers, the whole bit. Behind the house, a narrow pathway wound through a hardwood grove, over a hill and down a gentle slope to this hut and the manmade lake nearby. His panel truck was hidden in a tiny lane off the gravel road beyond the lake.

An hour ago, in the dusk, he had skirted the lake and strode confidently up the pathway, empty suitcases giving him respectability, a plausible lie ready on his lips. Neither the back doorbell nor the brass knocker in front had brought the whisper of a footfall in answer. He had expected as much, having studied the house and its occupants carefully.

The man, woman, and their teenage daughter invariably went out on Friday evenings and didn't return until midnight or later. They had a daytime gardener to keep the place in trim but no servants. The house was in darkness. There was a feeling of emptiness about it, and this, though it was not always a reliable guide, convinced him that he was alone on the premises.

Locked doors were no proof against him. He entered and set the suitcases down, eager with gloves and flashlight to explore for the richest and most compact articles. Then the lights came on blindingly.

He had to marvel at his coolness. He neither whirled in surprise nor leaped to the nearest window for escape. He turned slowly, smiling his pleasant, innocent smile, and, seeing nothing more dangerous than a sleepy fifteen-year-old girl in a blue dressing-gown, he had pulled an envelope from his pocket. She must not live to relay his description to the police.

"Perhaps you can help me, Miss," he said, as if he had every right to be there, as if he were an old but somewhat puzzled friend of the family. "I find that I—but here, read for yourself." And while his left hand extended the letter, his right fist drove upward with smashing force.

So much for the element of surprise. And so much for the house. Its contents must wait for another time. He must get away from it and mingle in bright busy places . . .

He thought he had killed her with his fist back in the house and his

first impulse had been to dump her in the lake and cloud the reason for her death, but the warmth of her body over his shoulder, the flapping of her dressing-gown, and the sudden thrashing of her legs as he hurried down the pathway had inspired other ideas. He had carried her into the hut.

He grinned in the darkness. She had put up quite a fight, but she hadn't had a chance against his weight and strength. He'd had to strangle her afterward to shift the suspicion from him. He must never wear this brown sweater or the grey pants again. Some fibres might be caught in her fingernails.

He mopped his face with his sleeve and placed a cigarette between his lips. He reached for his lighter and rubbed his thumb over the embossed initials of his name. He had got this expensive item on a previous job, though it bore different and engraved initials then. In this line, you had to be everything from silversmith to wood refinisher.

He caught himself and tapped the lighter on the table in self-reproach. Stale smoke or cigarette ash might contradict the evidence he had set up if the real sex criminal was thought to be a non-smoker.

He flicked his flashlight on for a last look around, glanced at the huddled form of the dead girl, then opened the door of the hut and stared out into the star-relieved darkness. He could not see the house because of the trees and the intervening hill. Swiftly, grasping the empty suitcases, he glided through the grove, skirted the lake, and found his truck.

He put the gloves and flashlight into the glove compartment, started the engine, and backed onto the gravel road before switching on the headlights. He pushed the cigarette lighter in, turned on the radio, lit his cigarette, and inhaled luxuriously. The night was a loss, but that happened sometimes, and other nights would make up for it. He drove toward town, in a hurry to be seen in reliable company.

He parked on a side street and went to the nearest theater, to chat with the cashier, but the booth was closed for the evening. At his favorite poolroom, he found all the tables busy and made do with casual nods to acquaintances. The bowling alley was also crowded. He had a sandwich and a cup of coffee in a dingy restaurant and insulted the waitress there, just to be remembered, but she was used to insults and ignored him. The brisk woman at the cash register took his money and shoved a book of paper matches back with his change without looking

up. He used one of the matches to light another cigarette and strode out.

Not one of those people, he knew, would actually remember him. He looked down at his shoes and decided they were due for half-soling. A little ruckus about poor workmanship would settle the issue in his mind. Greg's Shoe Repair remained open until eleven o'clock on Friday nights.

His shoes went through a tiny opening in the grille over the scarred counter and disappeared into a back room where a solitary stitcher yammered. A ticket was shoved at him and a heavy voice slurred, "Fi'mints-avaseat."

He sat on the one bench beside a bespectacled middle-aged gentleman with a pleasant face and quiet manner, the kind you hardly noticed unless he spoke to you. This one made conversation. "They must take in quite a bundle here."

"Yes, I suppose they do."

"I always wanted to be a cobbler," the man said. "Not a shoe salesman or a shoe rebuilder, a cobbler. Shoes nowadays are built on universal lasts, turned out wholesale, as if each man's foot was the same shape and bone structure as the next man's."

"I don't know what you mean exactly."

"You don't! My dear young friend, in the old days shoes were *built* in much the same way that a harness-maker builds a horse collar. He measured with care and precision, and determined the exact shape and slope before even thinking of laying awl to leather. Yes, a true cobbler built a shoe or boot of great comfort and durability—"

"Cobbler?" Half listening, he placed a cigarette in his mouth and extended the pack. "Smoke, sir?"

The gentleman's hand rose in protest. "Thank you, no. I never indulge. Sorry."

"That's all right." He reached for his lighter, stopped, and leaned forward to accept a light from the wooden match that the gentleman struck for him. He puffed, and said, "Thanks."

"Sorry if I bored you," the gentleman said, rising. "I often forget myself thinking of old times. But I must be off home now or Ethel will be furious." He bowed slightly with old-fashioned courtliness and departed.

His shoes were ready. The instant he paid, the wicket was closed.

No sooner had he tied his shoelaces than he was ushered quickly out into the warm summer night. He rocked on the new soles to make them flexible.

His cigarette had gone out.

He reached for his lighter. It wasn't in his pocket.

He patted his pockets in a frenzy. His wallet was there but not the lighter. Cold sweat broke out on his brow. Where had he had it last?

The hut! He distinctly remembered tapping the table in the hut with his lighter because he had nearly made the mistake of smoking there. He hadn't handled it since!

He was not superstitious but it suddenly seemed as if the Fates were pitted against him. The cigar lighter in his truck, the matches in the restaurant, the match in the shoe repair shop. He could accept the first incident, even the second, but the third, on this particular night, was beyond the bounds of coincidence. His initials on that lighter would hang him!

He sped down the street to his truck, leaped in, and tore out of town, down the gravel road to the lake. He ran through the grove, stopped, remembered his flashlight in the glove compartment, and ran on without it. He knew exactly where his lighter was, on the corner of the trestled table.

He yanked open the door of the hut and began feeling around in the darkness. He felt over the table top and along the benches, the breath rasping in his throat, his heart pounding in his ears.

He was down on his knees, scrabbling about the floor, when they found him, the two policemen and the anxious father whose home-checking phone call had gone unanswered—the deadly calm father whose piercing eyes detected a tuft of brown wool between his daughter's death-clenched fingers. Under the glare of their powerful flashlights, he knew the game was up for all time.

Several miles away, a quiet little man examined a silver-plated cigarette lighter and smiled to think that he had not lost his touch. It was all a matter of being ahead of the quarry. To refuse a cigarette in order to have a match ready to forestall a damning search for a lighter was being ahead. If that stupid young man hadn't had his wallet under his hand in his left trouser pocket, he'd have got that too.

To defer judgment is to court worry . . .

LAST OF THE BIG-TIME SPENDERS

by Duffy Carpenter

"Are you going to hang someone tonight, Daddy?"

That's T.J., the six-year old. Of my three children, he is the youngest, and the only member of the clan who is impressed with my being a Small Claims Court referee. Unpaid, of course. I earn my daily bread as a marketing guy for a major corporation.

"Para-legal sounds like you jump out of airplanes to me." That's Meggin, the twelve-year-old-going-on-fifty-four.

"I'm not a judge, T.J. I just settle disputes over small amounts of money below $1,000. As for you, Miss Smarty Pants, 'para' means 'along side of.' I work *along side of* the courts to help the judges' case load."

"Well, you're not even a lawyer," Meggin said with some petulance. She hates to be corrected. An inheritance from the maternal side, no doubt.

"I don't have to be a lawyer under the new state law, dear. I have an MBA and lots of business experience, and I took a six-week course and an exam, didn't I?"

"Show her your badge, Dad," T.J. prompted me. He loves the little "Officer of the Court" disk I carry in my wallet. So do I, but I don't admit it.

"Where's David?" I asked my wife, who ignored me. She was still mad at me, and was giving me the silent treatment. The argument is too silly to relate. If you're married, you'll understand; if you're not, you never will, and count your blessings. Meggin, ever aware of her surroundings, filled the void.

"Davey's in a school play and had to leave early for rehearsals," she reported.

I was beginning to think that my nine-year-old didn't exist. I never see him at the breakfast table anymore. Since Small Claims is in session at night for the public's convenience, I'm not home for dinner on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'm not home on Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays either, due to business commitments. That should give you a clue to the cause of the frostbite I'm getting from the adult lady at the other end of the table, known to the world as Mrs. Jeff Corbett, nee Sarah (Sally) Barnes.

"Well," I said, getting to my feet, "if I don't see Davey with my own eyes pretty soon, I'm going to report him to the Missing Persons Bureau." I chuckled. No one else did.

I got a kiss from Sally that was in the "for the sake of the children" category and left for work.

It was ironic that my unnoticed jest about Missing Persons was the basis of the third case I heard that evening in room 407-A at the Municipal Building downtown. The docket read "Acme Investigators *vs.* Crimmer."

Crimmer, Amos, defendant, was a beefy guy around fifty who, I

would have guessed, was perpetually rumpled. He certainly was that night. The plaintiff, Calvin Hobbs, looked and dressed casual, like a golf pro. He didn't look like a private detective to me, but he was, and had the credentials to prove it.

