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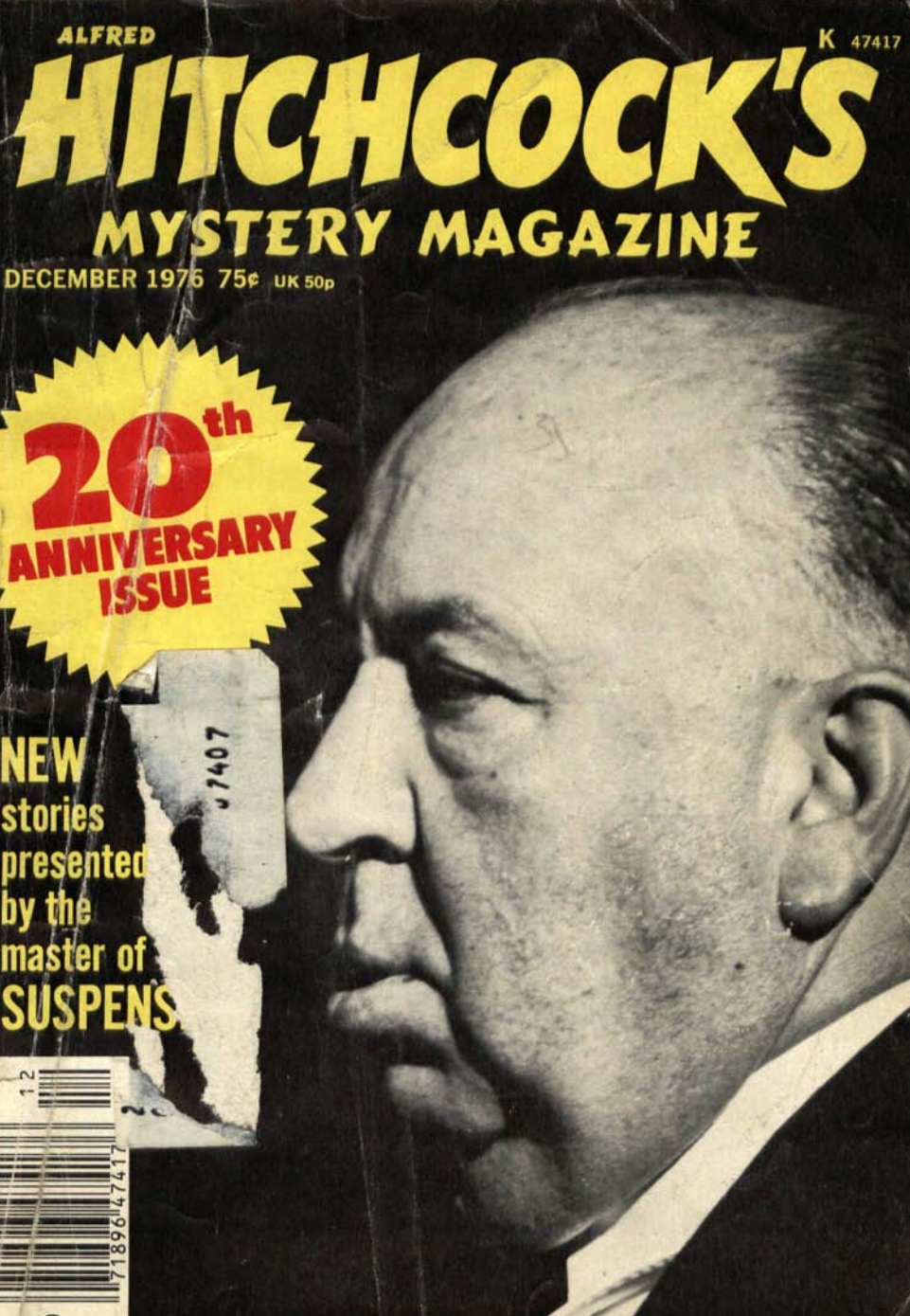

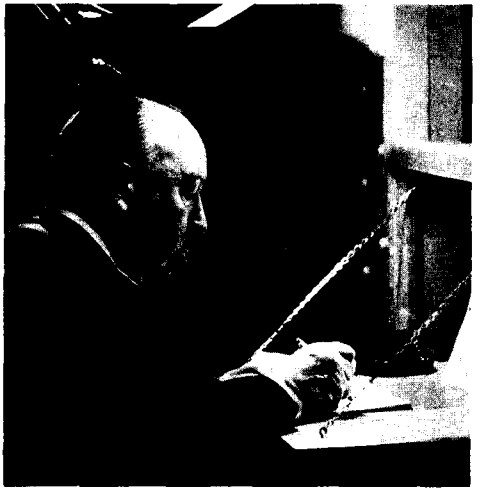

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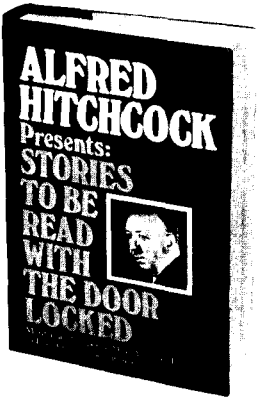

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 21, No. 12, Dec., 1976. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at 75 cents a copy. Annual subscription $9.00 in the United States. $10.00 in U.S. possessions and Canada; $11.00 in the Pan American Union and all other countries. Editorial and Executive Offices, 229 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10003. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, Ct. 06830. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices.

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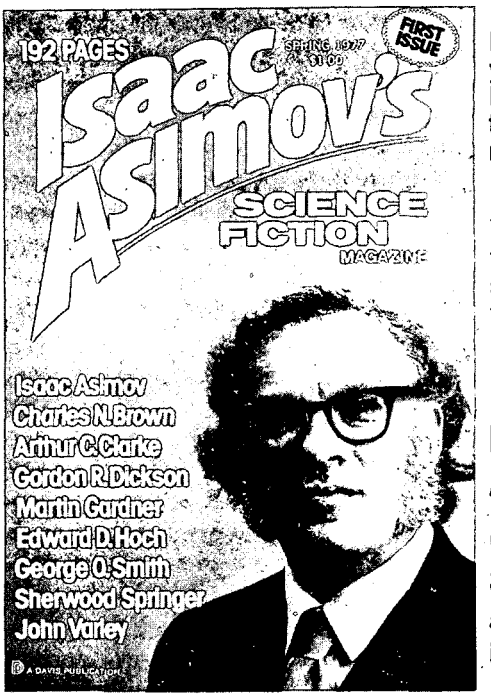

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December 1976

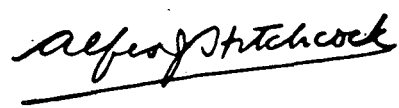
Dear Reader:

It's my pleasure to welcome you to the 20th Anniversary Issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine!* Yes, loyal friends and new, we have been bringing you the very best mystery fiction we can find for twenty years now, since December 1956.

To celebrate, we give you in this issue twelve captivating stories by loyal contributors and new—Vincent McConnor, James McKimmey, Edward D. Hoch, Sonora Morrow, Robert Edward Eckels, Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg, Joyce Harrington, Duffy Carpenter, Robert J. Randisi, Virginia Hart, Mick Mahoney, and Jeffry Scott. From "The First Moon Tourist" by Duffy Carpenter to "End of the Line" by Edward D. Hoch, you will find abundant cause for celebration.

I invite you to join me in a toast to AHMM and its wonderful readers and writers. And I fervently hope there is no botulism in the punch.

Good reading.



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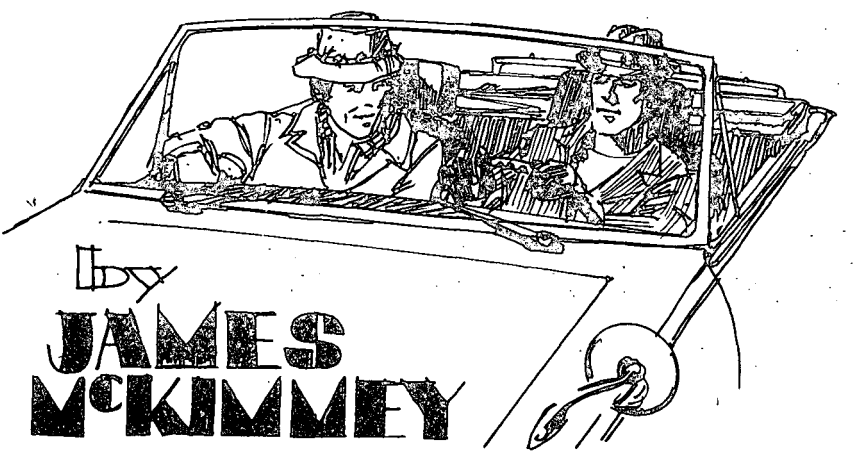
Is it true that competition is the stuff of life? . . .

THE FOREVER DUEL



by JAMES McKIMMEY

Charles Kinniger sat in the front passenger seat of the small, expensive sports car as Alex Tolbert drove expertly up the grade toward the target of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and their streams and lakes. Kinniger, a medium-sized man with a face easily forgotten, felt his hands tensing on his thighs—he was wearing an old poplin fishing jacket and twill trousers he'd owned for over half of his 42 years. An assortment of dry flies, used in his fishing, was affixed to the sheepskin

band of his venerable narrow-brimmed hat. You've done it, Tolbert, he thought. Any minute now, a cat toying with a defeated mouse, you'll tell me what and how.

He looked at Tolbert, steering easily with thin-gloved hands and smiling faintly. Nearly the same age as Kinniger, Tolbert was a strikingly handsome man, slimly built almost to the point of delicacy. Both earned similar incomes as professors of criminology at separate Bay Area institutions of higher learning. But, in contrast to Kinniger's careful conservation of funds, Tolbert bought only the finest. His was a corduroy car coat purchased at one of San Francisco's most expensive sportswear stores. His matching hat and gabardine slacks came from the same store.

"You seem remote, Charles," Tolbert said cheerfully, glancing at Kinniger. "Unhappy. Tense."

"I'm fine, Alex," Kinniger said grimly.

"Fishing should be excellent."

"The streams'll be low—they always are in the fall. I like the conditions of deeper water."

"You're a pessimist," Tolbert said. "As always. But why should that bother a fly fisherman? The fish have to surface for your flies, don't they? And, anyway, the art of doing it is all that counts, isn't it?"

Listening to Tolbert laughing softly, Kinniger felt an underlying anger. It had always irritated him that Tolbert failed to understand anything of the true sport of fishing. Fly fishing *was* an art, one Kinniger had worked at assiduously for much of his life. It was the pleasure of standing in a stream, in wading boots, making the cast, surely, accurately, then watching the fly float, waiting for the strike, using needle-sharp reflexes when the fish did, then setting the hook and working the fish to exhaustion and the net. He wasn't always successful, but that didn't matter—it was the proper doing of it that mattered.

Tolbert, on the other hand, didn't care how he caught fish. His usual method was simply using a spinning rod and salmon eggs on the hook, or *worms*, for God's sake! He would spear them, if he could. He would dive into the water and catch them with his teeth if that were possible! All that mattered was the accumulation of as much fish as possible, no matter what the method, no matter what the legal limit.

Creep, Kinniger thought, realizing how much he'd come to hate and resent the man.

"I love this country," Tolbert said with relish.

They had reached one of the higher elevations where winter winds had bent stands of pine trees into permanent curves. Some of the top limbs had been wrenched away so that the trunks pointed jaggedly to a sky now floating small fluffy white clouds. Below was a lake backed by rugged mountains, an azure circle with a wooden pier running outward. Beside it, small boats rocked gently. At this time of morning you would have to troll for the fish, Kinniger knew, and trolling was not acceptable to him. Only fly fishing, on a good rushing trout stream. But he could find no anticipation even in that today.

"You *do* seem preoccupied," Tolbert said.

"*Tell* me," Kinniger demanded forcefully.

"Tell you?" There was a lilt of pleasure in Tolbert's voice, a voice honed to vibrating resonance after years of classroom delivery. "Tell you what, pray, Charles?"

"You've done it, haven't you?"

Again Tolbert looked at Kinniger, his eyes flashing with suppressed mirth. "You're taking a terribly circuitous route, my man."

"You know what I mean."

Once more Tolbert was laughing softly, but he failed to respond otherwise.

Kinniger found himself thinking back to when it had started, in the excellent seaside restaurant where they had gone for lunch one Sunday weeks ago . . .

The interior was not overly crowded, and they had obtained a table with a window view of the waves crashing against a thick rock retaining wall. Tolbert studied the menu written in Italian with infuriating slowness as a black-suited waiter stood impatiently beside them. Kinniger had always enjoyed eating here, but the waiters intimidated him.

"Signore?" the waiter asked, staring at Tolbert with dark angry eyes.

"Ah, well," Tolbert said, nodding. "*Calamai con pomodoro*, I think today."

The waiter scribbled swiftly.

"And a simple salad for two. Just please bring the lettuce, the oil, vinegar, and condiments. I'll mix it myself. Oh, yes, and a decent Chianti, of course. Charles?"

"Spaghetti," Kinniger said simply, as he always did.

The waiter turned his resentment upon Kinniger now, as he waited for his selection of sauce. Tolbert refused to assist, knowing full well that Kinniger could not read the menu nor remember what he'd had before.

"*Con salsa semplice di pomodoro?*" the waiter barked at last. "*Con salsa di vongoli? Con salsa di carne?*"

Tolbert chuckled and said, "With plain tomato sauce, Charles? With clam sauce? Or with meat sauce?"

"Meat sauce," Kinniger said, feeling his face warming. The waiter scribbled again, and moved off. Tolbert smiled at Kinniger. "You could have *said* meat sauce. One mustn't be afraid to be honest about one's shortcomings, Charles."

The condescension bothered Kinniger. He knew Tolbert had no fluency with the Italian language. He simply had taken a menu from this restaurant, as he had from other foreign restaurants, looked up the listings in a book, and memorized the translations and pronunciations.

"Be of good cheer, Charles. Please don't think of Lucille."

Kinniger looked away from him and studied the water breaking against the stone, his face flushing again. Lucille, he thought. The only woman he'd ever wanted enough to marry, with her outgoing warmth that had made Kinniger feel more secure and protected than ever before in his life. He'd brought her here several evenings and had glowed in her warmth. It was at this table, in fact, that Kinniger had proposed marriage: she had accepted in the very chair Tolbert was sitting in now.

Days later, Tolbert, to whom he'd introduced her—reluctantly, sensing he should not do it, doing it just the same to show off—had seduced her. And when he had had his fill, he'd informed Kinniger of the fact and dropped her—as, of course, had Kinniger.

It was not only the loss of Lucille that continued to upset Kinniger, it was the way in which it had been done. Tolbert always won everything at which they competed—chess, golf, fishing . . . The list was endless. But losing Lucille to him, who had cared nothing for her, was the most bitter forfeiture.

"Stop thinking of her," Tolbert said gently. "She wasn't worth a jot."

"I'm not thinking of her!" Kinniger said explosively.

The waiter arrived with the wine and salad, glaring at Kinniger.

"We mustn't bother the other diners, Charles." Tolbert smiled.

Kinniger fell silent, knowing that he could not hold his voice down until he regained control. He waited in that silence as Tolbert mixed their salads. He did not like a salad made only with oil and vinegar; he liked lettuce with avocado topped with blue-cheese dressing.

"There we are," Tolbert said politely, handing a plate to Kinniger. "Dig in."

Kinniger did so in silence.

"Now we're pouting, aren't we, Charles?" Tolbert said at last.

"I am not pouting!"

"Now, Charles."

"I'm trying to enjoy this!"

"I should hope so. It's well made, isn't it?"

When the salad had been consumed, the entrees were brought. Kinniger, as was his pleasure, spooned a generous amount of Parmesan cheese over his spaghetti, then began eating, feeling more in control. He looked across at Tolbert, who was tasting his food and sipping his wine with obvious appreciation. "What is that you ordered, anyway?" Kinniger asked.

"Squid," Tolbert said.

Kinniger's appetite faltered for a moment, then he resumed eating, averting his eyes from Tolbert's plate.

Finally, over a small Marsala custard he had selected for dessert, Tolbert said, "Well, Professor, I've been thinking."

"What have you been thinking?"

"That while we study and teach criminology, that while we're considered experts at the business of crime the fact is that we are merely observers at the edge of it, aren't we?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then I'll be more specific. What I'm saying is that we are merely ivory-tower academicians. We've had no taste of the real thing. And I suggest we should."

Kinniger put down his spoon and looked at Tolbert. "In what fashion?"

"In whatever fashion either of us individually selects—in whatever fashion we can successfully accomplish."

"The wine's gone to your head, Alex."

"I think not. I've been considering this for some time. I believe, personally, that I'm ready. How about you, Charles?" There was chal-

lenge in his voice. "Charles?"

"Am I supposed to steal pencils out of a blind man's cup? Thieve someone's morning newspaper from his porch?"

"*Charles*. Not such petty wrongs. I'm talking about committing true crime!"

"But why?"

"To get to know the criminal mentality, not simply theorize on it as we've *been* doing. Get into the water and *swim*."

"I still don't understand—"

"I'm suggesting you commit a crime you believe yourself to be capable of, and bringing it off undetected. I shall do the same."

Another contest, Kinniger thought with apprehension. One he would be quite foolish to get into. Yet . . . could he refuse? Allowing Tolbert one more victory without so much as an effort on his part? *Damn* the man!

"What do you say, Charles?"

"How far do we go?"

Tolbert motioned with a fragile hand. "I set no limits. We should each simply choose, plan, do, and then inform the other, once it has been done. I should imagine the greater crime accomplished would decide the victor. Are you game, Charles? Do you have the mettle, do you think?"

Kinniger struck a fist against the table. "I can do anything you can do, Alex!" He tried to make the statement emphatic, tried to believe in the words.

That was weeks ago, he thought now, driving the mountain road with Tolbert. His words had *not* been valid. He'd done nothing whatever about Tolbert's contest. He'd dreamed up a half-dozen criminal actions and planned them in precise detail. But when it came to the doing he'd failed. Tolbert had not, he knew. The man's manner today indicated that he had indeed committed his crime, and won another contest.

"I demand that you tell me, Alex," Kinniger said angrily. "What did you *do*?"

Tolbert's expression reflected extraordinary self-satisfaction. "Do you recall a recent San Francisco incident concerning the Hiviana Bank?"

Kinniger suddenly felt ill. He read avidly about all crimes and he'd

certainly read of that one—a simple but effective robbery that had netted the thieves just a little over one-hundred-thousand dollars. "You're not going to tell me you had anything to do with that!"

"Oh, but yes," Tolbert said with relish.

"You manipulated that from behind the scenes? Is that what you're going to try to foist off on me? No good, Alex. The man who got the money went into the bank accompanied by a woman carrying an automatic weapon. He was an ex-con and was found later on the beach shot to death, apparently by that same weapon. He was absolutely identified as the robber, because he'd worn no disguise in the bank. There was no evidence of the money on him. It's assumed the woman did the killing and ran off with it. You had nothing to do with that heist!"

"But I did, Charles. I've been using that bank for nearly twenty years and I know the operation down to every small detail. I've made friends there and I know where the vulnerabilities are. I planned everything, including gaining the assistance of that ex-convict. I knew he'd just gotten out of San Quentin—and I knew, just as you know, the unconscious predilection of such people wishing to return to their cells by immediately committing a fresh crime. So—I telephoned him, disguising my voice, and made the proposal. He accepted.

"Poppycock!" Kinniger said.

"I did not give him the name of the institution, told him only that it was a bank. He met me at the appointed place of rendezvous, where I had ready a stolen car—the simplest of accomplishments, my man. I carefully outlined what we were to do and how. We carried out the caper most successfully."

"There was a woman with him!"

"It was I, Charles."

Kinniger stared at the other man, feeling his pulse pounding. *That* he could believe—Tolbert would be capable of a convincing masquerade as a woman—but had he actually done anything so bizarre as dressing as a woman and helping an ex-con rob a bank? Then had he actually *murdered* the man?

"When we went to the beach to divide the money," Tolbert said, "I shot him to death. He was a stupid individual, as most criminals are. But not *this* criminal, Charles—*I* got away with it."

Grand theft, and murder as well! Kinniger thought furiously.

"There's no way to trace anything to me, Charles. I threw the gun from the Golden Gate Bridge. The gentleman who actually collected the money from the bank, as I held that weapon, never knew who I was or, in fact, that I was not a female. He knew nothing of the identity of the bank we intended to rob until we were prepared to walk into it—so he could have told no one about that prior to the robbery. I was with him during the robbery and after—until his demise."

Kinniger's hands knotted into fists. "Where did you get a gun?" He had to find a hole somewhere, anywhere.

"I stole it from the library of a gun collector I've known for years."

"In drag, I suspect."

"You suspect correctly."

Kinniger sat in cold silence. Finally he said, "I reject it all, out of hand."

"My creel on the back seat," Tolbert said. "Lift it forward."

Kinniger turned and looked at the large monogrammed wicker container with the leather harness attached; Tolbert usually caught so many fish that its large size was essential. "What about the damned creel?"

"The money's inside."

"If it is, which I doubt, I'm not putting my fingerprints anywhere near it."

Tolbert peeled off one driving glove, then the other. He handed them to Kinniger.

Kinniger put them on and yanked the creel forward, feeling instinctively that the money was there. He lifted the cover and made a hurried count that revealed Tolbert's story to be absolutely true.

"When we return to the Bay Area," Tolbert said, enjoying himself, "I shall drop you off, then deposit that currency where it shall never be found by anyone but me. A nice little ace in the hole, eh? Plus the satisfaction of actually having done what I did. Now, my man, what magnificent crime have you committed to outdo me? Let's hear it."

"Go to hell, Tolbert!" Kinniger raged.

Tolbert used a little-known trail to get to a secluded section. He maneuvered his car expertly through the woods and parked on a rock plateau beside a stream.

He gathered his tackle eagerly from the trunk of the car. Kinniger

was listless as he began his own preparations. He watched Tolbert don waders and a fishing vest, then fit into the harness of the wicker creel—he knew he would wear the creel constantly here, now that its contents had been revealed. For collecting fish, Tolbert would use the metal stringer he had attached to his belt.

Kinniger shook his head, tasting bitterness. Also wearing a fishing vest, with a small net creel attached, he put together his 8-foot fly-rod. He fitted the heavy fly line through the lead guards of the rod and tied on a light 10-foot leader. He estimated the time of day and year, the condition of the water, their location, then selected a McGinty fly to approximate the yellow jackets buzzing over the water.

Tolbert, standing at the edge of a pool just upstream, caught his first trout even before Kinniger had attached the McGinty to his leader. He bellowed with joy and victory as he always did. Kinniger trudged downstream around a bend and to the bottom of a falls, then started working up and down the stream, from pools to white-water riffles, trying everything: black gnats, royal coachmen, hackles, mosquitoes, quills, pink ladies, red ants, almost every fly he owned.

Nothing worked. There was not the slightest evidence that fish even existed in these waters.

Yet he kept hearing Tolbert's infuriating shouts as he continued to draw fish from a stream that refused Kinniger the same privilege.

Then Tolbert was directly above him, working carefully along a rock ledge at the lower side of a pool where water spilled over and came down in a flashing roar to where Kinniger cast into the rapids in front of him.

Tolbert shouted again, and held a wriggling trout of impressive size for Kinniger to see. Kinniger swore silently, then blinked as the idea came to him, full-blown.

He did not think more about it—he simply acted, as fury seethed within him.

He found in his vest a very large hook he'd used on a one-time salt-water excursion in the Pacific Ocean. He cut the leader line from the heavier fly line to which it had been attached, then swiftly tied the large hook to the fly line and pinched on split shot for added distance and control. He made several quick false casts, the large hook flying back and forth over his head.

Then he looked up to see that Tolbert was still on the ledge at the

top of the falls, perhaps fifty feet above where Kinniger stood with the water churning around jagged rocks.

Kinniger made his real cast now, sending the line upward, straight at Tolbert, his accuracy unerring. The hook bit into Tolbert's vest. Kinniger yanked his line, fixing the hook, and pulling Tolbert off the ledge. Tolbert shouted as he came down—then he struck the rocks. Kinniger let his catch be pushed along by the rapids a distance. Finally, when Tolbert reached quieter waters, Kinniger worked him in.

When he had beached him on the bank, he examined him and knew that Tolbert was quite dead.

He removed the harness of the creel from Tolbert's body, then opened the cover. The money had gotten a bit wet, but it would soon dry. Kinniger closed the cover and wrapped the harness around the creel. He had done it! No planning, no plotting, just the action itself! He'd not only murdered, he'd murdered Tolbert himself! And he had Tolbert's stolen money. All he had to do now was hide the money to retrieve later, then drive Tolbert's car to the nearest phone to report the accident.

He knelt beside Tolbert and took his car keys. As he did, he smiled at the stringer hooked to Tolbert's belt where some of the fish were still flopping. He would simply leave them secured, proof that Tolbert had not needed a creel.

He stood up with the creel and started up along the bank toward the sports car. He could hide the creel anywhere nearby. Who would be likely to find it even if they should search for it? Why should anyone search for *any*thing?

Then it came to him, as he climbed, that perhaps there was the faintest possibility that someone *would* think of foul play. It was unreasonable—he and Tolbert had been outwardly regarded as the best of friends. Yet the lawman's mind was constantly honed by suspicion, wasn't it? The creel, if it were found with the money in it, could be identified as Tolbert's. And the money would constitute a motive. Someone had dashed Tolbert to the rocks and taken his creel with the money in it . . .

Kinniger stopped, feeling his heart racing as hard as it had when he'd pulled Tolbert off the ledge. A small chipmunk scurried in front of him so that Kinniger actually jumped. A jay sounded a bitter tirade at

him from a pine branch above. Kinniger's nerves sang in reponse.

Go back to the body, he thought, turning and hurrying down toward it. Put the harness of the creel back on Tolbert, remove the money and transfer the fish from the stringer to the creel. Find some other container to put the money in, so that it's safe here for a time, in the wilderness . . .

No, he thought. Foolish thinking. He was overreacting. Everything was fine. All he had to do was hide the creel as it was, somewhere, anywhere, remembering its location, then go ahead and report the accidental death.

He climbed upward again, trying to remain calm. As he neared the car, it came to him: what if Tolbert had not committed the perfect crime, after all? What if the man Tolbert had killed, the ex-con with whom he'd committed the bank robbery, had somehow found out Tolbert's real identity—had left evidence of the fact in some way, telling someone, writing it down where it could still be found . . .

Or something else: what if the bank had a record of some of the serial numbers on the currency!

Kinniger turned and plunged back down the bank, thinking: forget the money! Put the harness and creel back on Tolbert and leave the currency in the creel, and drive off to phone in the report. Who could accuse Kinniger of foul play if that kind of money remained in Tolbert's possession?

As he neared the body he stopped, thinking: leave a hundred thousand dollars? All of the security he'd always wanted and needed? Leave it? Just like that?

He couldn't do it!

He whirled and went upward again. He'd been so certain that he had at last beaten Tolbert, beaten him all the way, once and for all. But now another thought rushed at him, a vicious, stupendous thought!

What if Tolbert, knowing that he was going to reveal to Kinniger the fact that he'd robbed a bank and murdered a man, using the money to prove the fact, had also left a document behind? "In case of my untoward death, gentlemen, look to Mr. Charles Kinniger, who was informed of my crimes and knew of the stolen money . . . "

He stopped and turned and went downward again. Give the money back to Tolbert, he thought wildly—let him have it, even in death! . . .

But, no, he thought, his mind whirling as he reversed himself and

started back up the incline, he couldn't give it up—he couldn't! Yet . . .

And he found, with maddening realization, that he was simply running back and forth over the same path, unable to make a decision. The peaks surrounded him in primeval grandeur. The stream sounded its sweet free-spirited tumbling. But he felt as trapped, as defeated, as any animal caught in an unrelenting cage.

"*Damn you!*" he shouted down toward the dead man. "*Damn you, Tolbert!*" he screamed, knowing that his condemnation was as useless as it had always been.

The careful stalker overlooks nothing. . .

ONE OF A KIND

by VIRGINIA HART

Gary noticed the scorpion first—and the girl second. The girl he could have stared at for an hour and still not been able to pick her out of a police lineup. The scorpion-shaped brooch pinned to her blouse was one of a kind.

"Give me a beer," he told her, forcing his eyes to her face. "And some kind of sandwich."

"Need a menu?" She tucked a stray strand of black hair behind her

ear, first on one side and then on the other, a gesture characteristic of girls who wore their hair straight and too long—a gesture that had always irritated him.

"Barbecued beef or ham—whatever." He shrugged and flashed her his best smile.

The girl nodded, blank-faced, and scribbled something on a pad before turning away from the table.

Gary had seen the brooch before. Twice. The first time was when he'd been accepted in the organization. He'd been invited to dinner, so he could be looked over by the big man in his museumlike mansion. There'd been a portrait over the fireplace of a sad-eyed, dog-faced matron who would have looked more at home stirring a kettle of Irish stew than she did presiding over the antique-filled, red-velvet, and gold-damask drawing room.

"My beloved wife." Rick Hadley appeared suddenly through a paneled opening Gary had supposed was a plain wall. "Dead two years April. But not in here." He tapped his chest as if the gesture went with an often repeated speech he'd memorized. "I had it painted, like they say, posthumously. She was a gentle woman. Too shy to sit for a painter. Lovely, huh?"

"Lovely." It was an uncomfortable word for Gary and felt strange in his mouth.

"See the pin she's wearing?" His voice vibrated as if he were speaking through a microphone. "Designed it for her myself the year we were married. An anniversary present. That thing—the scorpion—was her—what do you call it?—birth sign."

The pin was hideous, Gary thought. Outsized, like cheap costume jewelry. The woman's face was so plain that the gaudy brooch dominated the portrait completely—just as it dominated this nothing of a girl who wore it now.

"Nice," Gary told her as she set the beer and sandwich in front of him. He pointed. "The pin, I mean. From an admirer?"

"You could say that." She lifted her eyebrows.

Gary thought of the last time he'd seen the scorpion. Rick's young son, Paulie, had pulled him aside, all excited, and had opened a black velvet jewel case. The thing had stared up at him.

"This belonged to Mama. My old man would blow a fuse if he knew. But I'm giving it to my girl, Lisa, tonight for her birthday. I figure

she'd get it after we're married anyway, so why not now?"

Gary hadn't answered, not caring. Taking sides in the private affairs of the Hadley family could have been fatal to his ambitions. It would be as easy to become a movie star as it was to work himself up in a big operation like Rick's. He could go on the rest of his life being just one of the boys, unless he planned his way carefully.

"Lisa even looks a lot like Mama did when she was a girl. But, hey—" when Paulie laughed, he lost the fierce Hadley scowl he'd inherited "—there's nothing Freudian about it. She's no mother image."

"Anything else?" the girl was saying, the flickering light from the candle on the table picking up evil glints in the scorpion's single eye.

It was the same brooch and this was Lisa Davidson—no matter what she called herself now. Like Paulie had told him, she did look a lot like the sad-eyed matron in the portrait. Except that her eyes weren't sad. They were brazen.

"Anybody I should be jealous of?"

The girl squinted. "Huh?"

"The guy who gave you the brooch."

"He's out of the picture," she said, flipping her hair again.

Out of the picture. The nonchalant way she referred to Paulie's disappearance from her life made things easier for Gary. Not that he'd ever had any qualms about killing her anyway. He had no prejudices where women were concerned. They were as easy to blow away as men were. Especially if, like this one, they had it coming.

Poor square little Paulie had shot himself when she dumped him. What had he seen in her that didn't show from where Gary was sitting? He was a nice-looking kid, and with the money and power that would have been his one day he could have made it with Raquel Welch maybe. This one's legs were too short, her figure was too straight. She had a "gimme-gimme" face. He'd known plenty of girls like that and all he'd given them was the back of his hand.

After Paulie's wake there'd been no contract out on the girl. Rick Hadley had refused to acknowledge her existence, as if to do so would have been a blotch on the boy's memory. But it must have gnawed at him that, thanks to her, he had no family. There had been an older son Chris who'd been killed in a boating accident when he was twelve. There had been a daughter Jenny who'd run off, wanting nothing more to do with her father after he'd sent a couple of his boys to discourage

a suitor he thought was beneath her. Then his wife had died. Word was that she'd taken an overdose—getting away from Rick in the only way she knew how.

And so there was only Paulie, and Paulie had tried hard to please even though he'd inherited his mother's softness rather than his father's might. Now he was gone too.

Gary was certain that whoever killed the girl who'd torn off the last link in the Hadley chain would end up in Paulie's place, and groomed to take over someday. Others had the same idea and hunted for the girl. But they failed because they expected her to leave town. They didn't figure she would brazen it out under their noses. Anyway, they didn't know who they were looking for. Paulie had kept his secret well.

"I don't want Dad turning his muscle on Lisa," he'd confided to Gary. "Once we're married, he'll accept her. Family is everything with him."

Gary hadn't wanted to be in the boy's confidence and resented being singled out. He'd see Paulie sneaking off for one of his rendezvous and he'd look the other way.

Then the day before the suicide, Paulie asked Gary to drive him somewhere. "If I take my car, I might be followed," he had explained.

Gary wanted to refuse and wished immediately that he had, but there was something so desperate in Paulie's face that he didn't have the heart. He waited outside, cursing himself for a fool, while the boy went into the Club Reno. Through the window Gary saw Paulie talking to a girl. They argued and he grabbed her. She yelled something at him and slapped him. He slapped her back and ran out.

The next morning, he put the barrel of a gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger. His note said only, "Have it your way, Lisa."