I started off. "Gentlemen, before we begin, I want to reiterate some points for the record. You have mutually agreed to waive a hearing before a judge and to submit this to arbitration before a referee. I'm sure the Clerk of the Court explained, Mr. Crimmer, that if you choose arbitration, my decision will be binding and final. With a judge, you have the right to appeal to a higher court. With a referee, you don't. You both understand that?"

They nodded agreement. I don't normally start that way, but this case had over $600 in contention; $672.50, to be exact. The limit to the amount you can sue for in Small Claims is $1,000, but most cases, at least my cases, involve sums in the $50 to $200 neighborhood. This case was my biggest so far, and I wanted to make damn sure it went smoothly. Another wrinkle in the pattern was that this was the first time I heard a case where a company was suing an individual. All the others were consumers suing retailers over irons that didn't work or shirts lost by a laundry. This was a reverse action, and might even prove interesting.

"Well, Mr. Hobbs, it's customary for the plaintiff to start off, so go right ahead."

"Thank you, Mr. Corbett," the detective said, opening a manila file and resettling himself in the chair across the table from me. Crimmer sat on the opposite side too, but he put two feet between himself and Hobbs, as if to underscore his disagreement. Hobbs spoke slowly and distinctly. He had obviously spent many hours giving testimony on witness stands.

"The amount in question, $672.50, is money representing fees and expenses incurred in an investigation undertaken by me, Calvin Hobbs, D.B.A., Acme Investigators, operating under state license number 173 . . ."

"Excuse me, Mr. Hobbs," I interrupted. "You must know that Small Claims is an informal court, so we can dispense with all the documentation. I don't think Mr. Crimmer is questioning your credentials."

"I'm questioning the expenses he ran up cruising around the damn country, that's what I'm questioning."

"All right, Mr. Crimmer"—I smiled condescendingly as I said it —"you'll get your chance. Now what's the crux of this matter, Mr. Hobbs?"

Hobbs looked a little miffed at having his recitation cut off, but I've had sea-going lawyers start that quasi-legal stuff before, and I was getting expert at stopping it quickly.

"If that's the way you want it, Mr. Corbett." Hobbs said it hesitatingly, as if I had made a grave error, but he was willing to sustain it in spite of his feelings. "On Monday, March 13, Mr. Crimmer came to my offices in the Grillon Building and hired me to trace his wife, Lillian, who had been missing since Sunday."

"Was a contract signed, Mr. Hobbs?"

"No, Mr. Corbett, but an oral agreement was made, which I believe constitutes a contract."

"I'm aware of that, sir. Go on."

He took a sheet of paper from his folder and laid it on the table in front of me. It was a detailed statement of charges totalling $672.50.

"The charges stated there can be documented with receipts and my expense diary."

I picked up the statement and studied it. "You were on the case for six days for a total of $450.00 in fees. And the rest is for expenses, I see. The largest expense was $150 for a flight to Bridgeport, Connecticut. What does the $50 'miscellaneous' charge stand for? The rest is highly detailed."

"That's a euphemism for smear money. You know, to buy information. It's all spelled out in my report to Mr. Crimmer."

He went into the file again and came out with several typed sheets held together with a staple.

"Here's a copy for the record."

He put the sheets down on the table, but I left them there.

"We don't keep records, Mr. Hobbs, and unless it is germane, I don't think I'll have to read it. Now, Mr. Crimmer, let's hear from you. Why do you refuse to pay the bill?"

"Because I don't like to be taken for a sleigh-ride. Sure, I hired the man, but when he mentioned expenses, I assumed he meant local stuff, you know, gas for his car and things. I didn't plan on him taking a vacation in Connecticut on my money."

"All right, that's a start," I said, going to work. "You dispute the ex-

penses, which we'll put aside for the moment. You do agree to the fee?"

"Not six days' worth, I don't. I run a small garage for a living, and money don't grow on trees. I hired him on a Monday, and on Wednesday I called him to stop looking, and ended up talking to one of those recorder things. The voice, his voice, said he was out of the office and to leave a message and I did. I said he's off the case. That's two days' work, as far as I'm concerned."

"Did you get the message, Mr. Hobbs?"

"How could I? I was in Bridgeport. I run a one-man office, sir. When I got back on Saturday night I was shocked to hear what was on the recorder."

"O.K., let's see if we can get some points of agreement here. You agree that at least two days' charges are valid, Mr. Crimmer?"

"Yes, that's $150, not $672.50."

"True. Now let's arbitrate. Did you tell Mr. Crimmer that you were going to Bridgeport, Mr. Hobbs?"

"I tried to call him from the airport, but didn't get an answer. The lead was a hot one, so I jumped onto the next plane. Hell, I would have been *saving* him money in the long run. I was hot on her trail and I figured I could have nabbed her. That's the way detective work goes, Mr. Corbett. You tumble onto something and you have to move fast or you end up with a cold trail and weeks of dog work. As for taking a vacation and a joy ride, I can think of a lot nicer places to go than Bridgeport, Connecticut. Hell, he had $10,000 riding on my finding her, so I used my own discretion. That's not out of line with industry practice."

"Ten thousand dollars? Where does that come in?"

"You put the point about the $10,000 in there?" Crimmer looked angrily at the report.

"Certainly I did," Hobbs said to me, not his adversary. "Look, Mr. Corbett, my regular fee is $150 a day. Mr. Crimmer is quite a haggler, and he offers me a deal. He tells me his wife took off with $10,000 from a strongbox he had in his home. He offered me a bounty of ten percent if I got the money back. I figured it didn't sound like a tough case, so I cut my price in half to $75 a day. O.K., so I'm out as far as the bounty is concerned and I'm also out an extra $450 I would have made if I charged full rate. I'm not complaining on that score. A deal is

a deal and I'm stuck with it, but I'm not going to eat the whole loss." He turned to Crimmer. "Didn't you read the report? And why shouldn't I have mentioned the $10,000?"

"What I own is my business and why should I read the report? It would have been a waste of time."

"I'm the one who wasted the time," Hobbs said. "For all I know, there never was $10,000, and you were using that as bait to get my price down."

"There *was* $10,000!" Crimmer said, raising his voice.

I could see this getting heated, so like a good referee I broke the clinch and sent them to neutral corners.

"Gentlemen, suppose we just deal with the facts. How did you proceed with the search, Mr. Hobbs?"

"I dug around locally on Tuesday, talking with neighbors. She didn't seem to have any close friends, and I came up empty. Then, on Wednesday, I got lucky out at the airport. A woman of her description had bought a through ticket for Bridgeport, Connecticut, earlier that morning, so I hopped the next plane."

I turned to Crimmer. "What prompted you to call the search off on Wednesday, sir? Were you dissatisfied with Hobbs in any way?"

"No, but there was no sense in him looking for a dead woman." He said it as if he were commenting on the weather. No change in expression or tone of voice. My mouth must have dropped or something, because he added, "I guess you didn't know that. They found her body over in Mituate in a vacant lot. If I don't look remorseful it's because I'm not. Lillian was a tramp, always was a tramp, only this time her boyfriend, whoever he was, liked ten thousand more than he liked her."

I was still stunned, and said a dumb thing. "She was murdered?"

"Strangled, and the money was gone. It may sound callous, Mr. Corbett, but I've lived with that hussy for twelve years and put up with a lot. This time, it wasn't any ten-day fling with the first pair of trousers to flatter her. She cleaned out the money and was going for good."

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Crimmer. When did this happen?"

"The Mituate cops say sometime Tuesday night, and don't waste any pity on me. The cops called me early Wednesday morning after they identified her from things in her purse. That's when I called Hobbs."

Well, there it was, in my lap. It was as ugly a case as they ever heard over in the Criminal Court, and even stickier. I had a feeling that Hobbs had acted impetuously, but in good faith. It seemed to me that he had used a key phrase, "industry practice;" that is, what is normally done in the course of a private investigation. What were its limits and excesses? I honestly didn't know. A referee is supposed to hand down a decision then and there, but you have a right to reserve judgment, and I did so.

"This is much more complex than I had originally thought, gentlemen, and I am going to defer a finding for one week."

The men looked at each other and then back at me. Both got to their feet. "Shall we come in at the same time?" Hobbs wanted to know, and I said yes. When they had left, I collected the charge statement and Hobbs' report for reference, and called the next case.

Two hours, or, more graphically, two cases (on non-delivery of furniture and an hysterical woman whose hair had turned out the wrong color in a beauty salon) later I was through for the night. Well, not quite through. I had called the Central Police Headquarters in the far wing of the Municipal Building. Lieutenant Bill Donnagan wasn't in, but he was expected at ten o'clock, so I took my time walking through the deserted halls to his office.

Donnagan is a tough old bird with a growl in his voice and a reputation for gruffness bordering on the rude. A while back, I did him a good turn and gained a friend. A gruff one to be sure, but a friend all the same.

"I hope you're not playing detective again, Jeff," he greeted me as I entered his office. He has two suits, to my knowledge; an old seersucker for summer and a grey nondescript thing for winter. The hat never changed, and never left his head in anyone's memory. This was early April, and the grey suit looked like it would welcome its coming vacation.

"No, I had enough of that on the cigar case last summer. But I do need some professional advice about how detectives work."

"They don't, didn't you know? We just wait for stoolies to come in."

"Seriously, Bill. You can help me with a touchy one." I went on to explain Hobbs' taking off on a wild goose chase without having cleared it with a client.

When I was through, he sat back and put his feet on the desk.