One thing puzzled Gary. This girl could have lived in luxury as the wife of Rick Hadley's only son. Yet she preferred working in a crummy dive, associating with low-lifers. In the corner booth, for instance, was a throwback from caveman days, a guy broad-shouldered and tall, whose slitty, lizzardlike eyes darted back and forth, following her.

"Is that good-looking fellow over there your boy friend?" Gary asked as she passed his table. "I thought at first he was Robert Redford."

The girl scowled at him.

"Hey, wait." He caught her arm and faked a boyish, aw-shucks ex-

pression. "I've only been trying to know you. Trying to work up courage to ask you for a date."

Her expression softened and she studied him a moment, gnawing at her lower lip. "Why not come out and ask? Could we go to dinner somewhere nice? Like Perino's?"

Perino's—the most expensive place in town. It figured. "Sounds good to me," he told her, smiling.

She came alive then, talking, moving, using her eyes like her kind of woman did when she thought she had a man going. Finally she scribbled her address on the back of a matchbook.

Gary paused at the door to raise his hand in a kind of salute. He'd be waiting for her when she got home tonight. Only it wouldn't be for a late-night dinner.

Tomorrow he'd lay the scorpion on Rick's desk. "I thought you'd want to keep this in the family," he pictured himself saying.

The girl wiggled her fingers goodbye at him. He wouldn't be bad if he wasn't so pushy and if he didn't use all that greasy gunk on his hair.

She glanced at the apeman in the corner booth. Good—he'd taken it all in. She wanted him to report that she'd let herself be picked up by another sleazy no-goodnik. Maybe she'd give him a lot more to report later. She might just have a real orgy with this smart-mouthed Romeo. Later he'd get worked over, but he had it coming.

She fingered the brooch the guy had been so taken with, remembering the night Lisa had given it to her. She'd come into the club crying, carrying a suitcase.

"I've got to get away. Tonight. Please tell Paulie I love him but I'm not strong enough to cope with whatever the Hadleys are mixed up in."

She had taken the scorpion, wrapped in a handkerchief, from her handbag. "I have no right to this. I don't want it. But I don't dare tell Paulie how I feel. No telling what he'd do. Oh, I'm so scared."

She started to the door, then came back, her eyes hollow. "You understand, don't you? You're Paulie's sister. You can make him understand. You had to escape from it yourself, didn't you?"

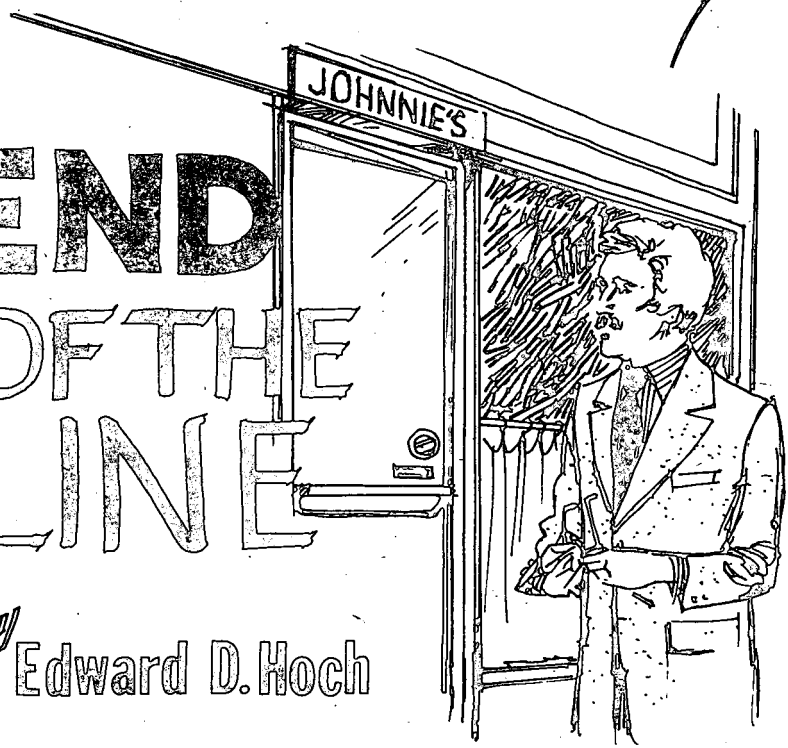
Lisa had been wrong. Paulie hadn't listened to her. They'd argued and he'd run out in a frenzy. Maybe in a way he'd escaped. But she hadn't—not really.

Every night her father's henchman came in and sat in the corner booth, looking out for her, reporting her every move. Rick Hadley showing his love for his daughter in the only way he knew.

The scorpion was ugly and she probably shouldn't wear it. Not in a place like this anyway. But it was all she had left of her mother. Funny, though—it was more like her father. Its claws reaching out, never letting go.

There is anguish in looking for what is already lost. . .

END OF THE LINE



by Edward D. Hoch

It was Saturday morning, when everything moved a bit more slowly—even the bus carrying Professor Walden Swift to his destination. Now it was the end of the line, and he got out because he knew Tommy Easton would have gotten out here too, the night before. For a time he stood silently outside the bus station, trying to see the scene the way Tommy would have seen it. He'd boarded the express bus at the University and he'd left it here in the city, less than twelve hours earlier.

But then what?

Professor Swift rubbed the mist from his glasses and focused on the line of shops across the street. The fifty-minute trip might have made Tommy hungry, or at least thirsty. He crossed the street to a greasy-windowed lunch counter with a red neon coffee cup blinking on and off above the door, circled by the words *We Never Close.*

"What'll you have?" asked a beefy counter man in a sweat-stained shirt. Stitched above his pocket was the name *Fred.*

"Coffee, black. And one of those doughnuts, please."

"Sure, Mister. Nice morning, huh?"

Walden Swift hadn't really thought about it. He rarely thought about the weather. "I suppose so."

"You down from the college?"

"How could you tell?"

"That was the express just pulled in. We get a lot of kids on weekends. You a teacher there?"

"A professor of English literature."

"Yeah? Pay pretty good?"

"Fair." Walden Swift watched while the man puttered about behind the counter, making coffee, washing dishes from the breakfast crowd, occasionally wiping off the spotted counter with a dirty damp cloth. "I'm looking for a boy," the professor said.

"Huh?"

"A boy. One of my freshman students. He left campus last evening and took a bus down here. I have to find him."

The counter man shrugged. "Lots of college kids come in here."

"This would have been last night around ten, off that same express bus. Here's a picture of him." Walden Swift opened his wallet and held out an overexposed flash photo taken at a campus political rally a few months earlier. "This boy," he said, indicating a sandy-haired youth in torn jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Yeah, maybe I seen him last night. I can't be sure." He edged away, wiping the counter. "I didn't come on till midnight."

Professor Swift returned the picture to his wallet and sat in silence, his brooding eyes scanning the fly-specked, grease-stained walls. A number of cardboard signs had been tacked up in spots, all designed to lure the college students further into the depths of the city. *Wrestling every Wednesday night! Bring your girl!* But it had been a Friday

night, not a Wednesday. *Funland! No place like it!* He jotted that one down in his notebook. An amusement park was always a possibility.

Then another sign caught his eye. *Rock at Johnnie's! Every Friday night!*

"Where's Johnnies?" he asked the counter man.

"Everybody knows where Johnnie's is."

"I don't."

"Straight down this street for five blocks, turn right and go over another block. It's on the corner."

"Many of the college crowd go there?"

"Sure. Friday nights you can't get near the place. But you're a little late. This is Saturday."

"I know." He paid for his coffee and doughnut and left a quarter tip.

Outside, the blue haze of the April morning was gradually fading before the currents of clear air off the Sound. In another hour the sun's glare would reveal the city as it truly was, spotlighting the peeled faces of the golden-haired girls on the faded soft-drink posters, sharpening the focus on the garish storefronts with their promise of instant pleasure.

On any other Saturday in April, Walden Swift might have joined in some campus activity—an impromptu picnic or even a bull session about the problems of the Third World. He liked to mingle with the young people he taught, liked the sound of their youthful laughter and the promise of their groping minds. He even liked the metallic click of a beer can being opened on a sunny afternoon, or the sweetish odor of pot being passed from hand to hand around a room.

But this Saturday was different.

Johnnie's.

The neon letters were dark. He glanced up at the sign and went in, past a lonely old lady scrubbing the lobby's tile with steaming suds, doing her part to rid the place of its mingled odors of stale cigarette smoke and perfume. The bar along one end of the dim room was cluttered with glasses and half-empty bottles. Scores of tiny tables were scattered about and covered band-instruments rested like tombstones on a raised platform by the small dance floor. The tall amplifiers at either side of the platform told him the music was loud and electrical.

"We're closed till five," a voice behind him said.

Walden Swift turned and saw a tired little man with a mustache standing in his shirtsleeves by the office doorway. "I came for some information," he told the man.

"You a food inspector or something? We keep a clean kitchen."

"On Friday nights you have rock shows."

"Sure. Nothing wrong with that." The man was on the defensive, sparring with an uncertain foe.

"Are you Johnnie?"

"That's me. Who are you?"

"Professor Walden Swift from the University."

"Walden?" Johnnie repeated with a grin.

Professor Swift returned his smile. "My father admired Thoreau." Then he turned serious. "Actually, one of my students disappeared yesterday. I've traced him as far as the city and I think he might have come here last night."

The man relaxed visibly. "The place is full of college kids on weekends. Why do you want to find him?"

"That's a long story. I think his life might be in danger." He produced the picture from his wallet once more. "Recognize him?"

Johnnie studied it for a moment, then shook his head. "They all look alike to me. I just make sure they're old enough."

"So you don't know him?"

"Never saw him."

"Is there anyone who might have? Bartenders? Waiters? Perhaps he tried to pick up a girl."

Johnnie was back on the defensive at once. "I don't run that sort of place, Professor. No drugs, no B-girls, no drinks for minors. Just good clean rock music. What they do after they leave here is no concern of mine."

Walden Swift sighed and started to turn away. He'd come to a dead end. But then, over among the tables, the cleaning woman came up with something. "Girl's purse, Johnnie," she called out, holding her prize high in the air.

"Any money in it? Identification?"

"Couple of quarters. Cigarettes. Name and address. Here!"

Johnnie accepted the cheap sequin-studded bag with obvious distaste. "She'll probably come looking for it," he said. "Jean O'Brian, 79 Fernwood Crescent. I'll give her a call."

Walden Swift cleared his throat. "I'd be happy to return it to her. It's possible she noticed this boy I'm looking for."

Johnnie thought it over, then shook his head. "No, I'd better keep it here. Sorry I can't help you."

The professor nodded. "That address was 79 Fernwood Crescent?"

"Yeah. You going to see her anyway?"

"I think so. A girl might be more likely than you to notice a boy like Tommy."

The house at 79 Fernwood Crescent was hardly the apartment of a college girl. It was in an older section of the city, a neighborhood of converted mansions which now served as oddly shaped apartments. Each one was different, having in common only the original high ceilings and high rents. Sometimes three or four working girls might take one and share the cost, but Jean O'Brian's name was alone on the mailbox.

She came to the door after the fourth ring, obviously just awakened though it was past noon, and stared at Walden Swift with a blurred uncertain look. She had the face of a sadly experienced city-dweller.

"Miss O'Brian?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Walden Swift. I'm a professor at the University. One of my students disappeared last night and I thought—"

"God!" She shook her head to clear away the fuzz of a hard night. "Not that boy I was with at Johnnie's?"

"Could I come in for a moment?"

"I'm not dressed." She bundled the blue bathrobe closer about her slim body.

"Would you look at a picture?"

"I suppose so." She took it in one hand, keeping the other arm tightly around her. "No, that's not the boy I was with."

"His name is Tommy Easton. I'm trying to find him, to retrace his route last night."

"I wonder if he's the one Sue Brady was with. He looked a little like this, with that sandy hair."

"Where can I find her?"

"I don't know. She's always around Johnnie's on Friday nights, same as me. A lot of the boys from the business college come over, but not

that many from your place. That's too far away. If they come to the city at all they usually have dates lined up already."

"Tommy wouldn't have had a date lined up. He didn't know anyone here."

"No. If he's the one I remember he was sitting by himself at first, just listening to the music. I thought he might have been looking for a fix, you know?"

"Drugs? At Johnnie's?"

She blinked her eyes. "Are you kidding? Why do you think it's so popular? If you're out of your crib you can buy pot at Johnnie's, though they're careful on the hard stuff." She was warming to the subject. "It was solid rock last night, a group from Detroit that Johnnie brought in. I could see your friend Tommy liked them too, if it really was him."

"What about him? What happened?"

"Well, he sat there alone most of the night. Then finally Sue Brady came in. She was with some guy old enough to be her father, but that's not unusual. Anyway, after two drinks he went to sleep with his head on the table. Your Tommy or whoever was at the next table and he offered to take her home. They sat together for a while and then they left. That was it."

"Did Tommy get into any trouble that you saw?"

"No—everything's cool at Johnnie's."

"You don't know where she lives? Where I might find her?"

"No. Wait. My boy friend and I dropped her off once after a night at Johnnie's—one Friday when she didn't manage a date. Just a second while I check the phonebook." She disappeared inside, leaving the door a few inches ajar as a possible indication of trust.

"Here, I think this is it," she said, returning with the open telephone book. "The Parkcrest Apartments. You can write down the address."

"Thanks," he said, getting out his pad and pen. Then, writing, he said, "You left your purse at Johnnie's last night. He has it for you."

The Parkcrest was a vast U-shaped building with a center courtyard filled with early-blossoming magnolias and children at play. The building reminded Walden Swift of another like it, where he'd often visited a girl he once loved. But that had been when he was young enough to believe in a girl who told him never to get involved with people.

Sue Brady, when she answered his ring, was nothing like the other girl. Her blonde hair was caught back in a youthful ponytail, but otherwise there was a plainness about her that startled him. On the street he might have passed her without a second look.

"Miss Brady? I'm Professor Walden Swift."

"Professor?"

"I believe you were with one of my students last night—a boy named Tommy Easton."

"What do you mean, *with* him?" Her blue eyes flashed. "He brought me home from Johnnie's because my date passed out on the table. He stayed maybe ten or fifteen minutes at most and then he left."

He showed her the picture. "Was this he?"

"Yes."

"Where is he? What happened to him?"

"How should I know?"

He sighed and lowered his voice a bit. "It's very important to me. Could I come in for a moment?"

She hesitated. "Only for a minute, please. I have to be going out."

It was a neat little apartment, marred only by an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts.

"I'm afraid," he told her, "of what might have happened to him."

"You can search the place if you think he's hidden somewhere."

"I'm sure he's not here. I just want to know what happened to him last night."

She sat down and took out another cigarette. "I told you—he walked me home and then left me."

"Did anyone see you together, follow you, do you think?"

"Lots of people saw us together, at Johnnie's and later."

Walden Swift sighed. "Let me tell you something about Tommy Easton. When he came to the University last September he was shy and introverted. He came from a broken home and he thought the world was against him. Maybe it was. Anyway, this first year at the University was a hard one for Tommy, and for people like me who tried to befriend him. He started smoking pot, drinking a lot, doing all the things he figured you were supposed to do."

"Like picking up girls?"

"Yes, that too. He'd come into the city on the bus and sometimes we wouldn't see him for days."

Sue Brady faced him squarely. "He went out for cigarettes," she said suddenly. "He never came back."

"Pot?"

She nodded. "I told him he could get grass at Johnnie's but it was closed by that time. He said he knew another place."

"What time was this?"

She looked away. "Around three o'clock."

"And he never came back?"

"I guess he changed his mind about me."

"He didn't change his mind. Something happened to him." He was on his feet. "Which way did he go? Can you show me?"

"I'll get my coat."

Once outside she led him to the left, down the street toward a line of stores. "He said it was down this way."

They passed a barber shop and a delicatessen, a cigar store and a beauty parlor. Presently they reached the corner and Walden Swift glanced in both directions, searching for a clue. A three-word sign caught his eye: *We Never Close.*

"Yes," he muttered half to himself.

He walked quickly toward it with the girl trailing behind. He pushed open the door and entered, and the counter man named Fred said, "Hello again. Back for more coffee?"

"You were working this morning, weren't you? Around three o'clock?"

"What if I was?"

"Tommy Easton was in here. He came back to buy some pot."

"You're crazy."

"But you sold him something else, didn't you? Harder stuff?"

The counter man took a step backward, and Walden Swift shot a hand across the counter to grab him. "Miss Brady," he said, "call the police!"

The counter man tried to pull away, tried to reach a bread knife by the skillet, but Walden Swift held him firm with a strength he hadn't known before.

"I lied to you," he told the girl. "Tommy Easton came back to the University last night, on the last express bus. He'd taken a shot of heroin here and somehow managed to stagger on board. When the bus pulled in, he was dead of an overdose."

Madness has a contagion all its own. . .

THE FIRST MOON TOURIST

by

Duffy Carpenter

When the legislature of my state decided to do something about the glut of cases clogging the Small Claims Court, they dreamed up an expansion of the referee system which allowed state-appointed non-lawyers to settle disputes below $1,000 in value. To qualify for this non-paying post, one had to have a background in business law, attend a series of lectures on procedure, and pass written and oral examinations.

The guiding principle, I was told in my classes, was the doctrine of the "reasonable man." Once I was actively hearing cases each Tuesday and Thursday night from 6:30 to 10:00 P.M., I wondered how far I was supposed to stretch being reasonable.

For the uninitiated, the legal definition of a "reasonable man" is a hypothetical being who exercises qualities of attention, knowledge, intelligence, and judgment. I do very well on attention because it would be impossible to fall asleep during the three-ring circus that these hearings are. I believe I also score well on the knowledge qualification, since I have a Masters in Business Administration and fifteen years of marketing experience. I even come up to snuff on intelligence, since I was smart enough to marry the prettiest girl this side of the Mississippi, have three bright children by her, and along the way managed to become a vice-president with a major corporation. So far, so good. But then we bump into judgment, and I think my first show of lunacy was becoming a referee in the first place. The second was allowing Minivich *vs.* Kripps to enter arbitration instead of alerting the local funny farm when they walked into my hearing room.

My initial reaction to the two contestants was that I had, through some magic, become the MC on "Let's Make a Deal." Minivich was a mustached man in his early thirties—at least I assumed that, because the visor on his space helmet blurred his features. Yes, space helmet, just like the astronauts wear. The rest of him was all denim. Jacket, jeans, shirt. This was set off by boots of silver. When he lifted the visor, I half expected him to say "Trick or treat." Instead, he said "Minivich to Corbett, present for justice." I'm Corbett, so I nodded.

That was only half the walnut. Its counterpart, or more accurately, the defendant, Joe Kripps, was not to be outdone. He wore a long red smock and a white hardhat. So far, so bad, but atop the hat was a small revolving light. Red, blue, white, red, blue, white, etc. When Kripps turned to draw up a chair, I noted the lettering on his back in block letters: "Far Flung Travel, Go Go Go." He sat down with a broad smile on his pudgy face. "Kripps is on the pad, Mr. Corbett," he said.

I quickly remembered what the Chief Judge had told me about decorum, cleared my throat, and gave the spiel about their right to have the case heard before a judge and be able to appeal his decision. "Before a referee, the decision is binding, you both understand that?"

"Plaintiff to Corbett, A-O.K." Guess who said that?

"Binding and final, that's what I'm here for," Kripps said in cadence with his revolving light. Now it was white, blue and red, and I wondered how the hell he had reversed the sequence, because his hands were still on the table.

"Now, gentlemen, the subpeona states that this is a contest involving $550, which you, Mr. Minivich, claim is due you on a breach of contract by Mr. Kripps. Excuse me, Mr. Kripps, could I ask you to turn off your light? It's most disconcerting." I felt as if I were sitting in the old Aragon Ballroom.

"What time is it?" Kripps asked.

Dumbbell that I am, I told him. "It's 7:55."

"Eight o'clock it goes off, unequivocally."

"Unequivocally?"

"Right. After eight, there's no sense in transmitting signals."

"Well, I guess I can stand it for five more minutes. Now, Mr. Minivich, suppose you tell me your complaint."

"Roger. This crumb here . . ."

That did it. I slammed the table with the flat of my hand. "O.K., fellows, let's cut the comedy. Take the screwy hats off. Now! Mr. Minivich, I expect more than shortwave responses from you. If you were in front of the bench, you would have been tossed out four minutes ago. Now let's get to it. What is your beef with Mr. Kripps?"

He took the space helmet off and cradled it in the crook of his arm. "No offense, Mr. Corbett," he said sheepishly, "I just wore this rig to point up my case."

"Apology accepted. Just what is your case?"

"I'm out five fifty bucks and he didn't get me on the moon. I want the dough back. No moon, no moola. No lunar trip, no lucre. That's my stand."

"Stand on what?" I turned to Kripps. "Mr. Kripps, will you turn that damned beacon off, please?" He did.

"That's why I brung in the space rig," Minivich went on, " 'cause I knew he'd show up with some gimmick."

I was at the end of my patience. "What do you two think this is, a side show? Quick and easy, Mr. Minivich, state your problem!"

"Rog—sorry. Five years ago, I was the first person to sign up for Kripps Tour of the Moon. Five years, mind you—1825 days waiting around."

"One thousand eight hundred and twenty-six," Kripps put in. "Remember leap year."

"So there's an extra day. That's even worser. Right, Mr. Corbett?"

"I don't know what's going on, so how would I know what's right until you tell me? Just how was Mr. Kripps going to get you to the moon?"

"That's his problem. He just promised delivery of my bod' on the big blue cheese up there, and there I ain't."

"May I inject a point of clarification?" Kripps asked.

"Clarification by all means," I said. "Maybe some sense too." Suddenly I knew how Margaret Dumont must have felt working with the Marx Brothers.

"I, sir, am the proprietor of the Far Flung Travel Agency. Several years ago, I offered a tour of the moon when and *if* the means of getting there was made available to tourists. As yet the means are not available. But Minivich's seat on the rocket is still reserved. Seat number one. We live up to our motto at Far Flung." He rose to his feet and recited: "Break your dull status quo, just tell Joe where you want to go." He resumed his seat like a senator who has just delivered a truly profound piece of insight.

"Mr. Kripps," I asked, "just what *means* were you referring to?"

"Commercial interstellar travel. The newspapers were full of it when the government said we would put a man on the moon back in the '60s. There were articles all over the place about folks someday being able to tour the moon, maybe even live there. I haven't put fifteen years in the travel agency game for nothing, so I started booking passages. I was saving that first seat for myself until Minivich here offered me a $200 premium over the $350 price to be number one. It's all here, signed and sealed in a contract."

He pushed the document across to me and I read it through. It had been legally drawn and spelled out the conditions and terms in plain language.

I looked at Minivich. He had a self-satisfied look on his face. Kripps was trying to erase it with some legal mumbo-jumbo. "My lawyer told me it is aleatory and still binding," he went on.

Minivich furrowed his brows and I explained as best I could.

"An aleatory contract, Mr. Minivich, is one where the performance of one party depends on the occurrence of some contingent event. The

event here seems to be the availability of a means of space travel."

"*Commercial* space travel," Kripps put in. "Armstrong and Aldrin and those guys at NASA don't count."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, Mr. Kripps," I replied curtly. "The contract covers that. But the letter of the law is one thing and the color of the law is another. I think the issue here is the probability of such a contingency being fulfilled. It's a question of value."

"He got lots of value." Kripps tapped the table with his fingertips. "He got a swell plaque, real mahogany, and a brass plate saying C. A. Minivich was the number one passenger to the moon."

"Everybody got one of those," Minivich smirked. "How's it so valuable when almost a thousand people have one?"

"Not one that says they are the first, they don't."

"Aw, this is a bunch of bushwa anyway," Minivich said with disgust. "I've already been to the moon and it was a bummer trip and you had nothing to do with it so fork over the five fifty clams."

"You have been to the moon?" I said it slowly and clearly.

"Sure. That's why I'm here. I don't need his crummy contract any more."

"Ha, that's rich." Kripps shook his head. "You've been to the moon. Ha."

"Yeah, Kripps, and you had some nerve charging five fifty when I could get there for nothing."

"Just how did you accomplish this . . . ah . . . trip, Mr. Minivich?" I asked with some trepidation.

"UFOs is how."

Well, I couldn't say I hadn't asked for it. But madness, says the poet, has a contagion all its own, and I was definitely infected.

"Unidentified flying objects?"

"Right on the button, Mr. Corbett," Minivich assured me. "Hey, don't look at me like I'm a whackeroo, Kripps, lotsa people are getting free rides in space ships. Don't you read the papers, for crying out loud?" He then spun a rather ingenuous tale about a three-day trip to the moon aboard a space vehicle that sounded suspiciously like the *QE II*. Minivich's interplanetary hosts were called Zebtrobs and the head Zebtrob was called Hugo.

"How come I didn't read about your trip in the papers?" Kripps asked.

"Because Hugo told me to keep my trap shut. The only reason I'm bringing it up here is because my wife insists I get my money back. Hugo would understand that because his old lady is also a nag. Her name is Quilta and she's a drag."

While this exchange was going on, I found myself with the queasy feeling that if the local press got wind of this, I could become the biggest joke to hit the municipal building since the parking lot caved in. Of course, Minivich's story was a fabrication, or, at best, unprovable. The contract remained the real issue. Kripps must have been using ESP on me, because he brought up the proof aspect verbally.

"How can you prove you went to the moon? Did you bring back some rocks or something?"

"Hugo said no souvenirs."

"Huh," Kripps grunted. "At least you got a plaque from me."

"But no trip. Can I call a witness, Mr. Corbett?"

I warily looked around the room, half expecting Hugo and his Zebtrobian spouse to materialize.

"She's right outside in the hall," Minivich assured me.

"*Who* is out in the hall?" I asked.

"The old lady, my old lady." He got up and opened the door to admit what I might have assumed was Quilta had I not been told she was Mrs. Minivich. It was impossible to tell her age. Age! It was impossible to tell if she was female or even had a face under all the hair that sprang out of her scalp like straw and fell over her face, shoulders, and hips. Denim was a big item in the Minivich household, because she too was covered with the faded material, except that her outfit consisted of a long cape over a shapeless dress. I rose out of an instinct of courtesy—or maybe apprehension, because she was fumbling with something under her cape.

She came up to the table, whipped out a small twig, and waved it in front of me. "You are a just man," she intoned. "The spirits accept you." Then she sat down in the chair her husband had drawn up for her. "Did you get the dough?" she asked Minivich.

"Not yet, Giselle. Will you tell the court about my trip?"

"Wait a minute!" Kripps had his hand up like a traffic cop. "His wife can't testify."

"I ain't testifying *against* him," Giselle Minivich intoned. Her voice had the quality of a hammer striking an empty boiler.

"Let's hear what she has to say first, Mr. Kripps," I said.

"Well, she has to be under oath then."

Mrs. Minivich looked shocked. "A high priestess of the Subterranean Coven take an oath! Boy, the nerve of some people!"

I intervened. "Just tell us what you came in to say, Mrs. Minivich."

"With pleasure," she said from inside the hair cover. "Kordo was gone for . . ."

"Kordo?" I asked. "Who's Kordo?"

"Him." She aimed a cocked thumb at her husband. "He used to be plain old Caesar Augustus Minivich until he went on that trip. Now he's Kordo, because that's what this Hugo Zebtrob called him."

"It's not Hugo Zebtrob, it's Hugo *the* Zebtrob," Minivich corrected her impatiently. "It's like calling me Kordo Earthling, for crying out loud. I'm Kordo *the* Earthling."

"O.K., O.K., don't get touchy." She looked at me mournfully. "He's been like that since this Hugo gave him a lift."

"You have met Hugo and Quilta?" I asked.

"Quilta?" She turned to her husband. "Who's Quilta?"

"Just one of the people on the ship."

"I thought she was Hugo's wife," I reminded him.

"Wife! You didn't say nothing about women being on the trip. Look here, Caesar Augustus Kordo Minivich, if you've been off in the clouds with some damned woman . . . you know how I feel about that jazz. You know what I'd do . . ."

The whole thing was going from the insane to the outer limits of credulity. Now I had three screwballs on my hands and a marital dispute as well. "Look, folks," I pleaded, "this is getting out of hand. Mrs. Minivich, answer yes or no. Did you see the space ship or this Hugo person?"

"No. I thought Caesar Augustus was laying in a ditch someplace for four days. I was wracked with worry, as they say. Then, thanks to the spirits of the deep, I made contact and they said he was O.K. Four whole days he's gone and then he comes back and tells me about his trip which turned out to be a bummer, or so he says. Was this Quilta one of those Amazon broads like in the movies?"

"Giselle, she was a drag."

"Well, I'm asking the spirits about that, don't you worry." She turned to me. "So he comes back and I tell him 'Hell, Kripps got five

fifty loaves of your bread and you got there free.' I told him to get the bread back 'cause we could use it for the Subterranean Coven. We're having a big membership push this fall."

"Oh, no you don't," Minivich said. "That money is going into space research."

That did it. As calmly as I could, I told them I would defer decision for two weeks to consider the merits of the case, and packed the lot of them out of there.

I sat in the blissful quiet of the hearing room and took a deep breath like a man who has just had a tour of Bedlam and needs to confirm his own sanity. Once I was properly assured that I still had all my marbles, I exercised my battered but unbowed facility to reason.

I was convinced of one point—Minivich took national honors for telling the biggest, most extravagant lie ever told to a wife to explain away an indiscretion. Many a guy has disappeared for a night or two and appeased the little woman's wrath with a fib or two. After fifteen years of dealing with salesmen, I thought I had heard the cream of the crop, but Minivich had outdone them all. I heard of guys who told their wives that they were on secret missions for the government. One very creative type had the moxie to concoct the canard that he had been held captive and was ransomed by his best pal, who backed up the tale. I am not suggesting that wives are gullible. There's an old backwoods saying that a smart goose only swallows what she knows will fit through her gullet.

I could find for Kripps on the basis of a seemingly binding contract, but I wanted the opinion of the Chief Judge. Maybe moon tourism would be available someday, but I doubted it would occur in Minivich's lifetime. No matter how big a liar he was, I couldn't see letting Kripps keep his $550 on a very nebulous future trip.

I made out a report starting quite honestly with, "Dear Judge Hopper: You won't believe this, but . . ." and dropped it off at his chambers before I left that evening.

Three days later, I was at my regular job at corporate headquarters dealing quite pleasurably with a staff of sane people, when a buzz on my intercom brought the world of Small Claims Court into my business life.

I told my secretary to show Lieutenant Bill Donnagan of the Detec-

tive Squad in. I've had dealings with this crusty policeman from time to time, and had casually suggested lunch to him several weeks ago. My assumption that he was there to take me up on breaking bread was in error; the call was official, *very* official, and his stern look proved it.

"Jeff," he said, taking a seat opposite me, "I don't know how you do it, but you are invariably involved in these things."

"What things?"

"You heard a case involving a guy named Minivich a couple of nights ago."

"Yes. It was a lulu."

"So I gather. Judge Hopper passed your report along to us when the case popped up."

"What case? Has something happened to Kripps? Or Minivich?"

"Yes, Minivich—something called murder—and I think you helped to bring it about."

"Now wait a minute, Lieutenant . . ."

"Jeff, take it easy," he said with a smile. "You didn't do it on purpose. Mrs. Minivich did her hubby in last night because he had been unfaithful to her. Of course, they were both a couple of kooks. She's a witch, or so she claims, and Minivich must have been a fruitcake himself."

"Oh, my Lord," I said when the truth hit me, "I mentioned the woman on the spaceship and she killed him over that."

"That's what she says."

"She's confessed?"

"No, but she's given us a statement that's a beaut. Claims when she learned of her husband taking a trip with a space goddess, she decided to put a spell on him. She just wanted him to have a simple accident, but he ended up breaking his neck. He was pushed, or fell, from a ledge at the rear of their property. Of course all that garbage about space trips is nonsense. According to the neighbors, they'd been fighting bitterly for two days, and it finally led to murder."

"And she says it was a spell that killed him."

"Yeah. Says she put too much power in it."

"Thank God I don't hear criminal cases. I'd hate to be the judge who sits on this one."

"That's why Judge Hopper brought your report to our attention. He thinks there's an insanity angle, and it will never come to trial."

"I feel awful," I said, and I did. If only I had kept my mouth shut. "Does she have an attorney?"

"The court will appoint one. She's in custody as a material witness at the moment. The D.A. says you might have to give a deposition to the psychiatrists, so I thought I'd give you some advance warning, my friend."

"Couldn't it have been an accident, Bill? Minivich could have fallen, you said."

"Sure, and it might have held up, except for the vicious fighting the neighbors overheard. She threatened to fix him. That's why she's taking this too-much-power-in-the-spell line and sticking to the story that he actually did go on a space ride. It's just another case of a guy who got caught playing around and got nailed. There's no wrath like a woman scorned, you know."

"Talk about a woman scorned, how about the other woman? He went *someplace* for four days, didn't he? Where was he? Who was he with? Couldn't that person have a motive?"

"Sure, we're sifting through the possibilities." He got to his feet and gave me a sarcastic smile. "Please, Jeff, if my wife ever asks you if I was with you when I've told her I was, don't blow the whistle on me."

"You're too old to play around."

"You're never too old, but you do have to be willing. See you, your honor."

I wasn't due back in Small Claims until Tuesday, and thank heaven the papers paid no attention to the case, including my part in it. Over the weekend, the thing gnawed at me. Was I responsible for Mrs. Minivich's act? I had to know, so when I got to the municipal building on Tuesday evening I stopped off in the police wing to see Donnagan.

"Well, I don't know if the D.A. would like it, Jeff," he said.

"I'm an Officer of the Court too, you know."