"With a private dick, you never know. Some are square and some are crooked. This guy Hobbs hasn't been around this town long enough to get his nose dirty. Runs a one-man shop, doesn't he?" I nodded. "Well, if he flew to Miami or Vegas, I might say he was boozing up the expense sheet. But not a small city back East, Jeff. It sounds legit to me. In fact, the same thing happened to me years ago. I trailed a bird all the way to New York on a train and caught seven kinds of hell from my senior officer because it wasn't authorized. But then, *I caught* my man. This Hobbs was supposed to be some kind of hotshot, but I guess he's a dope—or maybe just naive."

I got to my feet and started to leave. "I really hate to sock it to a guy who just lost his wife and $10,000 to boot. It was probably his life savings."

"What ten Gs?" Donnagan wanted to know. I told him the rest of the story, or rather all of it.

"Crimmer," he muttered. "Sure, Lillian Crimmer. Strangled over in Mituate last month. Mituate TWX'd us and we called the husband." He turned and pulled a clipboard from a row of hooks behind his head and flipped through the pages. "Here it is. There was no mention of her carrying $10,000."

"She wasn't. It was taken from her by a lover or someone."

Donnagan put the board back on its hook without looking, his feet still on the desk. It must have been a practised exercise. I would have broken my neck trying it.

"Does something arouse your suspicion, Lieutenant?"

"No, my young fellow, and I've got enough problems in this town without borrowing any from Mituate."

On the way home that night and at my regular job all the next day, the germ of something inexplicable was starting to sprout in my brain. Even when I was home that Wednesday night, I had plenty of time to think about it, since Sally was still fighting the cold war.

Question #1: Why didn't Crimmer tell the Mituate cops about the ten thousand?

Question #2: Even if he hadn't cared about his wife, would a man who had just been informed of her murder automatically call to cancel a search for her as his first order of business? Just to save $75?

Nobody is that organized. Or that cheap.

There were other things that bothered me, like if the late Mrs.

Crimmer was a bit of a strumpet, what was she doing with access to his safe deposit box? Add, for that matter, what was he doing with $10,000 in cash? That's a bad way to keep savings, when it could be earning a dividend in an account.

All this was running around my brain as I sat alone in the den around 10 P.M. Sally was ignoring the fact that I had come home early from a planning meeting at the office. On an impulse, I picked up the phone and dialed the Municipal Building. When I got Donnagan on the line, I said, "Could you check and see if Crimmer reported his wife to Missing Persons?"

"Oh-oh," the Lieutenant's voice said mockingly, "I could tell something was biting you when you came in here the other night. Why don't you leave it to the police, Jeff? Hell's bells, you wouldn't want some joker from another town messing in your business."

"I'm not 'messing' with Mituate business, Bill. I want to know if he reported her disappearance to the local police here in town."

"Suppose he didn't. Lots of people don't. What do you think they do down in BMP, send out a troop of Boy Scouts every time someone is overdue for dinner? Sure they check the morgue and hospitals, and that's about it. Jeff."

"Would you check anyway? As a favor?"

He told me to hang on and put me on hold. In seconds, his voice came back on. "Okay, Sherlock, she was reported missing at 11:30 P.M. on March 14th. Satisfied?"

"No. She was missing on the 12th, a Sunday, maybe earlier. Why did he wait two days to use a free service when he hired a professional tracer just the day before on Monday?"

"How do I know?"

I went on and explained my other suspicions, about the access to cash kept in a safe-deposit box, and calling Hobbs the minute he heard she was dead. "Don't you think we ought to make Mituate aware of these facts, Lieutenant?"

"This may come as a surprise, Jeff, but Mituate is not a one-dog town and it has a very capable detective division. Don't you think they've checked Crimmer seven ways up and down? The first prime suspect is the spouse in cases like this." From the way my wife had been acting all week, I could see what he meant.

"Now do me, Mituate, and yourself a favor and forget about it. You

may not know it, but most police departments are swamped with people who think they have solved crimes. Most of them are little old ladies with nothing else to do, by the way."

On that note, I hung up and took his advice. I also decided to award Hobbs the entire amount when next Tuesday came around.

The next evening, before my Thursday-night hearings started, I vowed to remain uninvolved and aloof and stick to the business of solving small-claims hassles. About midway through my last case, there was a knock on my door, and a patrolman in uniform came in quietly, handed me a note, and left.

I excused myself from the weighty problem of whether or not Mrs. Anna Collucci was entitled to a new pair of shoes, even though the shoe-store owner now sitting on her right had insisted at the point of sale that she needed size ten and not nine. The note read:

Corbett:

Congratulations. You solved another one.
Drop by after your session for details.

Donnagan

I was so excited and anxious to learn how they had tripped him, I gave Mrs. Collucci the privilege of getting $5 off on her next pair of shoes. She was still shouting like an Italian version of a banshee as I walked quickly away from room 407-A toward the police wing.

Donnagan was coming out of his office as I walked up.

"Old lady, huh?" I chided him. "Sherlock, huh? I knew I had a hunch about that guy."

"So did I, although I didn't tell you at the time. Come on, we have him down in the lock-up. We're holding him for a Mituate pick-up."

We took the elevator down to the cell block and, as we passed through the guard desk, Donnagan was saying, "Damn shame, too. I do the work and Mituate gets a felony murder credit. Well, one hand washes the other."

"We para-legals would call it *quid pro quo* and all that." I was feeling pretty peppy about my coup and was showing it. "What finally tripped him up, Lieutenant?"

"Here's the cell. Ask him yourself."

We came up to pen 10 and I looked between the bars at the man

sitting on the cot. He looked tired and worried and not at all like a natty golf pro, much less a private detective.

"Hobbs? Hobbs did it?"

"That's right, Hawkshaw. We've got a confession out of him. He doesn't look like he wants to talk to you. Come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee to show the city's appreciation."

All the way to the coffee shop, I was numb with confusion. "This is crazy, Lieutenant. I thought Crimmer did it. What did Hobbs have to gain?"

"Ten G's is a big inducement. We didn't know Hobbs was in the picture until you told me about the lawsuit. As I told you, Mituate went after the husband first, but he came up with a solid alibi. They've been concentrating all their time looking for a mythical lover."

"Mythical? But Crimmer said . . ."

"One of the first things you learn in police work, Jeff, is that people are always saving face. A guy's wife is missing, so right away she's a tramp. Of course, he didn't bother to tell us that he made life so miserable for her that she just walked out alone. Crimmer runs a crummy little garage, and yet he has accumulated ten G's in cash. What does that suggest to you?"

"Illegal money?"

"No, he's clean. But he is a miser, and that type isn't much fun to live with. If a guy learns that his wife has just been murdered and his first idea is to save some money by cancelling a detective, I'd say he was a first-class penny pincher."

"All right, I can buy that. He certainly haggled during the hearing. But why should Hobbs expose himself by suing Crimmer?"

"He was covering himself. If he didn't demand to be paid, Crimmer might have become suspicious once he figured out the fact that only the detective and the mythical lover knew about the money. Eliminate the lover story and who do you have? Hobbs. He got the case on Monday, so he had a hot trail. He catches up with her in Mituate, does her in and takes the money. Then he goes flying off back East on a supposed wild-goose chase. He also gave himself an alibi until I gave Mituate the lowdown on Hobbs. They went to work and placed him in that town Tuesday night."

"But that's highly circumstantial, isn't it?"

"It was until this morning. The Bridgeport cops canvassed all the

banks in Fairfield County and came up with a $10,000 deposit made by a James Morgan on the day Hobbs arrived there. The assistant manager of the bank is flying out for positive identification, but from his description on the phone, it's Hobbs all right."

"Well, I'll be damned," I said, shaking my head. "I guess I'd make a lousy detective, huh? I thought it was the husband, and the real killer was right under my nose."

"Oh, you have the instinct, Jeff. All you need is the direction. Remember, crime takes all types."

"I know," I said woefully. "The only trouble is, I'm getting to meet every damn type."

In the heart of the matter lies the truth . . .

THE MELTING MAN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Jerry Roman remembered the conversation he'd had with Ned Speckly on the evening the gallery opened. They'd been standing in one corner, admiring a colorful abstract by Dubuffet, both a little high on the catered cocktails Jerry had ordered for the occasion.

"You've got a great little place, Jer," Ned told him, looking out through the tinted glass at the small exterior sculpture garden. "I'd be proud to have a showing here."

Jerry was not so high that he would miss an opportunity to get a commitment from a sculptor of Ned Speckly's renown. "Can I sign you up right now?"

Ned stirred his drink with one finger, absently, as if weighing the possibility. "Oh, I think not, Jer. I don't really have enough good stuff for a one-man show. But I'm working on a single large piece now that has me quite excited. I'm calling it *Nam*, which is a river in Thailand, but is also *Man* spelled backwards. It's a life-size study of a male nude. I think when it's finished it'll represent the whole evolutionary process."

Jerry Roman was excited by the prospect. If his gallery could be the first to show a new work of Speckly's, it would be a real coup. "What medium are you using—clay or stone?" He knew that Ned sometimes used both, even doing final life-sized works in clay, while most sculptors used it only for small works or preliminary models.

"Neither, actually. *Nam* is being done in a new sort of plastic material I've only recently heard about. It's malleable at temperatures only slightly higher than 100°, and can actually be worked with bare hands at about 125°. I think it gives a nice natural gloss to the finished work."

"Look, Ned, could you have it finished in three weeks?"

"Probably. Why?"

"We're having an invitational contest, with a nice fat award. Something to get the gallery off the ground and give us publicity. I'd like you to enter *Nam*."

"Be happy to, if it's ready. What's the top prize?"