"Not the criminal division. But what the hell, I can see you're bugged, and it's probably my fault for rubbing it in last week in your office. Come on."

Giselle Minivich hadn't changed much since our last meeting. In fact, she hadn't changed a bit, not cloak nor denim dress nor whacked-out attitude. She looked at me through the bars and waved her hand in front of her.

"Corbett, you are a just man. The spirits tell me."

"Yes, of course," I said awkwardly. "Mrs. Minivich, I have to know something for my own peace of mind. If I hadn't mentioned this Quilta person, would you have put a spell on your husband? I mean, did it make you that jealous?"

"Not at first. But when she came back for him, I knew I had to use a spell."

"She came back for him? You saw her?"

"No, but I could see the lights of the ship every night. She was out there waiting for him, all right. I just used too strong a spell, that's all. I don't understand it, because I followed the incantation precisely."

"Well, I'm sorry for your trouble. Do you need anything?"

"They took away my wolfbane. Could you bring me some?"

"I'll try," I said, turning away from the cell, wondering where you could buy wolfbane.

Did you ever have an idea slug you? Not just happen in your head, I mean really slug you hard?

"Lights," I said, turning back to her. "You said you saw lights. Did you tell the police?"

"Those fools don't believe there ever was a space ship. They think my Caesar Augustus was having an affair, or was on a binge somewhere."

"What did the lights look like, Mrs. Minivich?"

"Very eerie."

"Were they flickering on and off? Red and blue and white?"

"Yeah. Then white, blue, and red. Caesar Augustus—I can't call him Kordo any more—he goes out to meet her in the dark and my spell got loused up and he fell off the ledge."

"Sure. Well, you sit tight, Mrs. Minivich. I've got an idea."

Ten minutes later, Lieutenant Donnagan was in his office showing me how irritable he could get.

"Jeff, this time you're going too far. What could Kripps have to gain by Minivich's death? He's not a looney like old Giselle in there. He's a promoter with some wild ideas, but he wouldn't kill somebody over $550."

"How about $350,000?"

"What $350,000?"

"It's right there in the report. Kripps sold Minivich the first seat at a $200 premium. So the other thousand or so places were sold for $350."

"So what, Jeff? People will buy anything. Hell, I've seen ads peddling deeds to one square inch of Texas, or cans of Alpine air. So Kripps had a great gimmick and made a killing on it."

"Made a killing over it, you mean. Don't you see, Bill? If I voided Minivich's contract, it would have made all the others questionable and challengeable. A referee doesn't set precedents at law, but remember, I took mine to the Chief Judge. And Kripps did have a flashing light."

"Anyone could have a flashing light, but we could investigate his movements on the night in question. I don't promise you anything, but I'll dig into it."

He must have dug very deep and very well, because three days later Kripps had taken Mrs. Minivich's place in jail. The police had only a circumstantial case going until a witness showed up to swear that Kripps had been lurking near the Minivich home on the night of the death. That disclosure softened the travel agent up and he told all. He had spent the space-flight money and feared that a finding for Minivich would start a series of suits which would bankrupt him. He was sure Minivich was crazy enough to believe that he was seeing a space ship and walk off the ledge in the dark.

"That's the one part I can't buy," I said to Donnagan a few days after the Kripps confession. "How could he be sure that Minivich would believe the lights were from a space ship?"

"It was worth a try, to his thinking. Minivich really believed in UFOs, you know. In a way, I'm getting to think they exist myself."

"You, a trusted police official?"

"Don't laugh. When we checked the other-woman angle, trying to find out where Minivich had been for the four days, we came up empty. There isn't a trace of him being in this city during that time period, and no indication he left here by normal means of transportation. The guy just went poof for ninety-six hours."

"Sure, sure," I said.

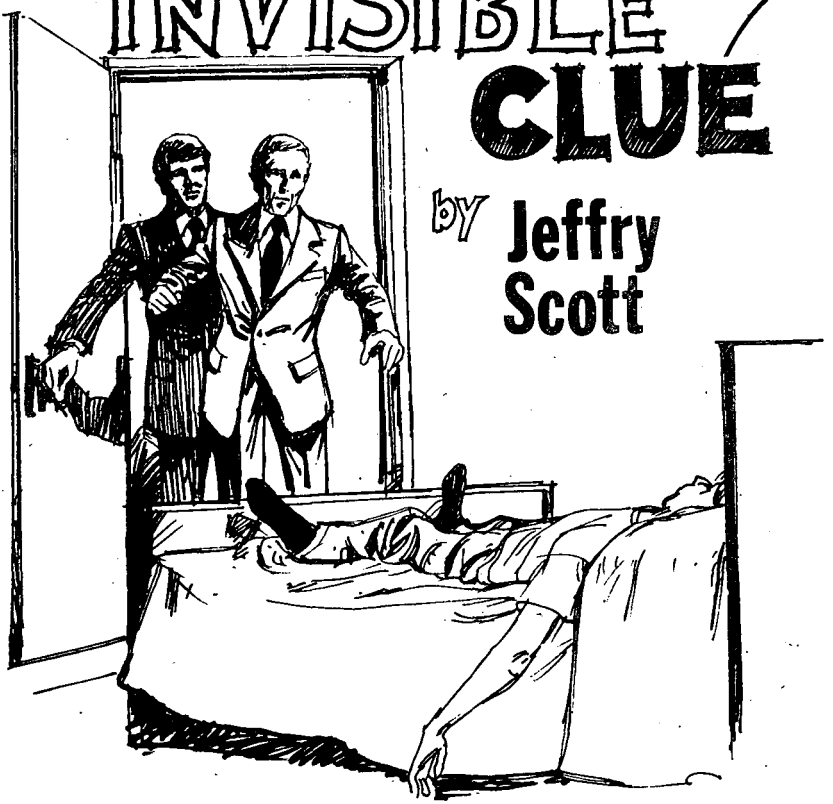
"You never know, Jeff."

As I drove home that night, I watched the various lights in the sky—passing planes, the airport beacon off in the distance, headlights from cars up in the hills. Maybe, just maybe, I thought. I conjured up the image of a space Amazon. No, my wife wouldn't believe a word of it. Quilta, I muttered to the skies, Quilta, stay away from my door.

It wasn't a bit like the dog whose significance lay in not *barking. . .*

INVISIBLE CLUE

by **Jeffry Scott**



Normally reticent to the point of rudeness, my friend Morlock does rather plume himself on the Leander affair.

And with good reason. After all, Major Colin Morlock, former soldier and retired colonial policeman, is not a detective. Yet he cut to the heart of the Leander case without setting eyes on either of the men involved.

That is a feat any professional criminal-investigation operative must

respect. Even more startling is the fact that it was done by means of a clue which could not be seen. If it had been visible, it would have been no clue at all—or so Morlock explained teasingly.

"Like Conan Doyle's dog, whose significance lay in *not* barking?" I suggested, trying to sound intelligent.

"Not a bit like, laddie," Major Morlock snorted.

He is dapper and saturnine, somehow out of his spiritual era with his starched collars and painstakingly buffed handmade shoes. The sight of him used to put me in mind of wicker chairs, Burmese cheroots, sundowners, and jungle-surrounded tennis courts. Then I realized that Morlock was a character seeking the proper Somerset Maugham story while enduring a long distasteful exile in modern London.

Deny it as he will, Morlock cultivates that aura. It leads people to dismiss him as a harmless relic. But he still plays murderous squash and will be doing press-ups on the changing-room floor long after I have collapsed in a puddle of sweat.

Morlock calls himself a personal security consultant—it sounds dull and respectable and, well, reassuring. What he sells is reassurance itself, for Major Colin Morlock is a bodyguard—among the best dozen of them in the world, some would say.

"I'm like an old football player" is his own modest assessment. "I can't dash about, but I can jolly well read the game. It's a matter of recognizing patterns, having a good set of trouble muscles, and then *walking* in a rapid but unflurried manner so as to be in the correct spot at the best time."

Trouble muscles? According to Morlock, his back aches like a pregnant woman's in the presence of danger to himself or a client.

Having heard about the invisible clue, I pestered him for the story.

"The case hasn't come to trial yet and I dare say it will be heard in camera," he warned. "I'll change the names on that account. I'll also deny any knowledge, if you quote me. But it's all true, my word on that, laddie . . ."

The story started in Major Morlock's office suite near St Paul's Cathedral, as half the pigeons and public clocks in London made a fearful racket to signal that another day's business ought to be launched.

Those offices! He got the place cheap when a pop record company went bankrupt. The decor was ten years out of date, marking the worst

and wildest excesses of psychedelic decorations. Each door, and there were many, was a different clashing color. Walls and filing cabinets and desks were unlikely shades of tangerine, yellow, purple, and green, all of which did not suit Morlock. The rent, however, did.

After the best part of a week out of town, he was listening to a tape recorder.

From it rattled the voice of Linda, his secretary. "I've handled all the routine stuff, sir. Only one mildly interesting item. Squadron Leader Alex Leander telephoned for you this afternoon. I've never heard of him, but there was a definite you-must-have-heard-of-me note in his voice."

Major Morlock smiled wryly. He was being made to feel his age.

Alex Leander had been a brilliant fighter pilot during the Battle of Britain. But that was a long time ago—his secretary's parents had been teenagers themselves when it was fought out above their heads.

I've never heard of him. Morlock, lost in a reverie, had to stop the tape and wind back. After World War Two, Leander had emigrated to Africa, going in for farming and stockbreeding on the grand scale. Less happily, Squadron Leader Leander had become involved in emergent-nation politics, respected by black nationalist leaders and looked at askance by his own kind.

Morlock pressed the Start key again.

Linda was saying: "He sounds nice—but scared, edgy-like. He must have pots of money because he's got a permanent service flatlet in Maybury Towers, that huge place in Mayfair, although he only comes to London once a year, if that. He wants you to contact him as soon as possible. Says he got plenty of sleep on the plane over here, but he won't be able to stay alert for more than 24 hours. That gives him about eight hours to go, by the time you get back."

Linda burst in while her final recorded words were still emerging from the machine. She listened sheepishly. "Ever so sorry, Major—I meant to scrub that tape last night, but my feller called for me and I clean forgot."

"Why on earth scrub it?"

"It's all off," said Linda blithely. "He popped in just before I shut up shop yesterday evening—Squadron Leader Leander, I mean. Full of apologies, changed his mind. Nice old boy—well, not *old* old. About your age." She blushed and shook her head.

With lethal patience, Morlock suggested, "Drop the silken courtesy and the diplomatic touch, they don't suit you. Facts, if you please!"

Linda gave him a glance blending irritation and reproach. "No need to get shirty. He paid fifty pounds as a cancellation fee. Insisted on it. If you ask me, he was ashamed of getting in a tizzy and shouting for help, and wanted it all smoothed over and forgotten quick."

Major Morlock frowned and started massaging the small of his back. Alex Leander might have changed in thirty years or more, but Battle of Britain aces, as a breed, are not notorious for getting in tizzies and issuing needless SOS messages.

Also, Morlock had a knack for picking up scraps of information bearing on his own line of business. Recently he had escorted a Nairobi businessman who was in London to exchange diamonds for cash, and wanted to lose neither. Alex Leander's name had cropped up during one of the endless hotel-bedroom waiting periods, and the name was connected with at least two assassination attempts.

"No reply," Morlock grunted. He had looked up Squadron Leader Leander's telephone number at Maybury Towers. The place was a Twentieth Century cliff-dwelling—a thousand or more air-conditioned centrally heated caves looming above Hyde Park.

Rather subdued now, Linda handed him a cup of coffee. "Well, he's cancelled. Probably out for the day. He won't thank you for chasing him."

"Maybe." Major Morlock brooded over the coffee. He looked up sharply, catching her eye. "Tell me everything you can remember about his visit."

Linda shrugged and pulled a face. "What's to tell? He was a bit, you know, embarrassed. Dropped his money on the carpet when he was paying me the fifty pounds."

She snapped her fingers and giggled. "Tell you what, Major, he's color-blind. Couldn't wait to get out once he'd explained about canceling. Walked straight into the lavatory. I told him it was the green door, but no, he went steaming through the red one, and that's just the broom cupboard. So he sort of swore under his breath. I kept saying, 'The *green* door, sir.' Bless my soul if he didn't try the pink one, to the fire escape. Ever so embarrassing for both of us—I had to scoot over from behind the desk and sort of lead him to the exit."

But Linda was talking to Major Morlock's back. He had whirled to the phone. Within ninety seconds he was talking to Superintendent Blaikie of Scotland Yard's Special Branch.

"Morlock here. Trouble, laddie, probably serious. Certainly urgent. Squadron Leader Leander—yes, the Africa chap. He is or was at 524 East, Maybury Towers. Somebody's out to kill him. I'll join you there."

When Blaikie and his men kicked down the door at Maybury Towers they found Alex Leander sprawled in the tiny bedroom, in a coma after what appeared to be an attempt to commit suicide with barbiturates.

After treatment in the Intensive Care Unit of a nearby hospital, Leander explained that he had indeed taken a drug overdose. His visitor had given him the choice of that or a bullet through the head. Leander had opted for almost-certain death rather than the absolutely certain variety.

It must have been a bizarre and quietly evil scene: the man with the gun sitting nurselike beside the bed as Leander's color changed and his breathing grew ever slower and more labored . . .

"As soon as it became obvious that the Leander who called at my office was an imposter, then the most likely reason for the masquerade was to make sure that I wouldn't go looking for the real Leander," Major Morlock lectured me.

"Now then, if the assassin heard Leander phoning me, which must have been the case, it meant that he had bugged the phone or was using a listening device from a flat adjacent to Leander's. Superintendent Blaikie's chaps checked the phone and it wasn't bugged, so they looked for holes in the walls—and found one leading them to 523, next door. Prints all over it. The man had a record and they caught him at the airport."

Morlock seemed to take it for granted that I understood what had alerted him. I could follow his early doubts, when Leander asked for and then rejected a bodyguard. But somewhere along the track, he had lost me. I said as much. Major Morlock looked genuinely surprised.

"But my dear chap! Wake up, laddie. The man who canceled my services was color blind. Ergo, he could not be Squadron Leader Leander. You simply aren't allowed to become an R.A.F. pilot if you're color blind!"

It is easier to know what you don't want than what you do . . .

don't Wait for Me

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

To: Mitch

Weather says there's a big snowstorm on the way. Get me something big to use in the second section. Kids, snowmen, you know what I want.

Toby

Mitchell Crane crumpled the assignment slip and jammed it into his pocket.

"Rotten kids," he muttered. "Rotten snowmen. Rotten weather pictures." His stomach growled as he sorted through the rest of his mail. Most of it went into the wastebasket. He scowled over another assignment slip, this one for the women's page, to photograph a charity fashion show at noon. He glanced at his watch. He could either dash home, shower and change, or he could grab some breakfast in the greasy spoon downstairs. There wasn't time to do both. His stomach growled again. The ladies would just have to put up with him dirty.

The last piece of mail was a sealed envelope, his name scrawled on it in familiar green felt-tip. He slit the envelope impatiently.

"Dear Mitch," the thick green letters tumbled against each other. "I waited breakfast, but it got too late and I had to come to work. Are you all right? Give me a call as soon as you get in. Love, D.D."

D.D. DeeDee. Dawna DeWayne, pale and complacent classified-ad taker, hoping to convince him that marriage would assure a constant flow of Jimmy Dean's pork sausage, fried eggs, fried potatoes, and her own plump body on the side. Not yet for DeeDee. Mitch tore the note into green and white shreds and dribbled them into the wastebasket.

He stood for a moment before the bulletin board. There, set apart from the dusty accumulation of memos and schedules, was a photograph. A hand-lettered caption beneath it screamed, "PRIZEWINNER!!" in inch-high red letters. It was a famous picture of a burning building, a collapsing fire escape and a woman and child falling through space. Mitch had clipped it from the paper and hung it there himself. He had lettered the taunting caption himself. As he stared at it, his stomach churned once more. But with a different hunger.

Snowstorms! Fashion shows! He'd never win any prizes that way.

He rubbed his eyes. His beard itched and his head ached. He remembered that he'd meant to have the camera lens checked yesterday. No time now. Too bad for the ladies, but who really cared if the fashion pictures came out sharp or not.

Mitch slid into his duffle coat and slung his camera bag over his shoulder. Black coffee was what he needed and maybe a couple of doughnuts. He resented the hungover feeling without the high that should have preceded it. Too many nights spent patrolling the streets watching for the big one, listening to the police band radio, sleeping finally in the car when he couldn't stay awake any longer. Too many bottles of No-Doz.

He slouched down the long hall. Across the way, typewriters clacked and people rushed about with hands full of copy. The noise irritated him and his headache pulsed wickedly inside his skull. Along one side of the hall hung a gallery of feature pictures: county fairs, bridges with sunrises, balloon ascensions, lovers in the park, kittens and kids, rabbits and kids, kids at the zoo.

Always the rotten kids.

Some of them were pretty good pictures, and a few of them were his. But none of them packed the wallop that would win him a press photographer's prize. For that, he needed the event, the drama of life and death, the thing that stubbornly refused to happen.

Mitch thumbed the elevator button impatiently. People passed him, smiling and wishing him "Good morning." He ignored them all, staring fixedly at the elevator indicator.

The coffee shop was almost deserted. Mitch lowered himself wearily onto a stool and slung his camera bag onto the adjoining one.

"What's the matter with you? You look terrible. Got the 'flu or something?"

Edna, the fat waitress, looked up from her newspaper and examined his face with eyes avid for misery.

"Coffee. And a doughnut."

"All out of doughnuts. Got some pie. Apple, peach and banana cream. Want me to read your horoscope?"

"Just the coffee."

"Listen. You're Taurus, right? 'Ambition can be a snare. Today is a good day to rest on your laurels. Beware of pushing yourself too hard. You will lose more than you gain. A crisis is approaching in your personal affairs which you can avoid through small attentions.' Sounds like you ought to go home and go to bed. Want some company?" Edna guffawed and the paper crackled in her fat hands. The sound echoed painfully inside Mitch's head.

"Black coffee," he snarled. "And a couple of aspirins."

"Excuse me for living." Edna huffed away to the coffee urn. When she returned with the steaming cup and the aspirins she was ostentatiously silent. With ponderous dignity, she drew him a glass of water and retreated to the other end of the counter with her newspaper.

Mitch swallowed the aspirins. The cold water hurt his teeth. His throat was raw from too many cigarettes, but he lit another. What he'd

really like to do was go home and take a hot shower and sleep for a couple of hours, and then get back into his car and ride the cold streets watching for the big one. This was the right weather for it. Bitter cold with a snowstorm on the way. Somewhere an overworked furnace was ready to explode, a gas leak was ready to ignite, a space heater was about to be knocked over, a spark from an untended fireplace would fly, and the flames would roar.

In his mind, the picture developed. An old brick building, smoke pouring in black clouds from the broken windows, behind those windows an intense red glare. Water from the fire hoses frozen on the cornices in glittering daggers of ice. Firemen working frantically to raise the extension ladder to reach the top floor where people were straddling the window sills and screaming. Below, he waited, camera poised, for the moment that had to come. The decisive moment. Isn't that what they called it? Those arty photographers who never had to meet a deadline? This was it! One of the figures on the top floor had swung both legs over the window sill. The ladder was still yards away. The flames licked hungrily at the window frame. The figure braced itself. . .

"Oh, honey. I was hoping I'd find you here. Ellen said she saw you by the elevator so I hurried right down. Why didn't you stop by this morning? I waited as long as I could."

"DeeDee." He turned, fuddled, to look at the girl perched on the stool beside him.

"Didn't you get my note? Why didn't you call me? I haven't seen you for days and days."

"Been busy," he said and sipped his coffee. But now he was aware of the softness of the girl. The pale yielding softness that he could burrow into and forget about prizes and fires and falling bodies. That's what she wanted. Part of him wanted it too.

"You look so tired. You're going to make yourself sick. Look, why don't you go over to my place? Take a nap. There's some chicken salad in the refrigerator. I'll get off early . . ."

Mitch weakened, then forced himself to remember the night he'd spent with her, letting her wrap him in her softness, only to find out in the morning that a woman had stood for three hours on a ledge outside the fourteenth floor of a nearby hotel threatening to jump. She hadn't jumped, but she might have.

He had missed a big one—suicides like that were as good as fires—because DeeDee had made him forget. He'd never spent another night with her. It was then that he'd started patrolling the streets, watching and waiting. The only concession he'd made was to stop by her place in the early morning for breakfast. Even that was beginning to take up too much of his time, time he couldn't spare if he was going to be ready when the big one came along.

". . . Mitch, I can't keep waiting forever. I love you and I want to help you, but I don't even know what's bothering you. Say something, Mitch. Don't just sit there with that look."

"Don't wait, Dawna." He threw a quarter down on the counter, stubbed out his cigarette and picked up his camera bag.

"Wait! Don't go! I'm sorry. Mitch, where are you going?" The girl snatched a paper napkin from the steel dispenser to blot the tears that were starting.

"To work." Mitch strode out of the coffee shop and into the cold gray street. Her voice followed him.

"Stop by later. I'll be waiting."

The air was dank and heavy with the threat of snow, but it was cold and it cleared his head a little. He decided to leave his car parked and walk over to the hotel fashion show. As soon as he finished this assignment, he could drive the streets. Sooner or later, it had to happen and he'd be ready.

He walked on red carpet. Lights glittered in the cavernous lobby. The hotel was old, its elegance tarnished. But it was still the place where society held its public celebrations. The cream and gold doors of the ballroom stood open to the shrill chirp of a hundred female voices. Just inside the doors at a gilt pretense of a desk sat a personage. Gowned and coiffed to lacquered perfection, her glossed lips curved in a condescending smile as she intercepted him.

"May I help you?" Her eyes skimmed disdainfully over his stained duffle coat, his creased greasy jeans, his heavy boots, and back to his beard.

"Take your picture, lady? Two bucks a throw. Or is that too expensive for you?" He flapped his press card at her face.

"Oh, are you from the . . . ah . . . paper? Well, I think you'll probably want to operate behind the scenes, don't you agree? Get some candid shots of the models, and then we can have the commit-

tee gather for a group shot backstage. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Some of the nearby ladies were beginning to stare at him over their cocktails. A few snickered behind their dainty napkins.

"Absolutely marvelous, ducks. Simply divine. What a pity that I just remembered I forgot to bring any film. Guess I'll just have to toddle back to the dear old office and get some. Don't hold your breath waiting. Cheeri-bye."

Mitch about-faced and marched across a sea of red carpet. He was hot, hot, hot. His head throbbed. Maybe he was coming down with something.

"Damn snobby bitch," he muttered. "Never again. No more fashion shows." He worked out in his mind what he would tell Toby O'Connor, the picture editor, to account for his failure. Well, it wasn't his fault, was it, if some scrawny hag refused to let him into the ballroom? He couldn't very well just barge in, could he?

Isolated flakes of snow were beginning to drift from a sky the color of asphalt as he trudged back to his car. He felt each step jolt through his body and thud rhythmically in time with the pain in his head. The stale air inside the car reeked of an amalgam of overflowing ashtray, Burger Chef bags and restless sleep. The back seat was hidden under a pile of yellowing newspapers, odds and ends of equipment, dirty laundry and empty soft-drink cans. Over this was tossed a gray blanket, useful for those times when sleep was unavoidable, and Mitch pulled into an alley or a supermarket parking lot for a few hours. He hadn't been home for three days.

He eased the car out into the stream of traffic and drove west along familiar streets. Time after time, he was drawn to these decaying blocks of moribund tenements. In his mind he carried a map with each possible location for his scenario pinpointed in red. It was the sheerest coincidence that Dawna DeWayne lived on the west side of town, on the top floor of one of the less run-down buildings. On her salary, she couldn't afford better, but she'd made her two rooms comfortable. She was a nest-builder and deserved someone who could appreciate her talents. Too bad she chose to waste them on him.

He drove past her building and was tempted to pull into the parking space that lay conveniently empty in front of the door. He could use the key that she'd pressed on him weeks ago. He could sleep in her bed where the sheets would be cool and clean. He could bathe in her

bathroom and smell her fragrance in her soap, her towels, her hairbrush. He could eat her food and drink her coffee. And he could be gone before she got home. He circled the block. It would be good to rest. His headache would go away and he would be fresh for the night's work.

As he pulled up to Dawna's building for the second time, he swore. The parking space was gone. The whole block was lined with parked cars. He sat staring at the dirty yellow bricks. It was an ugly building, square and tall, with a grim concrete porch sprouting a planter box where nothing ever grew. It would be a pleasure to see it go up in flames.

Just as well, he thought. If he allowed himself to fall into Dawna's bed, he'd never get free. She'd just have to wait, if that's what she wanted. He had other things to do.

Late in the afternoon, he pulled into a carry-out restaurant. He carried two hamburgers and a container of coffee out to the car. While he ate, he switched on the two-way radio. He'd been avoiding contact with the paper all afternoon, and now it was too late to be handed any more asinine assignments. At first he heard nothing but hum and crackle. Then the hoarse bellow of Toby O'Connor blasted into the car.

"Mitchell Crane! Whatever your godforsaken call number is! If you don't answer me within five minutes, you're fired. If you do answer me, you're fired. You're fired unless you come up with a pretty good reason why you walked out on that fashion show. Come in, Mitchell Crane."

"Hi, Toby." Mitch flipped the switch and spoke conversationally into the mike. "What's up?"

"What's up!" the radio exploded. "He wants to know what's up. He merely insults the publisher's sister-in-law, and now he wants to know what's up. Your time is up, that's what's up. I've put up with your craziness long enough. Do you realize I had to send the darkroom boy over to the hotel? At least he had sense enough to put on a tie."

"Toby, she practically threw me out. She wanted to stick me in a back room."

"Do you want to take some sick leave, Mitch? You haven't been looking too hot lately." O'Connor's voice, still hoarse, sounded mollified. He had no love for the publisher or his relations.

"I'm not sick. I'll be there in the morning."

"You better have some snow pictures I can use."

"I have to get the snow first, Toby. But even if it doesn't snow, I promise you a picture. Something big is going to happen tonight. I feel it in my bones."

"We don't put out a newspaper on what you feel in your bones. For all I know, you've got rheumatism. Consider yourself on warning, Mitch. Out."

"So long, Toby," he whispered to the radio. His coffee was cooling swiftly in the cold car. He gulped it down and tossed the empty cup into the back seat.

"Off we go, old buddy, old pal. Tonight's the night. Tonight Mitchell Crane comes out on top." He drove out into the darkening streets. The snow had stopped sprinkling, but the streets were wet and would probably freeze. Strange how his headache had disappeared as soon as he'd realized that tonight was going to be the big one. Maybe it was just the hot food, but maybe it was knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that by tomorrow morning he would have the picture that would make him famous.

He drove for hours and watched the lights at window after window, in building after building, go off. Dawna would be home by now waiting for him, calling his number, wondering where he was. He chose a route that took him past her building again. Sure enough, the two windows on the top floor were brightly lit. He imagined her, wrapped in her fleecy pink bathrobe, sipping tea with her mind tuned to the ring of the doorbell that would mean he'd given in and come running to her. She would let him in, kiss him and then race to the stove and start frying pork chops, opening cans of soup. And afterwards, after she'd fed him . . . ah, God! It was too bad. Too, too bad.

He pounded his fist on the steering wheel and drove on. Around corners and down dark alleys, up and down the city streets, until the map in his mind whirled and wheeled like a planetarium show and the constellations of red pinpoints streaked through his brain like fiery meteors. The night grew darker, still and frozen. This was the night, and nothing was happening anywhere. It had to be tonight. He'd promised Toby. He'd promised himself.

He slowed the car. Where was he?

The street looked familiar and at the same time oddly distorted, like a nightmare street where the buildings leaned crazily against the sky

and threatened to fall in on him in an avalanche of shattered brick. At the end of the block, a single street light glowed blue-white. The only other lights were the twin cones of his headlights. He switched them off and killed the engine. Time for some sleep. He could sleep here as well as anywhere. An hour or two and there would still be time to get the picture.

First he needed to stretch his legs. He was cramped and numb from hours behind the wheel. He got out of the car. The cold air pressed against him, lifting his hair, searching through his clothes like a lover seeking out his warmth. He walked down the middle of the street. On both sides brick buildings looked down on him. He felt their dark windows watching him. Behind those windows people slept. They didn't know that tonight was Mitchell Crane's big night. Let them sleep.

He stopped before a dirty yellow brick building. Its windows from bottom to top were dark. He walked up onto its concrete porch and tried the front door. It wasn't locked. He walked into the dark hall permeated with a faint unpleasant smell of underground dampness and stray cats. To his left the stairwell rose into black emptiness. To its right a narrow oblong of darkness indicated a corridor that ran through to the back of the building. He would need a flashlight. And the other things.

He went back to the car. The flashlight was in the glove compartment. And a candle. He took them both. He took the pile of newspapers from the back seat. He had to make two trips. He took the dirty laundry, and, from the trunk, a large can with a screw top. He made his arrangements carefully, the newspapers in a crumpled heap, the clothes packed against the wooden wainscoting of the corridor. He tore a grimy sheet into long strips. He emptied the can, careful not to spill even a single drop on himself. He went back to the car once more for the empty paper coffee cup. He made a hole in the bottom of it, and with the cup upside-down he thrust the candle through the hole. He set the candle and cup down on the floor at the end of the strips of torn sheet. The candle was six inches long. The cup was three inches high. The candle would have to burn three inches before the cup caught fire. When the cup burned, the candle would fall onto the saturated strips of sheet. The flames would race along the floor to the piles of newspaper and clothing. Tonight was the night.

With sure hands, he lit the candle on the first match. He wet his

thumb and forefinger with saliva and squeezed the match out between them, relishing the short sharp pain. The candle burned with a steady yellow flame. Everything was perfect. Now he could get some sleep.

He left the building quickly. His car was parked half a block away on the other side of the street. Close enough but not too close. No one had seen him. There had been no one on the streets, no one watching from any of the dark windows. Before he wrapped himself in the gray blanket, he loaded his camera with fresh film and slung it on its strap around his neck. It rested in his lap, ready.

He laid his head against the back of the car seat and closed his eyes. His mind drifted with anticipation to the moment of awakening. It would be just the way he'd dreamed it would be. He'd done everything he could to make sure. The picture would be a prizewinner. Dawna would be proud, but she would also realize that he could never have settled for what she had to offer. She would stop waiting for him so relentlessly. Dawna would find someone else to need her. Dawna would be out of his life.

Something in his mind was trying to shake off sleep. Something about Dawna, and the yellow brick building. Had he made a mistake? No, there was no mistake. He conjured up a vision of the candle burning brightly in the dark hall. That was all he needed to know.

Awakened by sirens, he struggled out of the gray blanket. He swung the car door open and stepped out into confusion. A voice blared instructions over a loudspeaker and he smelled smoke. Beautiful! He stumbled over fire hoses and dodged intense men in rubber coats. Wonderful! He found a position for himself with a clear view of the top floor of the burning building. It was all too good to be true.

He focused the camera and clicked off a few frames just to get the range. He watched two firemen struggling with a hose in the doorway. The fire gushed out at them and forced them back. They tried again. Other hoses spewed water into the lower windows. The fire sizzled, retreated, and then roared in another direction. The windows on the top floor were still dark. The fire hadn't reached them yet.

Mitch felt a momentary qualm. What if they put the fire out before he got his picture? What if they'd already evacuated the building while he was sleeping? No. Not possible. He saw no huddled groups of bewildered survivors on the sidewalk. He saw no one but the laboring firemen and a few policemen.

The top-floor windows now showed a dim red glow. The floor beneath was an inferno and the flames were breaking through. Mitch waited, his camera poised. They had to be there. *She* had to be there. He'd planned too carefully to be cheated now. And he wouldn't be cheated. Wasn't that something white fluttering at the window? A white shape where a moment ago there had been nothing?

"There she is!" he screamed. His voice was lost in the roar of the fire, the pumping of the engines. "Get the ladder!"

He wasted no more time shouting. His shutter clicked rapidly. He saw the whole sequence through the viewfinder, from the first appearance of the white shape at the window, its frantic hesitation while the red glow turned into avid tongues of flame, and finally the desperate leap into space. It was all over in seconds. But he saw it all and got it all on film. He'd got his prizewinner.

Dawna! he thought as he raced to his car. As he drove away, his mind was already developing the film, seeing the white shape falling against the background of dirty yellow brick. He didn't notice the small knot of people who had gathered at the corner, nor did he realize that a policeman had watched him curiously and was now following him in a blue cruiser. The cruiser stopped briefly at the corner and the driver exchanged a few words with a heavily bundled figure who had broken from the crowd and waved at Mitch's car as it passed by. The rear door of the police car opened and the figure tumbled into the back seat. Then the car continued downtown, following Mitch's distant taillights through the cold empty streets.

At four in the morning, the newspaper office was deserted. The guard on duty in the lobby passed him through after he'd signed the book. Upstairs, Mitch used his key to the darkroom and got directly to work. Under the red light, he relived his triumph. Time after time, while the film was developing, he saw the white form hesitating in the window. In frame after frame, he saw her fall. The picture would be a shocker. It would run on the front page, on front pages all over the country. He selected three frames that showed the whole sequence and set up the enlarger. Toby O'Connor would be astrounded. Toby was a good friend, and in the morning, if the snowstorm materialized, Mitch would go out and get him the best snow pictures he'd ever seen. It was the least he could do for a friend.

While the prints were drying, Mitch decided to take a break for a cigarette. He switched off the warning light and opened the darkroom door. He wasn't surprised to see Toby O'Connor waiting for him. Somehow, Toby would have known.