"Five thousand outright, or a ten-thousand-dollar purchase prize."

Ned Speckly seemed both pleased and eager. Presently their conversation drifted into other matters, and they were joined by a scattering of the guests.

"Great little gallery, Jerry," someone said. "Best of luck with it."

"Just what this town needs," another man told him.

Jerry Roman sucked in the aura of anticipated success through much of the evening, hoping only that these wealthy and opinion-making people would later come to buy as they now came to drink and admire. The Roman Gallery had been a gamble from the start, with every loose cent of his cash sunk into it.

Later in the evening he found himself once more at Ned Speckly's

side. The sculptor's face was lined with the weight of the cocktails he'd consumed, his thick black hair was mussed, and Jerry heard him mutter something about his wife.

"How is Fran?" he asked. "I thought you might bring her along tonight."

Speckly lurched drunkenly against a small plaster figure, nearly upsetting it. "Fran's a no-good—" He righted himself with effort. "She's probably with Carlton right now."

"Is that still going on?" Jerry asked, trying to sound light. Carl Carlton was an art critic for the town's only newspaper, a pompous little man who nobody really liked but a few women loved.

"That's still going on," Speckly confirmed. "But not for much longer. One of these days I'm going to kill him."

He lurched away and Jerry was accosted by others, including a jeweled socialite who insisted on buying one of the more expensive abstract oil paintings on the spot. For the moment he forgot about Ned Speckly and his marital problems and the statue of *Nam*.

Two weeks later Ned phoned to say that the statue was finished. He was going away to rest for a week or so, but Fran would deliver the work on their pick-up truck.

"You only have to arrange for unloading it, Jer boy," he said.

"How much does it weigh?"

"Better than two hundred pounds. It's no lightweight."

"All right. I'll make arrangements at this end."

It was two days later when Fran pulled up in her truck. Jerry had always thought of Fran Speckly as an amazing woman. She was tall and strong, both physically and spiritually, with a handsome boyish face and deep thoughtful eyes. She was an artist in her own right, and Jerry had often suspected that she could have developed into a great one if she hadn't constantly been overshadowed by her sculptor husband. Perhaps that was why she sometimes sought solace in the arms of others.

"It's here," she told Jerry. "And it weighs a ton!"

He smiled. "How've you been, Fran?"

"As well as could be expected." She climbed down from the truck, wearing faded dungarees and a man's shirt. "Do you have someone to help unload it?"

"I've got a couple of fellows inside. You look tired."

"I am. He goes off and leaves me with all the work."

"Will he be back for the judging Monday night?"

"I doubt it. He caught the noon plane to Montreal yesterday. Said he knew a place where the fishing was great in August."

When the statue had been moved safely indoors, Jerry pried away the protective boards and undraped it. What he saw was almost breathtaking. Surely *Nam* was Ned Speckly's masterwork, nearly seven feet tall, with a feeling of cool savage power about it. The naked man, all white and glistening, stood knee-deep in just a suggestion of waves. He seemed to be straining against some mysterious unseen force. He represented the very essence of primeval man.

"It's amazing!" Jerry told her. "The best thing he's ever done."

"It is good," she agreed. "I'm so happy for him."

"I'll have to find a good place for it, where the judges can really appreciate the lines and texture."

"Let me know how it comes out," she said.

"I'll do that," Jerry assured her. He watched the truck pull away and went back to contemplating the statue of *Nam*.

It was no surprise to Jerry Roman when the judges awarded first prize to *Nam* the following Monday evening. It seemed to him the natural winner, and he was overjoyed for his friend and for the gallery. The first thing he did after the ceremony was to phone the news to Fran.

"We've got ourselves a winner," he told her. "First prize!"

"Oh, that's wonderful, Jerry! Ned will be so pleased!"

"Do you have his address in Canada? I want to wire him."

He sent the wire to arrive in the morning. Then he went back to the gallery and stood for a long time looking at *Nam*. It was in a good position, but perhaps not quite the best. As the first-prize winner, it should not be the initial sight as people entered. It should be there, for them to come upon after a time, powerful in some natural outdoor setting. That was it—outdoors, in the enclosed garden, where its full beauty would be seen and appreciated.

In the morning, on the first day of the heat wave, he had it moved outside.

Somehow, out in the garden for three days, no one commented on it. Musing over it, Jerry made a sudden discovery as he was closing up the gallery on Thursday evening. Quite accidently, brushing against

the statue with his hand he noticed a kind of stickiness.

Then he saw it.

The whole right arm of Ned Speckly's creation was beginning to melt.

Jerry was horrified. He remembered, too late, what Ned had said about the effect of heat upon the new material he had used. The temperature had been up around 100° for three straight days—perhaps even higher in this enclosed courtyard with the sun beating down. The plastic had simply started to melt.

Jerry stooped to examine the extent of the damage, and then he felt an unexpected hardness beneath the surface. A frame of some sort, inside the statue? He got a flashlight and bent to confront the melted section more closely. There was something . . .

Then he was certain. Chipping away just a bit more at the statue, he uncovered the whole of a human finger.

He stood up, his heart beating too fast. It couldn't be—and yet . . .

He went around to the other hand of the statue and flicked on his cigarette lighter, holding the flame very close to the molded fingers on the other hand. In a few seconds the surface had melted and he knew a dreaded truth.

Ned Speckly's prize-winning statue had a body entombed within it.

Jerry sat for a long time by the telephone. He knew he should call the police, and once he even started to dial the number. But the publicity would probably ruin his gallery, and it would certainly ruin Ned Speckly. The body itself was bad enough, but to have it entombed in his first-prize statue was something else again.

Somewhere during his torturous ponderings, he remembered Carl Carlton, the art critic who had not attended the opening or the judging. In fact, now that he thought about it, he hadn't seen Carlton or read his column in weeks. On a hunch, he dialed the newspaper office and asked for him.

"Carlton?" a bored voice responded. "I haven't seen him. I think he's still on vacation. He was supposed to be back this week."

"Thank you," Jerry said, and hung up softly. He went back outside and stood for a long time staring at the statue, remembering Ned's words the last time they'd been together.

"She's probably with Carlton right now. One of these days I'm going to kill him."

Fran herself had delivered the statue.

Did she know? Did she suspect?

Such a thought was impossible.

He went back to his office and dialed her number. Any action, at this point, was better than none at all.

"Fran? Jerry Roman."

"Jerry! How are you? How's the exhibition?"

"Fine, Fran, but I do have one little problem. Is Ned back from Canada yet?"

"No, he isn't. I just talked with him on the phone earlier this evening. He's decided to stay a while. In fact, he's urging me to come up and join him."

I'll bet, Jerry thought. He's afraid to come back. "Well, look, Fran—I've got a little problem with his statue."

"Oh?"

"One of the hands was damaged slightly. Nothing serious, but I think it should be withdrawn from the show until Ned has an opportunity to repair it."

"I see."

"Don't want his masterpiece damaged further, you know."

"I suppose I could bring the truck around, if you could help me get it aboard. Then I could just leave it in the truck till Ned gets back."

It seemed to be the only sensible alternative to calling the police. At least the gallery would be out of it. Ned could take his chances.

"Fine," he told her. "Do that, please. First thing in the morning."

He hung up the telephone and went out to the storeroom to find an old drape or a tarp—something to cover the thing that stood in the garden.

She came with the truck in the morning. He wheeled *Nam* out on a little dolly, and was hooking up the hoist to lift it onto the truck when she stepped in close to the shrouded sculpture.

"I want to see the damage," she said.

Their eyes met for just an instant, and he knew that she knew.

He pulled the cloth away from one side of the statue and revealed the hand. "I want it out of here," he told her. "I don't want any part of it, Fran."

"All right."

"My God—what was he thinking of?"

She didn't answer, only walked toward the front of the truck.

He followed, because there was more that he wanted to say. "I could have called the police, you know. I *should* have called the police."

"I have to get home," she said. "Please help me get it on the truck, Jerry."

"When is Ned coming back from Canada?"

She was silent for a moment, staring at him. Finally she said, "I don't imagine he'll ever come back now."

"Perhaps that would be best."

Only a few people noted the absence of the prize-winning *Nam*, and Jerry had his excuses ready. Otherwise the following week passed quietly, but he knew that sooner or later there must be some outcry over Carl Carlton's disappearance.

On a Monday, ten days after Fran Speckly had picked up the statue, he opened the newspaper and felt a chill up and down his spine. There was Carlton's art column, complete with the familiar little half-column picture of his smiling face.

Jerry Roman closed the paper and sat down. It couldn't be Carlton. Men didn't come back from the dead. This was simply someone else on the paper using his name.

He drove down to the newspaper office, located on the upper floors of a block-long bank. He stopped one of the copy boys. "I hear Carlton's back from his vacation."

"Sure," the boy said. "Right over there."

And he was, right over there. He turned from his desk as Jerry approached. A little man, so harmless-looking. "Well, Roman. Sorry I missed your opening."

"I'm sorry too."

"I was vacationing in Canada."

It had to be Canada, because someone had to be there to receive the wire.

"Is she up there now?" Jerry asked, his mouth dry.

"Who?"

"Fran Speckly. Is she in Canada now?"

"How should I know, old boy?" He ran a quick, darting tongue over his lips. "I understand Ned won the award at your gallery."

"That was a mistake," Jerry said very quietly. "The award should

have gone to Fran. Or did you help her with it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do," Jerry said. "You see, Ned couldn't have finished *Nam* because he's inside of it."

"You're mad!"

"I don't think so. I'd forgotten how good an artist Fran was. Much better than her husband, as it turns out. I doubt if Ned's work ever had that power."

Carl Carlton studied him closely. "Have you told anyone this wild idea of yours?"

"Not yet."

"You'd be wise not to!"

Jerry Roman smiled. "You know something? I wonder if she'll destroy it now. It's the best work she's ever done. Better than Ned ever dreamed of doing himself. And she knows it. Do you think she's likely to destroy it and start all over again?"

"Get out, Roman. I don't want to hear about it!"

"I think if the police went to her place now, they'd find it—with Ned still inside."

Carl Carlton glanced around the newsroom, making sure they could not be overheard. "What do you want?" he asked. "Money?"

Jerry hadn't thought about it until that moment. What did he want? "I don't . . ."

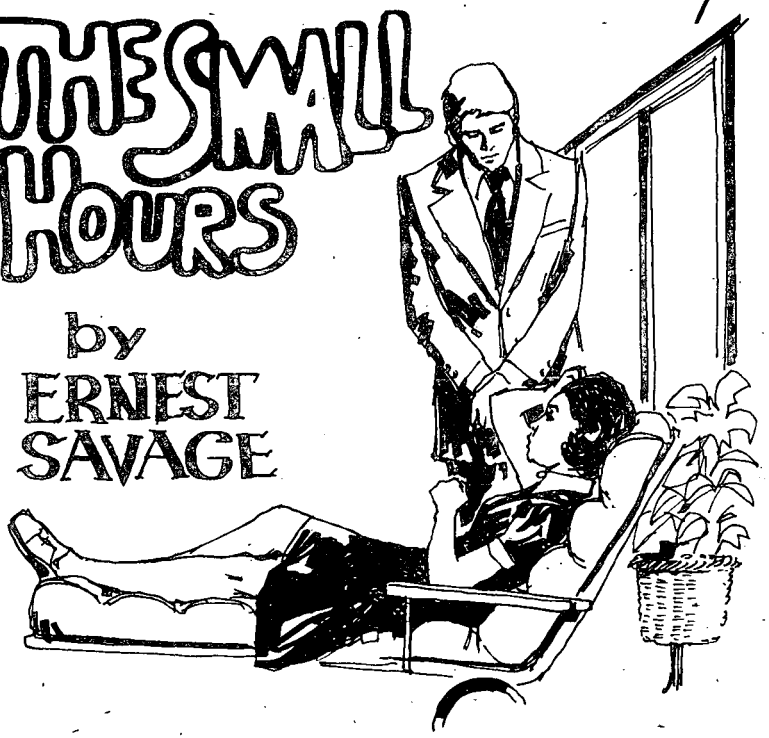
"Ten thousand dollars?"

He drew a deep breath and looked into Carl Carlton's eyes. "I'll tell you what I want. If she can fix up those hands, I want the statue for my gallery."

One can kidnap a soul as well as a body . . .

THE SMALL HOURS

by ERNEST SAVAGE



I don't know what time it was in Zurich when Henry Taylor called me from there, but it was quarter to one in San Francisco and I'd been asleep for an hour. "Lance has been kidnapped," he told me bluntly. "I want you to go out to the house."

I swung my legs out of bed and planted my feet on the floor. He'd sounded only mildly perturbed, but it could have been the connection. "And what do I do when I get there?"

"Put a cap on it—if you can. But it may be too late, Sam. Mrs. Jason called the Belvedere cops before she called me."

"When did Mrs. Jason call you?" My feet were cold; I was waking up.

"She hung up about five minutes ago. It seems Millie—the maid—was knocked unconcious by the kidnappers and she called the cops reflexively."

"How can I put a lid on it? And why should I?"

"Because I'm asking you to! For one thing, that jerk kid of mine could have done it himself—I wouldn't put it past him—and for another I don't have to tell you it would hurt the company. I don't need any more bad publicity right now, Sam, so please do what you can." The "please" came out like a tooth.

I was silent. I didn't like Henry Taylor; he had all the flaws that go with fifty million hard-won bucks, and few of the graces. But I liked his son Lance, despite the name, and I didn't think it was likely he'd arranged his own kidnapping, tempting as it might be to devil his father.

Taylor spoke again. "Mrs. Jason said the note the kidnappers left said we had only eight hours to come up with the money or he'd be dead."

"How much money?"

"I don't know—the note didn't say. Get out there, Sam, for God's sake, and do what you can for me. I'll be in touch later." He hung up before I could ask him why he didn't take the next plane home; but on reflection, I didn't really want to know.

I'd been to the Taylor place three times before—to play tennis with him. He owns the two best red-clay courts I've ever seen. I've also been fishing with him on his yacht. But it doesn't mean we're friends. I'd done a job for him, and it was a case of one thing leading to another. Besides, I'd play tennis on a red-clay court with the Archfiend himself.

The chief of the Belvedere police force and one uniformed cop were there when I arrived. They'd been there about an hour and had worried frowns on their faces. The Chief, who introduced himself as Howard Parks, had wanted to bring in the FBI, but a call from Taylor—after he'd talked to me—put a stop to that. Taylor had told him to let me handle it, and he seemed glad to. He and his aide comprised about a third of the Belvedere force and their principal duty was to keep the

pristine little town they served clear of undesirables. They were bouncers more than they were cops.

In the kitchen, Parks introduced me to Mrs. Jason, who was seated tiredly at the table in the center of the big room. I said to her, "Tell me what happened."

It was her night off, she said, and she'd gone to a movie in Sausalito, getting back at midnight. She'd found Millie, the maid, unconscious on the kitchen floor and had seen the note scotchtaped to the refrigerator door. She'd brought Millie around with cold compresses and had made the phone calls. She'd gotten about that far in her recitation when I sensed something missing.

"Where's the dog?" I asked her. Taylor had a Doberman guard dog and every time I'd been here before, his barking, it had seemed to me, was damn near continuous. The question opened her eyes and she said she didn't know—it *was* funny she hadn't heard him.

Parks and I went out to his run to look and found him dead. Poisoned meat, probably, tossed over the six-foot chain-link fence. Taylor kept him thin and voracious and he'd probably wolfed it down in a gulp. Even dead he looked dangerous.

On the way back we went through the eight-car garage and I snapped on the lights. A Daimler, a Rolls, a Jaguar XJ, and a Porsche were side by side, then two blanks, then a beat-up VW bug about ten years old. It didn't look as sassy there as they usually do.

"Mr. and Mrs. are in Zurich," Parks said. "The cook and the head gardener—they're married—and the chauffeur are all on vacation. Mrs. Jason says Mrs. Taylor is having neurological surgery of some kind in Zurich and they gave everybody a vacation for two weeks while they're gone—everybody except Mrs. Jason and the maid."

Millie was laid out on a chaise lounge in the sunroom. She was whimpering. Mrs. Jason had rigged an ice pack on a good-sized lump on the back of her head. There was blood, some still fresh. I asked Mrs. Jason if she'd called a doctor and she said Millie didn't want her to.

"You have a family doctor, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Call him."

Millie's eyes were red from crying, the fear in them still high. She had a round pudgy face, a small pursed mouth, and a receding chin. A

patch of old acne scars emblazoned each cheek. Her eyes were her best feature, even red and full of fear. A blanket was pulled up to her chin. The eyes watched me.

"Where's your room?" I said.

"On the third floor."

"Don't you want to go to bed?"

"No!" Firmly. "I don't want to be alone."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

She said she and Lance had been drinking cocoa at the kitchen table and watching Johnny Carson on the kitchen TV. Carson was introducing his second guest when they heard the dog raise a ruckus. Lance went out to investigate and a minute later she followed him. That's all.

Mrs. Jason had returned from phoning the doctor and was standing behind me looking stern. "One of her slippers," she said, "was just outside the kitchen door. She must have been dragged back into the kitchen. I found her on the floor by the table."

The note was still taped to the refrigerator door. It was composed of letters clipped from magazines and newspapers. It read: "You will receive instructions shortly for the payment of ransom for the return of your son. You will have exactly eight hours to comply with these instructions starting at midnight today, the 18th, so be prepared! Otherwise Lance is lanced."

I asked Mrs. Jason to make a pot of coffee. The eight-hour thing had puzzled me from the start. The eight *night* hours.

"Funny damn thing, isn't it?" Parks said. "We got six hours and change left and we don't even know how much they want. Or where to take it, or nothing!"

"Except they'll kill him," the uniformed cop said.

"Yeah, except that." Parks was gloomy. One of his priceless charges was in jeopardy and everything he lived for was on the line.

I asked Mrs. Jason for Taylor's phone number in Zurich and she said it was written on the blackboard over the kitchen phone. I was just about to dial when the phone rang. It was Charlie McDermott, Taylor's Executive V.P., and he asked for me.

"This is Train," I said.

He said he'd gotten a call from Taylor in Zurich about forty-five minutes before ordering him to go down to the office in the Trans-America building and get all the cash they had in the vault and bring it

out to me at the house. He was at the office now and wondering what the hell it was all about. Taylor hadn't told him.

"How much you got?"

"Seventy-seven thousand in even numbers, but what the hell's it—"

"Bring it out."

I didn't need to call Taylor now. He was smart and quick, whatever else he was. He'd realized it was the dead of night in California and the only money available for ransom would have to be on hand. And the kidnappers would realize that too. I hung up the phone and stared at the blackboard for a while. They needed ketchup, soda crackers and more cocoa.

I'd begun to consider the possibility that it was Lance. Certainly it was an inside job, or one remove from an inside job, but my God—*that* kid? He was an artist and he had his room and a big studio on a second-floor wing of the house. One day, after I'd whipped his old man at tennis and Lance seemed to want to kiss my feet for it, he'd taken me up there to look at his stuff, and I'd liked it. He had a water color there that I would have been glad to take home with me, but he was into oils then and about twenty of them dominated the room in a display of savage color that galvanized the eye. Wild. Fauve wild. But extorting ransom money from his old man? It was too far out of character, I told myself.