"Hi, Toby," he said and smiled. "I got it. I finally got it. Wait'll you see."

"Mitch." Toby shook his head. "There are some people here who want to talk to you."

Mitch looked around the cluttered office, crowded with men in uniform.

"There's no time to talk. Don't you understand, Toby? I finally got the picture. The prizewinner! It's fantastic!"

"Just a minute." One of the policemen came forward. "Can we see the picture?"

"Sure. I made three prints. They should be just about dry by now." Mitch darted back into the darkroom. The policeman followed and watched while Mitch plucked the prints from the dryer. "See. I'll get that prize for sure now. Take a look at these." He moved to hand the pictures to O'Connor, but the policeman intercepted him.

"You were at the fire tonight?"

"Well, of course. That's where I got the pictures."

"What time did you arrive?"

"I don't know. Who keeps track of time? I got there in time to get the pictures."

"Tell me about the pictures."

"What's to tell? Look at them for yourself. What's going on here?" Mitch appealed to O'Connor. "Tell him, Toby. Tell him how I've been waiting for this picture. Tell him you're going to use it on the front page."

"Answer his questions, Mitch," said O'Connor. "It's important."

"If you say so, Toby. But I still don't understand." Mitch faced the policeman. "As anyone can see, these pictures show a woman leaping from the top floor of a burning building. In the first picture, she appears at the window. In the second picture, she is perched on the window sill. In the third, she is falling. Any more questions?"

The policeman studied the pictures. Then he raised expressionless eyes to Mitch's face.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"Who. . . ? Just a woman . . . a girl," Mitch faltered. "How should I know who she is?"

"Mr. O'Connor." The policeman turned to Toby and handed him the pictures. "Will you tell me what you see?"

Toby O'Connor glanced at the pictures and sighed. "These are pictures of a burning building. They're badly out of focus. I told you to get that lens adjusted, Mitch. But as far as I can see, there is no woman falling from the top floor. I'm sorry."

"What!" shrieked Mitch. "She's there! I know she's there! I saw her. DeeDee. She jumped! She's dead. But I got my pictures."

"Noooo!" A strangled sob came from the corner of the room.

Mitch whirled. The old pain shot through his head when he saw the figure huddled in the chair, the pale tear-streaked face, the tangled blonde hair.

"You! You can't be here! I don't want you here!" He snatched the pictures from Toby's hand. "Here's where you are. I killed you!"

"No, Mitch," she gulped. "I was waiting for you. I heard the sirens. I knew you'd be there. I ran out to see if I could find you. I saw you drive away. I waved, but you didn't see me. Oh, Mitch! Did you want me to die like that?"

"But the pictures," Mitch stammered. "They prove—look—here she is . . . her arms, her legs, falling."

"Mitch," said O'Connor gently. "There's some kind of white smudge there. It could be smoke. It could be a piece of paper or a curtain flying out of that window. There was no one in the building. The whole block is marked for demolition. No one died in that fire."

"I don't believe you. I couldn't have got the wrong building. It was her building, the yellow brick one. She's dead. She has to be."

"She's not dead, but you're still not off the hook." The policeman was holding a gasoline can. "Is this yours?"

"I have a can like that. I always keep spare gas in my car. I got stuck out in the country once."

"We got this out of your trunk. It's empty."

"Then it must be mine. I guess I used it up."

"I guess you did. I guess you used it tonight. Let's go."

The uniformed men closed in around him. He turned caged eyes to O'Connor.

"Toby, what about my pictures?"

"Don't worry about the pictures, Mitch. I'll get you a lawyer. I'll get you a doctor."

The policemen began herding him toward the door.

"I don't want a doctor. I'm not sick. Print those pictures, Toby. Please! That's all I want."

"Okay, Mitch. Okay."

Behind him, the girl struggled out of the chair where she had been crying quietly. She clutched her coat around her and wiped her face on its sleeve.

"Mitch, honey." The words bubbled from her lips, thick and wet with pity and forgiveness. "I'll wait for you. However long it takes, I'll be waiting for you."

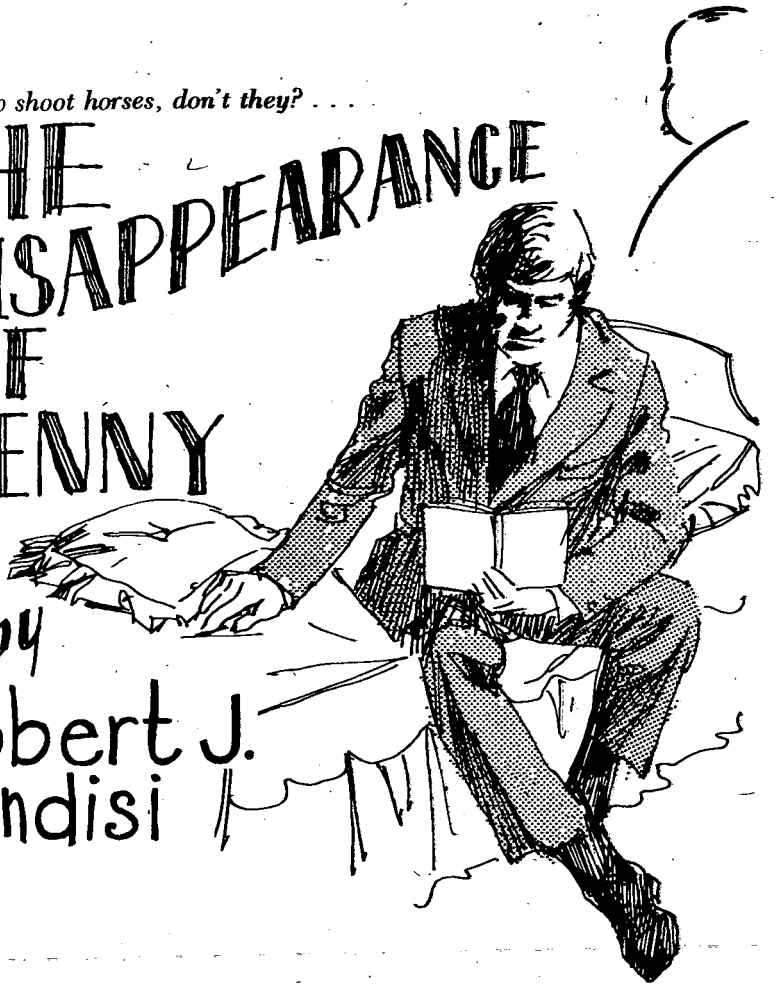
"I have a headache," he said.

Outside the snow began to fall.

They do shoot horses, don't they? . . .

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PENNY

by Robert J. Randisi



Penny's Penny was Hopkins Stable's Triple Crown hopeful for 1976. The colt had been named after Benjamin Hopkins' daughter, Penny Hopkins.

"Penny won nine out of ten races as a two-year-old, Mr. Tucker," Benjamin Hopkins bragged to me. "Her only loss was to Paul Lassiter's Bold Randy—"

"Whose only loss as a two-year-old was to Penny's Penny," I finished

for him. "I follow the horses, Mr. Hopkins." Hopkins and Lassiter were chief rivals in the world of thoroughbred racing. "Could we get down to why you asked me to come here?"

"As I told you on the phone, Mr. Tucker, she left the house yesterday morning and has not returned. She's never done that before. I tried to report her missing to the police, but they inform me that she's overage."

"What they mean is that she is between eighteen and sixty-five and therefore they cannot accept a missing-persons report on her unless there is some physical evidence of foul play," I explained, "or a history of mental illness."

He waved his hand impatiently. "Yes, yes, they explained that to me. They also suggested I hire a private investigator."

He had called me that morning at my office and asked me if I would come to his office at the track. He promised me a two-hundred-dollar consultation fee even if I turned down his case.

"They told me you are a specialist in missing persons."

I nodded. "I worked with the Missing Persons Unit as a detective for six years until they changed their policy to this 18-to-65 age limit. I disagree with the new policy, which claims it is against the constitutional rights of the missing person for us to look for him if he doesn't want to be found. How are we supposed to determine whether a person wants to be found or not?" I shrugged. "I decided to go out on my own."

He tapped the desktop with a pencil.

"I will pay you one thousand dollars to find her for me," he told me.

I didn't hesitate. "You've got yourself a detective, Mr. Hopkins."

"Fine. First I'd like you to—"

"We'd better get something straight right from the beginning," I interrupted, holding up my hand. "You've hired yourself a detective, not a leg man. You'll have to let me run the investigation my own way."

He digested that a moment, then nodded curtly. "Agreed."

I took some preliminary information from him, about his daughter's favorite places and people. He paid me the promised fee, plus a retainer, and walked me to the door. He was tall and stately-looking, with plentiful snow-white hair, big shoulders, and a barrel chest. He must have been a hell of a figure twenty years before, but now he was sixty-five and showed every year of it.

"Please, Mr. Tucker," he said before I left, "find my daughter."

I had a feeling his concern was artificial, but I told him I'd try.

Hopkins had said that Penny was a regular at almost every stable on the track, so that's where I began asking questions about who'd seen her and when.

I saved Paul Lassiter's stable until last.

As I approached, I saw a man come out of one of the stalls. He was tall, at least six foot one, and he was remarkably handsome. Paul Newman eyes. In his early forties.

"Paul Lassiter?" I asked on a hunch.

He turned and gave me an easy kind of grin.

"That's me. What can I do for you?"

"My name is Frank Tucker. I'm working for Benjamin Hopkins."

"In what capacity?" he asked.

I took out one of my cards and handed it to him.

"What would Benny need with a private eye?" he asked, pocketing the card.

"He's looking for his daughter. She's disappeared."

"Penny?" He seemed surprised.

"How many daughters does he have?"

"Just Penny that I know of."

"Have you seen her in the last few days?" I asked him.

"Come over to my office, Mr. Tucker. Maybe we can rustle up a drink." I followed him to the far end of the grounds where we stepped into an office very much like the one where I'd spoken to Hopkins. I turned down his offer of a drink and settled into a seat while he made one for himself. I had the feeling he was stalling for time.

He turned around, a drink in his hand, a smile on his face, and said, "I think I saw her, let me see, the day before yesterday. That would be Thursday, wouldn't it?"

"How friendly were you?"

"An old man like me?" he said. If he was acting he was doing it very well. "I'm her father's mortal—well, professional rival."

"What were you going to say?" I prodded.

He shrugged, sipped his drink. "Mortal enemy. But that's a little strong. That may be the way Benny thinks of me, but it's not the way I think of him."

"You call him Benny."

He sipped his drink again before answering. "I used to work for him. Then I branched out for myself, took some people with me. He never forgave me for that. I think he wanted me to be his protege forever. That wasn't for me. I learned everything he could teach me, then went out on my own. I guess he considered me a traitor, probably still does."

"What was Penny doing when you saw her Thursday?"

"It was at the track lounge. She was having a drink with one of her friends, Louis Melendez."

"The jockey?"

He laughed. "Some people think of him that way."

Which didn't say much for Lassiter's opinion of Melendez's riding ability.

I thanked him for his time and left, promising myself I'd be getting back to him soon.

I couldn't locate Louis Melendez anywhere on the track grounds. He seemed to have vanished right along with Penny Hopkins. Before checking out his apartment, I decided to try the lounge where Lassiter had said he'd seen them together.

"What'll it be?" the bartender asked. He might have been an ex-jockey, judging from his size.

"A ginger ale and some information," I told him, sliding a ten across the bar. "Louis Melendez. Have you seen him?"

"Little Louie? Let me think—Thursday," he answered finally.

"Was he with anyone?" I asked.

"Sure was. That little fox, Penny Hopkins."

"Benjamin Hopkins' daughter?"

"The same. Hey, if there were two of her, wouldn't that be something?"

"Why so?"

His eyebrows went up and almost touched his hairline.

"Haven't you ever seen her?" he asked. I shook my head. Old man Hopkins hadn't had a picture of his daughter in his office.

"Come with me," the little barkeep beckoned, coming around the bar. I followed him to a wall covered with framed photographs.

He pointed to one and I zeroed in on it. It was a shot of a curvaceous young girl surrounded by a group of jockeys. She was taller than

all of them and her red hair was tied with a green ribbon. Her grin was wide, her nose slightly snubbed. Her face was that of a young girl, but the body was definitely a woman's.

"If that don't make your blood boil, you're made of stone," the bartender said.

"Is Melendez in that picture?" I asked.

"He sure is—he's the guy practically drooling into her lap." He pointed to a little guy whose hang-dog look bespoke a man hopelessly in love with someone he couldn't possibly have.

"Was he in love with her?"

"Hey, you're pretty good. Just from the picture you can tell, huh?" I stared at him until *he* got the picture. "Okay, sure he was crazy for her. I mean, everybody was a little in love with her, but he was sick."

"How'd she treat him?" I asked.

"Like a trained puppy. He was her gopher, but that was his choice, you know?" He shook his head and a faraway look came into his eyes. "I'd of been her gopher, she give me half a chance."

I turned around and went back to the bar to finish my ginger ale. It was still early and the place was empty, so he came back with me and leaned on the bar while I drained my glass.

"Thanks for the information," I told him.

"Of course, I never would have had a chance with her, same as everybody else," he said and droned on. I shut him off and was about to leave when he said something that made me stop and back up.

"What?" I said.

He had good instincts, that boy. As soon as he saw my interest he clammed up, waiting for the green. I reached across the bar and grabbed his tie with the horse's face on it and twisted it just a trifle.

"Repeat, please."

"Hey, okay, okay. All I said was nobody had a chance because everybody knew she was tied to Paul Lassiter."

"Yeah," I half whispered, letting loose of his tie.

I laid a five down on the bar and left.

"It was a stupid lie, Lassiter," I snapped. "If it was all over the track, you had to know I'd come back with it sooner or later. Why make it later?"

He shrugged his shoulders and reached for the drink he'd been

drinking when I burst into his office. "I saw no reason to volunteer any information—besides, isn't that an occupational hazard with you? Being lied to?"

"Only by people who have something to hide," I told him.

"I have nothing to hide, Tucker." He shook his head. "I didn't think Benny would mention it to you because he was furious at the idea. He wouldn't admit to anyone that his daughter loved me. I saw no reason to admit it either."

"You've made me think you have something to hide, Lassiter. If you do, I'll find out what, I promise."

I left him and went looking for Benjamin Hopkins. He had lied to me also, even if it was a lie of omission.

He wasn't in his office and I didn't see him on the grounds.

"Where's Hopkins?" I asked his trainer, Mickey Rivers.

Rivers glared at me. He was a man of about thirty-five, retired from the races because of a bad fall some years before. Hopkins took him on as trainer because of his love for horses and it had worked out to their mutual advantage. "*Mr.* Hopkins," he began, "went home earlier. I imagine he's still there . . ."

Hopkins greeted me, asking, "Have you found out something already?"

"Yes, I have. I found out about Penny and Paul Lassiter. That was something you should have told me, Mr. Hopkins."

"I don't see why that—" he began imperiously.

"I can see why you might not want to admit that Lassiter was taking something from you, especially your daughter, but if you are really concerned about finding her, your pride shouldn't interfere. That is, if your real interest is in finding her."

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Just that your main interest may not be in *where* she is, but in whether or not she's with Lassiter."

The look on his face told me I had him pegged right. He wasn't concerned about his daughter's welfare; his real concern was in finding out if Lassiter had taken a "property" away from him.

"I'd like to see her room," I told him, before he could gather his thoughts and decide he wanted to fire me.

"Come this way," he muttered. I followed him up a long winding flight of stairs and into a room larger than my entire apartment. The

walls were covered with framed photographs of Penny with horses, Penny with jockeys, and Penny in the Winners Circle with her father.

"I have some paperwork to attend to downstairs," Hopkins told me. "If you need anything, call me."

When he left I began to prowl about the room, attempting to get a bead on how the girl's mind worked.

On her dressing table was a hardcover novel called *Price, Pride and Passion* by someone I'd never heard of. The bookmark was between the last page and the back cover. I leafed through the book and decided to take it home with me. I continued to prowl and came up with a locked diary—under the mattress. I put it in my jacket pocket.

Nothing else in the room interested me except a framed picture of Paul Lassiter, at his very probable handsomest. He was smiling and it was signed, *Love, Paul.*

He was a phony, just like her old man. He didn't love her, or he wouldn't have attempted to hide the fact that they were a "thing." Neither of them loved her. They both considered her a prize to be won from one another. I took a close-up of Penny from the wall, removed it from its frame, and slid it into the book to take with me, and found myself wondering if Penny Hopkins' disappearance had been her own idea.

When I called my service, there was a message from "Ray the bartender." He said he had some information for me. I didn't know a bartender named "Ray" so it had to be the one at the track lounge.

When I walked in, his face lit up in a smile. Considering the way I'd left him, it was a bit of a surprise, but it also meant he had something to sell and he thought he could sell it big.

"Hey," he said, "I been trying to find you. I got your number out of the book."

"Pour me the same as before," I told him. "Why did you want to see me?"