I asked Mrs. Jason to sit down at the kitchen table with me and Parks when the coffee was done and asked the uniformed cop to go hold Millie's hand until the doctor arrived. She didn't want to be alone, she said.

"Mrs. Jason, when did the Taylors leave for Zurich?"

"Last Sunday, five days ago." She sat like a plebe at West Point, shoulders back, chin tucked in. She looked competent.

"Do you always go to the movies on Thursday night?"

"Yes. Almost always. They change the bill on Wednesdays."

"Did the cook and the chauffeur and the gardener all leave on Sunday?"

"Yes. The cook and the gardener are married—I got a card from them today from Tiajuana. I mean yesterday."

"Are they Mexican?"

"No. They're American. Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson."

"And the chauffeur?"

"Charles. He has people in Seattle. He drove up there in the station wagon."

"Is your husband around, Mrs. Jason?"

"I'm divorced."

"How about Millie? Any family?"

"She has a brother in medical school at Berkeley. I know of no other family."

"Where's your husband, Mrs. Jason?"

"I—he's in Oakland, I believe."

"How long have you been divorced?"

"Four years."

"How long have you been here?"

"Six years next month, but we were separated three years before the divorce."

"It's a long day's drive from here to Tiajuana," I said, "but a man could make it in a day, couldn't he? Do the Jeffersons know you always go to the movies on Thursday?"

"Yes, I suppose they do. There's something else I suppose you should know, Mr. Train. Mr. Jefferson was in prison once, many years ago."

"For what?"

"I'm not sure. I think it was extortion."

"Here in California?"

"I think so."

"What's his first name?" Parks barked. He was bristling.

"Peter. And his middle name is Lemuel."

"He live here?"

"Yes. They have an apartment over the garage. So does Charles."

Parks got up and went to the phone. "I'll find out," he said. Mrs. Jason and I looked at his big broad back as he dialed furiously.

"Is there anything else I should know?" I said to Mrs. Jason.

Her eyes flickered some. "Yes, there is. My ex-husband worked for Mr. Taylor's company until two months ago. He was fired for falsifying invoices and stealing things from the Oakland warehouse."

"And—?"

"He phoned me and asked me to intercede on his behalf with Mr. Taylor and I did, but Mr. Taylor refused to reinstate him."

"Why should he have? Wasn't he guilty of theft?"

"Yes, he was and he admitted it, but he promised to repay everything he'd stolen. He had some kind of a gambling debt, he said."

"Was he mad at Mr. Taylor?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Has he ever been here?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Does he know you have a Doberman?"

"I have no idea—but most people in Belvedere have Dobermans."

"Does he know you're out every Thursday night?"

"I don't know how he could."

"Do you think he did it?"

"No. I—"

"What?"

"I don't think he has the guts," she said flatly, and I grinned at her.

"We'd better check on him, though, hadn't we?"

"I suppose so." She said it with a little sniff.

"Mrs. Jason, Millie said she was having cocoa and watching Johnny Carson with Lance when this happened. Are they friends?"

"Yes. I think Millie is the only friend Lance has in this house."

"Including you?"

"No, excepting me. But they are quite close. She listens to him."

"Does she have any other friends?"

"Not that I know of."

"How long's she been here?"

"Longer than I. Nine years, I believe."

"Do they treat her well, the Taylors?"

"Mr. Train, they hardly know she's alive. She serves the food and she cleans the place and they hardly know she's alive. Except Lance."

"She's a lonely woman, then?"

"We're all lonely here."

The front doorbell rang just then and I told Mrs. Jason I'd answer it while she gave Parks the data on her husband. It was the doctor, a jacket zippered over his pajamas, a bag in his hand, his grey hair askew under the brim of his hat. He was no happier at being rousted out in the middle of the night than I'd been.

The cop had been good company for Millie. Her eyes were dry now and the two of them were watching some garbage on all-night TV. Her nice eyes showed fear again when the doctor, a little roughly, I

thought, examined her head. I left them alone and beckoned the cop to come along to the kitchen.

Parks was pretty upset. He'd put out a pick-up order on Mrs. Jason's husband and wanted to order an APB on the Jeffersons, but thought better of it when he said it out loud. What worried him was the swift passage of time, the lack of instructions, and his own vulnerability.

"Look," I told him, "if they want their money they'll have to tell us how much it is and where to take it, won't they? Relax, Chief, the only thing we can do now is wait—unless you want to search the grounds."

"That's not a bad idea, but God, Train, it's two-thirty and unless we pick up Jason and beat it out of him where the kid is, he'll be dead at eight o'clock. And if Mr. Taylor's son gets killed, there'll be seven kinds of hell to pay around here. I'm supposed to keep the peace in this community and by God, if Mr. Taylor hadn't asked me directly not to, I'd call the FBI right now. Or at least the Sheriff. We need men, lots of men! He's probably buried in some box in the ground with eight hours worth of air or something, and if we—"

"Chief, why don't you have your man look around outside? And maybe you and I can look around the house, just in case he's upstairs in bed. You're obviously a man of action."

"Good idea! Irv, you check the outbuildings and the grounds. Take a flash and—"

"My God, Chief," Irv said, "there's thirty acres enclosed by fence alone! Hell, it's a quarter mile down to the road from here!"

"Just go do it! Start with the garage and the buildings around the tennis court and the pool and look for fresh-turned earth. Maybe he's dead already."

"Why would they—?"

"Just go do it, Irv! That's an order!"

Mrs. Jason offered to come with us, but I asked her to stay with Millie so she wouldn't be alone when the doctor was through with her. Lance's pictures are what interested me most and we went directly to his studio, Parks checking his watch about every thirty seconds. The studio was lit by banks of fluorescent lights suspended from the high ceiling and when I flicked them on, the whole room came alive with color. There must have been forty canvases of various sizes on display. A window seat ran the full length of the south wall and paintings were resting all along its padded length as well as leaning against it from the

floor. The effect was stunning, but didn't do the kid's work justice because the eye couldn't isolate any one piece from the rest. There was a quality of defiance in the place, as though Lance was saying, "Look, damn it! I'm an artist and I *work* at it!"

There was a big canvas on the easel and the corner of it I touched was still tacky. There were twice as many pictures showing as there had been the last time I was here.

The Chief said, "Does he sell this crap?"

"You don't like it?"

"Do you?"

"He's good," I said.

"Nuts! No wonder the old man and him are on the outs. I'd throw him out of the house if he was my kid."

And maybe that's it, I thought. Maybe Lance has gotten his notice and needs money to go on his own. It was the only thing that could drive him to extortion—his art. He and Millie. If he did it, then she was in it with him. But it faded as I looked at it. He was a gentleman in the root sense of the word. He had his mother's slender patrician face and long supple hands. Those hands couldn't have raised that lump on the back of Millie's head, even if his mind commanded it. He was a tiger with a paint brush, not a blunt instrument.

I asked the Chief to search the rest of the house and went back down to the kitchen. The doctor was having coffee. He said, "Is it true Lance was kidnapped?"

"It looks that way." I sat down.

"Who are you? Or isn't it any of my business?"

"I'm Sam Train. I'm a private investigator. How's Millie? That's your business."

"Don't get sharp with me, Mr. Train. I've had it with this family. I couldn't care less what they *or* you think. Millie is an hysteric. The last time I saw her at my office it was for an imaginary female illness. She's a frustrated old maid at thirty-three."

"Have you given her a sedative?"

"No. She refused it."

"What do you mean you've had it with this family, Doctor?"

"Look, I've made more house calls here in the last six months than I have for all the rest of my practice put together. This is the first time it's been for anything of substance."

"What were the others for?"

His head snapped up from his cup of coffee. I thought he was going to tell me it was none of my business, but he was beyond normal discretion. "Mrs. Taylor," he said. "Dear Loretta. She's in Zurich right now to have her face lifted when what she really needs is a husband who's home now and again and a pile of dishes to wash every day, and maybe a garden to grow. I'm telling you, Train, riches are a curse! That woman is useless and she knows it and she can't live with it. Every second night she wakes up screaming and clawing the walls and hollering for ol' Doc Binning! Well, ol' Doc Binning hereby quits!"

"Can a doctor resign from a patient?"

"This one can!"

"How about Lance? Anything wrong with him?"

"No. He's a good kid. The last time I saw him—a few months ago—was for a sprained wrist and he gave me a painting in lieu of a fee. He didn't want to use his old man's money. And I like it too, that painting. I don't know what the hell it's supposed to be, but it looks good on the office wall, jazzes up the place. Maybe it's even therapeutic. No, he's a good kid, Train, and I hope you get him back." He stood up abruptly and jammed his hat on his head. "Good night. I can see my own way out. God knows I've done it often enough."

Millie was fighting sleep. She and Mrs. Jason were still watching TV and Millie's eyes were sagging shut every few seconds. I stood in the doorway watching her for a while before going in and sitting on the edge of her chaise lounge.

"Why don't you go upstairs to bed?" I said.

The simple question shocked her eyes wide. "I don't want to! I don't want to be alone, I don't want to be asleep."

"Eventually you'll have to be, Millie."

"I'll get her some coffee," Mrs. Jason said, and got up. "I could use some myself."

I moved a little on the edge of the chaise and she fussily pulled her legs to the far side. A slight blush rose in her acne-scarred cheeks. An old maid at thirty-three, Binning had called her. A sad little woman with lovely sleepy eyes. "Do you like Lance, Millie?"

She closed the eyes and swallowed. "Yes." Her voice was husky, almost inaudible.

"Do you think we'll get him back?"

"Oh, I hope so! Oh, yes, I hope so!" She turned her head aside and I put my hand gently on her cheek and pressed it back. Her sigh was almost a shudder.

"Have you any idea where he is, Millie?"

"What?" Her eyes were wide open again, big and dark. "Oh, no—no, I don't!"

I couldn't fathom her. She'd been hurt and badly frightened, and yet she refused rest. Did she fear sleep all the time or just tonight? She was homely and squat and unloved and lonely and maybe in sleep these horrors always roved her mind. An hysteric, Binning had called her; but even hysterics have to sleep. Could she and Lance, out of their mutual frustrations, conceivably have worked up this ploy? Two shy gentle people—?

The door chimes sounded and I looked at my watch. It was almost 4:00. It could be McDermott with the money and I wondered what had taken him so long. Mrs. Jason went to let him in.

"Millie," I said. "Tell me about your brother. Are you close? Is he a friend?"

"Robert's at school."

"Yes, I know, at Berkeley. Does—?"

"Train!" It was McDermott standing in the doorway. He was fully dressed, tie neatly knotted, topcoat, hat on, briefcase in hand. I'd met him a few times in the work I'd done for Taylor and had formed no opinion; but I was forming one now. He'd used his quarter-deck voice on me. I got up.

"What took you so long, McDermott?"

"I went home and got dressed. It looks like my day is beginning early. I've got an eight o'clock breakfast conference. Fill me in."

We went to the kitchen and had coffee and I brought him up to date. He asked good questions in a take-charge sort of way, but it was just habit. He knew Lance and shared Taylor's opinion of him, total disdain. Taylor had told me McDermott was an import-export genius, and maybe he was, but he had the terse automated quality of most top executives I'd known. To like him would be to like a machine that worked a little better than other machines. He had $87,000 in the briefcase. He'd found another ten after he'd phoned. It seemed like a lot to have in the office, but Taylor'd explained that to me once. He bought a lot of people in the course of a month's work and he needed

the ready cash. The people market is all cash, no credit. Taylor said it was all routine.

"It's more than the kid's worth," McDermott said, "but it's a hell of a lot less than they'll probably ask for."

"I doubt it," I said.

He glared at me. "Now what, Train? We just wait?"

"Yes."

Parks had been sitting with us. He grunted. He'd made a drink with some of Taylor's whiskey and he downed it. McDermott looked at him with scorn.

Mrs. Jason knocked on the frame of the kitchen door. "Millie's asleep," she said.

"Good!"

"I left the TV on. Would you gentlemen like more coffee?" She too looked at Parks with scorn. I grinned at him; he was having a bad night.

We were all sitting looking at each other when the phone rang and Parks got up so fast to answer it he knocked over his chair. He listened for a minute, then said, "What?" He hung up slowly. "Well I'll be damned!" he growled.

"Well what?" McDermott barked.

"It was Western Union with a telegram for anyone at this number. It said, 'Go look in the doghouse.' The guy said it wasn't signed."

"Guy?" I said.

"Yeah, guy." He went through the kitchen door and McDermott and I followed him outside.

Parks fished it out of the doghouse with a stick while I held the flash for him. It was an attaché case. Parks put the stick through the handle and carried it back to the house. He put it on the kitchen table and looked at me, red-faced.

"We gotta check it for prints."

"What we've got to do," I said, "is open it. There won't be any prints on it, Chief."

It was closed by two snap catches with push-botton releases. I pressed them and the case opened like a book. There was nothing inside but a note taped to the lining of the lid with the same cut-out letters and figures as before. "Put $50,000 in used bills in this case. Have the maid deliver it in her car. Have her stop at the phone booth

at the corner of 14th and Main in Belvedere at precisely six A.M. She will receive further instructions then. Make no attempt to follow her."

Parks sighed deeply.

"Poor Millie," Mrs. Jason said.

"What the hell!" McDermott said. "Fifty thousand! Chicken feed!"

We decided to let Millie sleep for another half hour. It was about fifteen minutes from the house to the corner of 14th and Main, so she'd have to leave no later than twenty to six—if she could be made to leave at all. She looked peaceful sleeping on the chaise, her pudgy face untroubled by the dreams she feared. Mrs. Jason said she couldn't do it, couldn't be made to do it, but I wasn't so sure.

Parks got a call from the Oakland police advising him that Jason had moved from his fleabag room a week ago and they were tracing him now. Then Parks sat Mrs. Jason down at the kitchen table and questioned her about where her husband might have gone, but got nowhere with it. He was overmatched. You hire a bouncer for a Chief of Police, you get a bouncer for a Chief of Police. McDermott left for his office to practice being a genius before his conference and I sent Irv out to hunt for the blunt instrument that had coshed Millie. I wanted to be the one to waken her, and at five-twenty I went into the sunroom to do it.

The TV was still on and I left it on. Somebody—for the love of heaven—was selling cars as though it were the middle of the afternoon. I sat down on the edge of the chaise and shook Millie awake and told her what she had to do.

"No!" she said, and began shaking her head violently. "No! no! no!"

"You want Lance to come back alive, don't you?"

"No, I won't do it!"

"You've got to, Millie. Those are the instructions. Nothing will happen to you."

She didn't cry, she just kept shaking her head, but she was listening to me and a few minutes later she said, "All right," and began to cry, her fine dark eyes lost in tears again. I asked Mrs. Jason to help her get ready and told her to be sure Millie had pencil and paper in case she had to take notes.

Mrs. Jason confirmed my guess that the lonely old VW in the garage was Millie's and I backed it out and pointed it down the drive toward

the road. McDermott had counted out the fifty thousand before leaving so he could take the change with him, and Parks and I put the money in the attaché case and put the case in the car. At twenty to six she was as ready as she would ever be and took off, still snuffling.

Her car had disappeared down the drive when I told Parks I was going to follow her. He didn't protest.

I knew the town well enough to take a back route to the corner of 12th and Main. I parked my Dart there and got out and took a position at the corner of a building facing Main. A milk truck was the only moving vehicle on the road at that hour and I thought maybe Millie had gotten lost, but a minute later she showed up in the distance and drove slowly to a point alongside the prescribed booth and stopped. The dawn sun was just pinking the tops of the hills to the west and visibility was perfect. Millie sat in her car for a while and then got out and stood by the phone-booth door blowing her nose. Then she stepped into the booth and took the phone off the hook. I hadn't heard it ring from where I was, but it was exactly six.

She was in there for three minutes—a long time, it seemed to me. A chauffeur-driven Rolls passed me, heading for Sausalito and the bridge. A pick-up rattled by, going the other way, the driver giving me a cold eye. Millie came out of the booth and leaned on her car. She seemed to be crying violently and I thought maybe she'd gotten instructions that were beyond her. But after a moment she wiped her eyes, got in her car, made an illegal U-turn, and headed my way.

I jumped back into the Dart and hunched down until I heard her pass, and then followed her, three blocks behind. We were alone on the road leaving town and I doubled the distance between us, just keeping her in easy sight. She seemed to be wobbling around, crossing the divider line in the center of the road and then raising dust from the shoulder every few hundred yards. She was going slowly, probably peering through tears.

She turned left on Upland Hills Road, heading east. The road climbs and twists for a few miles and then levels out on the Uplands Plateau and goes fairly straight. She was still wobbling all over the place, but it didn't matter, there was no traffic at all. It was 6:20.

We drove for about seven miles before she slowed suddenly and pulled to the shoulder of the road and stopped. I'd let about a quarter mile build up between us and closed it a little before I found a place to turn

off and get behind some trees. I got my binoculars from under the seat and ran back up to the road. I was in time to see her carry the attaché case into the trees on the left of the road, disappear, and return in about five minutes. Her VW was parked alongside a CURVE sign, the only sign between her and the turnoff. You couldn't miss it.

She got into her car and cut sharply left, trying to turn around. For a perilous moment she was broadside to anything that might have come around the curve, but nothing did. She backed and filled twice on the narrow high-crowned road before heading back my way, coming fast.

I ducked back into the trees and watched her pass. She was bent over the wheel, her nose an inch from the windshield and pushing the old bucket as fast as it would go. Two minutes later I was parked by the CURVE sign myself and crossing the road into the trees.

It took me twenty minutes to find the attaché case. It was in a narrow ravine that fed into the drainage ditch alongside the road. It was open and empty. I clambered down the steep slope and got it, lifting it by one finger on an inside corner. Now it might have fingerprints that meant something, but again I doubted it.

There were a dozen places a man could have hidden while Millie brought the case into the woods, put it down, and left. And a dozen ways he could have gotten out of there without being seen. The trees trailed up a slope and around the shoulder of a hill. Where they ended, I had no idea and no intention of finding out. There seemed to be no marks or traces around that meant anything. And no sign of Lance.

I went back to the Dart and put the case on the front seat, wondering why the man had bothered to transfer the money from it to something else before taking off. The probable reasons didn't seem adequate.

It was ten after seven when I headed back toward Belvedere and twenty to eight when I parked near the kitchen door of the Taylor house. Millie's VW was back in its corner in the garage. I sat there for a minute looking at it while Chief Parks, followed by Irv, came trotting out of the house and over to where I was.

"Well?" Parks said, and then testily ordered Irv to go back into the kitchen and wait for the phone to ring.

"Well nothing," I said, and gestured toward the attaché case. "It was empty when I found it. Where's Millie?"

"She went to bed."

"What did she say?"

"She said she'd done what she was told to do—and then she went to bed. Where's the boy, for God's sake? It's quarter to eight, Train!"

"I know what time it is." I got out and stretched and yawned. Parks glared at me, red-eyed with fatigue and worry.

"He's dead," he said. "They killed him."

"I hope not, Parks."

"You *hope* not!"

"Come on, let's go take a look at Millie's car."

"Why? You think he's in there, for God's sake?"

"No, but I think the money is."

"What?"

We found it under the floor board on the passenger side. A foot-square hole had been cut in the steel floorplate and a shallow metal box crudely welded beneath it. The piece of metal cut from the floorplate had been used as a lid for the hole. Covered by the worn carpet, you'd have no reason to think anything was there. The hole was packed solid with money and was one of the reasons he'd asked for only fifty thousand. You couldn't have gotten much more into it. And it was the reason Millie had been driving all over the road. That and tears. She'd been transferring the money from the attaché case to the box from the moment she'd left the phone booth. And she'd done a good neat job, even though she probably knew she was being followed. He'd probably told her she would be.

Parks looked stupefied. "So where's the kid?" he said.

"He'll probably come lurching in any minute now—with a knot on his head too." I felt dead tired.

"They did it together, didn't they?"

"It looks that way, except for one thing, Chief—" But he wasn't listening. He was pounding a meaty right fist into the palm of his left hand.

"By God," he growled, "I'm going up there and take that broad by the—"

"You go *at* her in any way, Parks, and I'll deck you. We'll go up together."

She wasn't in her room. Her bed hadn't even been turned down. And she wasn't in her bathroom either. But there was a little brown

bottle in the bottom of the washbasin and it was empty. I sniffed it, but got nothing. It could have held about thirty capsules. There was no label on it. I left the room on the run.

We found her in Lance's studio—and Lance too. She'd removed the pictures from the window seat, stacking them carefully against the wall, and then lifted the lid of the seat before the capsules took effect and she fell to the floor. She'd wanted Lance to have more air. He was laid out in the bottom of the window seat like a corpse, his hands folded across his chest. But he was alive, breathing softly through his mouth. Why in the name of God, I thought, did they put him in there?

Millie was in the foetal position, her black maid's dress way up around her thighs. It would have embarrassed her terribly.

"Call the emergency squad," I told Parks. "Make sure they bring a stomach pump!" He moved.

Millie was still alive. I picked her up and tried to get her legs to work, but they wouldn't. Then I carried her into the shower stall in Lance's bathroom and turned on the cold water full blast and held her under it, her head draped over my shoulder. I held her there for five minutes, jiggling her up and down and hollering in her ear, but it didn't work. She was alive, but not coming back. I figured she didn't want to come back. I took her in and put her on Lance's bed, just as Parks returned with Mrs. Jason. I told Mrs. Jason to dry Millie and keep slapping her face and she set to it at once while Parks and I returned to the studio and lifted Lance from the window seat to the floor.

He had a knot on the back of his head about like Millie's—enough to knock him out, but not for eight hours. He began to stir, rolled his head and groaned, just audibly. He would be all right. He was coming up, not going down, like Millie. I pulled up his sleeves and looked at his skinny arms. There was a small red dot on his left bicep that would have been where the needle went in. He'd been doped, expertly. I wiped water from my face and hair and stared at him. Why in the window seat?

The emergency squad was there in about twenty minutes, and gone five minutes later. The young paramedic in charge said he didn't like the looks of Millie, and he seemed to have care in his eyes. I asked him to do his best. They took both Millie and Lance in the one rig.

"Well, I guess everything's gonna be all right," Parks said when they'd gone. "The kid's gonna live."

"Yeah," I said.

I dried myself as best I could with a couple of Lance's towels and then went back to his studio and stared into the open window seat. Millie had insisted that he be put in there—it was the only reasonable explanation. He was her best friend; perhaps in her way she loved him. She would have insisted that he remain in the house—it was the price of her collaboration, and if she died it would be the cause of her death.

I went down to the kitchen. Mrs. Jason was sitting at the table drinking coffee. She looked at me tiredly as I picked up the phone to call Doc Binning. He was still at home.

"This is Train," I said. "Did you prescribe barbiturates for Millie Whelan?"

"Of course I didn't!" he snapped.

"Well, somebody did!" I snapped back, and hung up before we could get into another argument. Mrs. Jason was looking at me curiously and I told her that I'd just wanted to make sure.

"Is she going to live?" she asked. There was care in her eyes too.

"I doubt it. But you can call Mr. Taylor and tell him Lance'll be all right. Not," I added, "that he gives a damn."

"I'll wait a while," she said with a small glint of satisfaction in her eyes. "But perhaps we should notify Millie's brother Robert."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"No. But the university would have his address."

"Have you met him, Mrs. Jason?"

"No, but—"

"But what?"

"He's called her fairly often lately. I've spoken with him on the phone. I think he's been asking her for money—for his schooling."

"Does she give it to him?"

"I think so, Mr. Train, but she doesn't have much to give. Mr. Taylor doesn't believe in—"

"I know what Mr. Taylor believes in, Mrs. Jason, and what he doesn't believe in. Does Millie have any estate, do you suppose?"

"Oh, I doubt it. But perhaps her brother would like to know he'd have her car if she—she died."

"I think he's arranged for that already," I said.

At home I took off my wet clothes and put on a robe. Then I made myself a pot of instant coffee and sat down and phoned every Western Union office within twenty miles of Belvedere. Not one of them had a record of a 4:00 A.M. telegram for anyone in the Taylor house.

Parks was still in his office when I phoned him. He sounded to me about the way I must have sounded to him. Beat. "Chief," I said, "when you took that call from Western Union last night, was there the usual background noise of a Western Union office? You know, teletype clatter, voices, etc.?"

"Yes."

"No doubt about it?"

"No. Why?"

"A moment on that. Any report on Millie?"

He yawned noisily. "Hang on a minute, I'll check."

I put the phone in my lap and thought about her. If she lived, it would be possible, just barely possible, to put a lid on the whole thing. Except for the hospital records on her and Lance, it was still a private affair and could be kept that way. But no, no it couldn't. I shook my head in a rage of helplessness. I'd grown to respect her through the night. She'd done a dangerous thing, against her will all the way, torn between the only two emotional ties in her bleak and empty life, but she'd done it. Poor invisible Millie. If she lived, there was no way she could be spared the rest of the nightmare. And she'd known it.

"She's dead," I heard Park's voice tell me metallically from my lap. I lifted the phone to my ear. "She died a half hour ago. Now what was that about Western Union?"

I clamped my teeth and told myself it was probably just as well, but I felt the gorge rising in my throat again. I didn't know him, but I hated him; for a moment I mourned the sister he'd killed. "All right, Chief," I said, "put out a pick-up order on Millie's brother, Robert Whelan. Charge extortion and murder. You can get his address from the University of California Medical School at Berkeley. And tell the arresting officers to search his place for a tape recorder with a strip in it that sounds like the background noise you might expect in a Western Union office. Maybe he's erased it by now, but probably not. Probably he's—"

"What are you talking about, Train? Damn it, I'm so beat I can hardly find my face with my hands. What the hell is this about the brother and a tape? I thought—"

"Parks, did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah, I heard."

"Do you want me to call Berkeley police myself, or do you want to be the hero?"

"Cool off, Train. I'll do it. Was it him, really?"

"Yes, it was him, and Millie, but ninety percent him. Get him, Parks."

"Yeah, but who'd he murder?"

I hung up. I shouldn't have, I suppose, but since there was only one body in the affair, I knew it would come to him. And besides, I didn't want to talk to anybody any more. I wanted to brood about Millie's brother. He was a medical student and needed money—that's all I knew about him. Maybe he had only a little while to go and could smell the big payoff at the end of the course and was running out of money and couldn't stand the thought of dropping out. Or maybe he was failing, and hating himself, or maybe he'd just gone sour, or maybe he was bad to begin with. Maybe he'd asked Millie to ask Taylor for help, but Millie, the invisible woman in Taylor's eyes, wouldn't even try and the idea of kidnapping Lance developed in his mind. He'd borrowed her car, for a weekend maybe, and fixed the box in the floor.

And maybe, I thought, she didn't even know it was there until she got his call at the booth on Main St. And maybe—my mind ran on—she didn't know anything about it at all until he arrived on the scene the night before at a quarter to twelve or so with his club and his capsules and his poisoned meat and his hypodermic. Then, when she understood what he was up to, she insisted that Lance at least be kept in the house—and that had sealed her doom. "When you get back from delivering the money, sister dear, take these capsules in this little brown bottle and you'll feel like a million—trust me." Or maybe he'd known he'd have to kill her in any event and had given her just one lethal dose. And then a few days after the funeral, he'd drop by the house, tears in his eyes, and collect her car. Who would know?

I was alseep in my chair when the phone wakened me. It was Parks. They'd caught Whelan, he told me, found the Western Union tape and hypodermic needle and other paraphernalia in his room. He'd con-

fessed to everything and was being held without bail.

Did I want to see him? Parks asked.

"No. Why should I?"

"Well, in a manner of speaking it was your collar, Sam." It was Sam now. "I even told 'em at Berkeley I couldn't of done it without you—and that's what I told Taylor too."

"You talked to Taylor?"

"Yeah, he said he tried to call you but got no answer. Then he called me and we had a nice long talk. Damn nice fella." He was preening himself; he sounded fresh, renewed. "Hey, Sam, how much are you gonna bill him for your night's work?" Taylor had touched his heart, buccaneer and bouncer soulmates now. He really wanted to know.

"I don't know," I said. "But whatever it is, it won't be enough."

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