"I remembered something after you left this morning." He stopped and backed away so that his horseface tie was not within easy reach. I took out a five and slid it across the bar.

"To start," I told him. He nodded and gobbled it up.

"I saw Melendez after Thursday."

"When?"

"Yesterday. He came in here for a drink and he was filthy."

"What do you mean by filthy?"

"He looked as if he'd just ridden the feature in the mud and got thrown, you know? Only it ain't rained in weeks."

I digested that and swallowed some ginger ale. "He had a drink?"

"Yep. He came running in all upsetlike. He even ordered in Spanish. I hadda ask him to repeat it in English. After he drank it, he looked around, scaredlike, you know? Then he ran out like somebody was chasing him."

"Why didn't you remember that this morning?" I asked.

"Hell, it happened so fast. He was in and gone in a couple of minutes." He shrugged. "Slipped my mind."

I thought about it. If what Ray had just told me was true and Melendez was that scared, chances are he wouldn't be at his place. He'd probably be hiding out somewhere.

"Who's he hang out with the most?" I asked. Another jock named Ramirez, Ray said. I asked him to get a message to Ramirez, telling him I had to talk to Melendez. I slid him one of my cards wrapped in a ten-dollar bill.

"He's to call me anytime, got it?"

He snatched up the ten. "I got it. What's it all about anyway?"

"The way I figure it, that's about thirty bucks you've made already. If I hear from Melendez, it could go up to fifty. Got it?"

He widened his eyes. "You got it!"

I went home and fixed myself a steak with onions, a baked potato, and a salad. Then I settled down with my night's reading.

I got a little deeper into the book and caught the drift of it. It was about a girl with a dominant father who didn't like her choice of a fiance. The two, father and fiance, hated each other. One night the girl was raped and murdered. The book ends with the two men crying on each other's shoulder.

The diary was next. I used a steak knife on the flimsy lock, got it open, and started reading. It was written in a little-girl scrawl that made the reading a task. It started when she was about seventeen, about two years before. Most of it was about her love of the racetrack, the horses, and the jockeys. There was a segment that said, "Little Louie brought me flowers again today. I know he loves me, and he is sweet, but Paul would never understand."

Another part lamented: "If only Paul and Daddy could become friends again, like they used to be." These, or words to the same effect, were repeated again and again.

Later on, dated just a few weeks before:

"I can't take it much longer. I feel as if I'm being torn apart, I love them both so much."

The last pages grew even more anguished, until the last page: "I finished the book this afternoon, and I think I finally have the solution. I must go see Little Louie and ask him for his help."

That was dated Thursday. On Friday Penny had disappeared. She had been seen in the track lounge with Little Louie Melendez on Thursday. On Friday Louie was seen again in the lounge, this time dirty and agitated.

I closed the diary and set it aside.

"Are you the guy that called?" he asked. His nameplate identified him as Officer Doyle.

"That's right, officer." I took out my photostat and showed it to him. His partner, Parker, came along and took a look for himself. They'd pulled their radio car right into the meadow behind the track.

"What's this about a homicide?" Parker asked.

I shook my head. "I didn't say homicide. I said I'd found a body. It's over here."

They followed me into the brush where I had found Penny Hopkins' final resting place. I'd driven there early and had started my search of the meadow about eight-thirty. I found her at ten. I dug just deep enough to free her arm, then stopped and went back to the track to call the police. They'd sent a patrol car first, to decide whether or not the call was a crank, but as soon as Doyle saw her arm he had called to his partner to get Homicide and the lab people.

I asked him if we could wait for Homicide before I told my story so that I'd only have to tell it once. He was agreeable and we spent the time between talking horses. Neither of us looked at the grave while we spoke.

When Homicide arrived I told my story to two detectives I didn't know, Homes and Williams. I told them why I was hired, who I'd spoken to, and what led me to believe the girl was buried where she was.

"You say Melendez showed up in the bar covered with dirt?" Homes

remarked. "I'll put out a wanted on him, but meanwhile if you hear anything from him, let us know."

"Would *you* let *me* know what the lab comes up with on her?" I asked him. He agreed to keep me informed.

"You got any ideas?" he asked, as we walked from the meadow.

I nodded. "Some. But I need a little more time. Ask Lieutenant Joe Garvey about me. He'll tell you it will be worth your while to give me a little rope." Garvey was my old boss at Missing Persons.

He poked a cigar into his mouth and said, "That's a pretty good recommendation. Were you on the force?"

I nodded. "Ten years."

When we reached his car he told me, "I'll talk to Garvey. If you don't hear from me, be in my office tonight." He pointed his cigar at me and added, "Ready to spill."

I got to a phone and called my service. It was a little like calling OTB to see if your horse has come in—and mine had. Melendez had called and left a message for me to meet him at the opposite end of the track, beneath the grandstand. The time he wanted was twelve-thirty, and it was a quarter-past now.

The grandstand was, as I've said, at the other end of the track so that you couldn't see the meadow from there. I hoped Melendez hadn't seen the police from somewhere else and been scared off.

But when I got there he was waiting. He was like a scared deer, ready to run at any moment.

"Meester Tucker?" he asked, primed to run if I said no.

"That's right," I told him. I let him see my ID and he relaxed.

"I got message saying you want to help me." He was almost five feet tall and must have weighed all of ninety pounds.

"That's right, Louis, I do."

He nodded. "That is good. I can use help."

Just then he spotted something behind me and he froze. I turned. It was Homes with his partner and two uniformed cops.

"Damn it!" I yelled. They had tailed me.

"Don't move, Melendez!" Homes shouted. "We're the police!"

Louis glared at me and yelled, "You trick me!"

"No, Louis, I didn't!" He started to run and I hollered, "Don't run, they can't hurt you!"

"You've got nowhere to go, Melendez!" Homes shouted, coming up beside me. He had his gun out and was pointing it at the fleeing jockey. "Halt!"

"Don't shoot, damn it!" I yelled, knocking his arm up. His shot went wild and I started after Louis. I had to get to him before Homes or anyone else killed him.

I knew he hadn't killed Penny Hopkins.

He had only buried her.

"Detective Homes and Detective Williams, Mr. Hopkins. They're from Homicide."

Hopkins backed away from the door into his stable office and said, "Homicide! You mean he killed her?"

"Who killed her, Mr. Hopkins?" Homes asked. Williams stepped inside after us, but kept the door open.

"Why, Lassiter, of course. She probably came to her senses about marrying him and he killed her!" He sat. "She is dead, isn't she?"

"Yes, Mr. Hopkins, she's dead," Homes answered. "Mr. Tucker found her buried in the meadow behind the track."

Hopkins nodded. "So he did kill her."

"You're ridiculous," came a voice from outside. Lassiter stepped into the room and faced Hopkins, a younger version of his former mentor. "You know I didn't love her, Benny. Why would I kill her?"

"Because you couldn't take her from me," Hopkins snapped.

"That's all she was to both of you, something to take from each other," I told them.

Hopkins took no offense. "I don't have to justify myself to you, Tucker. I didn't ask for a daughter, I wanted a son. And on top of that, my wife died in childbirth. How could anyone expect me to love her?" It made so much sense to him that I pitied him.

"What about you?" I asked Lassiter. "What did she mean to you?"

Lassiter shrugged. "I liked her, but I didn't love her. She knew that—"

I shook my head. "No, she didn't know that. It says in here that she loved you both," I tossed the diary at Hopkins.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's the diary of a young girl who was being pulled apart by the only two men in the world she really cared about."

"All right, Tucker," Homes snapped, "you brought us here to convince us Melendez didn't kill the girl—so do it." Melendez was in custody, but he hadn't been charged yet.

"Melendez only buried her," I said, suddenly bone-tired. I indicated Hopkins and Lassiter and added, "They killed her."

"What?" Hopkins barked.

"You fool," Lassiter said.

"Tucker—" Homes began, but I interrupted.

"I'm sorry. I should have said they caused her death. They didn't actually murder her, but they *were* the cause."

I picked up the diary and began to explain. "Penny Hopkins was a very emotional, impressionable, unstable young girl. She loved her father and she loved Lassiter, but to them she was just something to fight over, like a beautiful colt. That confused her. She wanted them to love her and she wanted them to be friends.

"I don't know exactly how long their battle for Penny went on, but this diary goes back two years and it was happening then. That's two years she was pushed and pulled between the two people she cared most about, not knowing which way to go, which one to be loyal to . . .

"Then she read a book about a girl with very much the same problem as hers. The girl in the book had her problem solved for her. She was raped and murdered and this brought her father and boy friend closer together. It was a terrible, romantic solution, but Penny was very much alone and very much in need of a solution."

"You mean she went out and got herself raped and murdered?" Williams asked.

"I mean she shot herself."

"What?" It was a collective statement.

I turned to the last page of her diary. "The last page in her diary says she finished the book and had found her solution, but she needed Melendez's help. Melendez was in love with her, he'd do anything for her. He got her the gun she asked for and afterward he buried her."

I shut the diary and concluded.

Penny, Louis had told me, had chosen the meadow for her suicide because it was behind the track and out of sight and chances were good the shot would not be heard. After it was over, after he had watched her put the gun to her head and pull the trigger, and he had buried

her, he began to realize what he'd done. Penny had not wanted to be buried—she had wanted to be found. It was part of the plan to make her father and Lassiter think she'd been murdered, which, to her disturbed way of thinking, would bring them closer together. Instead, he, Melendez, had panicked and buried her in the meadow, along with the gun—as a result of which, he was as guilty in the eyes of the law as if he had pulled the trigger.

And so the man who had really loved Penny Hopkins would pay for Hopkins' and Lassiter's lack of love for her, and they would go scot-free. I took the photograph of the girl from my pocket and looked at it.

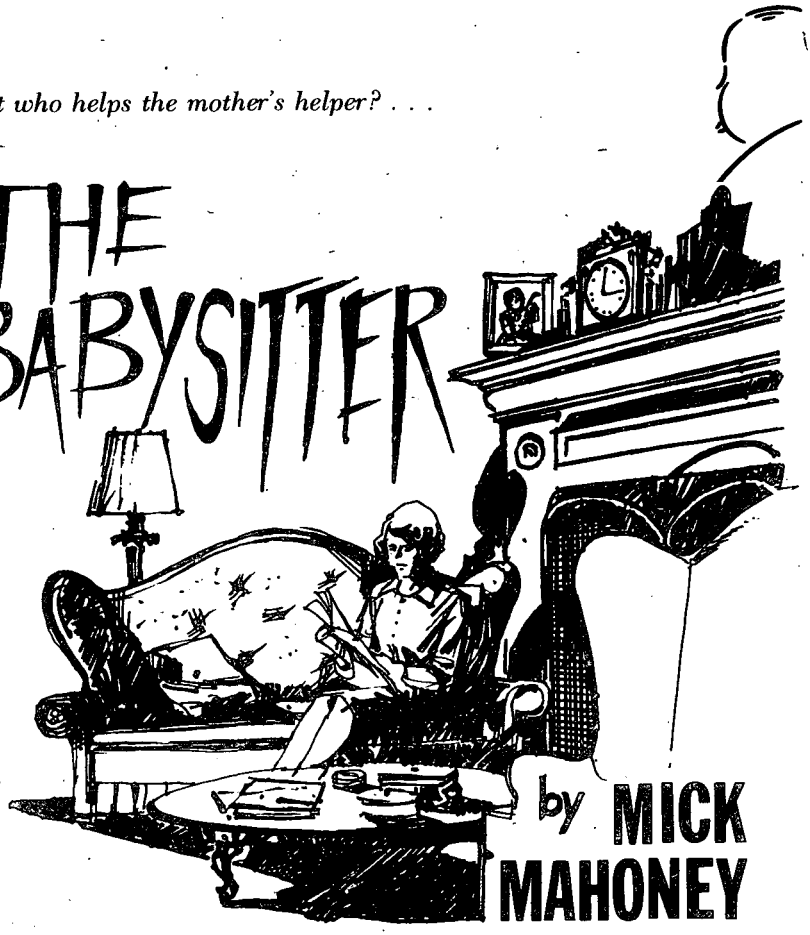
The two men she had adored were playing a perpetual game of chess.

She had thought she was their queen.

I'm glad she never discovered she was just another pawn.

But who helps the mother's helper? . . .

THE BABYSITTER



by MICK MAHONEY

"Hello? Mrs. Crowley? My name is Atkins, Margaret Atkins. I'm calling about the ad you had up on the bulletin board at the Shopsafe Supermarket for a babysitter. Are you still looking for someone? . . . Well, I'm married, and I have a child of my own, a daughter. . . Yes, I've always gotten on quite well with children. I don't think that would be any problem. I've done quite a bit of babysitting and can give you references. How old is your . . . ? I see . . . Yes,

surely, Friday evening would be fine with me . . . No, that's all right, I have a car . . . About 7:30? Good, I'll see you then . . ."

Mrs. Atkins replaced the receiver and sighed. Well, she thought, that will be another ten dollars. It's a help. And she sounded pleasant enough. At least there won't be the dirty diapers and the endless crying like with the little ones.

Mrs. Atkins often had trouble making ends meet ever since the accident almost three years ago. Despite Herb's insurance and disability payments and her job at the bank, they had to stick to a rigorous budget. They enjoyed what they could of the old pleasures, but there were endless medical bills on top of their basic expenses. And they were trying to put a little aside for Cindy's college.

Herb had been going for therapy twice a week for two years. He would never be able to walk again, but he'd made great progress using his hands. Still, they doubted whether he'd be able to hold any kind of a job. He tired quickly.

The accident had taken place near their home, out on the highway. It had happened at dusk on a summer day. Afterward, the other driver claimed that a bee had gotten into his car. In turning to shoo it out, his car had drifted into the oncoming lane and sideswiped Herb's. Herb had been thrown out as his car careened down an embankment.

She remembered how their son Stephen had looked when she went to identify him. They pulled the sheet down and he looked asleep. Asleep, but having a bad dream. She had wanted to reach out and shake him, to wake him up. He was only nine.

But that was the past. Death was part of life. Mrs. Atkins believed in looking on the positive side of things. She had her daughter, Cindy, who was ten now and whom she loved dearly. Things weren't so bad. They managed all right. Herb got depressed every so often, that was to be expected. Mrs. Atkins had to have enough optimism for both of them. Things could always be worse, that was her motto. Be thankful for what you have. Accept what you can't change.

But Stephen had been her first born, and the only son she and Herb would ever have. She'd always felt something special about him, that he was destined for something extraordinary.

When Friday evening came, Mrs. Atkins was tired. Friday was the busiest day at the bank. And she'd gotten up early to do the laundry.

Then after work she'd had to get Herb his dinner and clean up. She hoped Mrs. Crowley wouldn't stay out too late.

Luckily, Mrs. Crowley lived only ten blocks away. Mrs. Atkins hated driving. Even though she stayed on the back streets and went very slowly and cautiously, she was a nervous wreck when she arrived.

Mrs. Crowley lived in a small two-story frame house set slightly back from the road and shaded by two enormous elm trees. It was a quiet area. Mrs. Atkins pushed the lighted doorbell and heard chimes inside. A pleasant-looking woman a few years older than she answered the door. Mrs. Crowley was thin and had bright eyes and a wrinkled face that folded easily into a smile. She welcomed Mrs. Atkins into a cosy overfurnished living room.

"I don't get out much and I'm always afraid I'll forget something," Mrs. Crowley said after they had introduced themselves. "You know how it is, you start out and you realize you haven't brought your hankie or your comb."

While Mrs. Crowley rushed from room to room preparing herself, Mrs. Atkins glanced around the first floor. There was a dining room off the parlor with an old-fashioned chandelier over the table and a china cabinet with wooden scroll around the glass doors, filled with ornate gold-rimmed cups and pitchers. The house was old, with dark woodwork, stuffed chairs, and elaborate lamps everywhere. It seemed rather somber to Mrs. Atkins, but pleasant enough.

"My son's name is Graham," Mrs. Crowley said, returning to the living room with her coat. "He's a sensitive boy, but very well behaved. I'm sure he won't give you any trouble."

Mrs. Atkins said, "I'm certain we'll manage just fine."

"As I told you on the phone, he's just turned twelve. In his opinion he's too old for a babysitter, but I'm not so sure. If I were just running down to the store it would be different, but when I go out for the whole evening, if I didn't have someone in, I know I'd worry. You never know what might happen. No use taking chances."

"I agree with you," Mrs. Atkins replied. "Does Graham play some kind of musical instrument?"

Mrs. Crowley looked at Mrs. Atkins with curiosity. "How did you know?"

"I saw the music stand in the dining room."

"Yes, that's Graham's. He plays the violin. He's quite good too, for

his age. Not a child prodigy, but quite good. And he's very conscientious about practicing. That makes a difference. Practice."

"Of course."

"Yes, he's a fine boy—very well mannered. You needn't worry about that."

"Where is he now?" Mrs. Atkins asked.

"He's in his room," Mrs. Crowley said. "Graham likes privacy. He's a shy boy. Now where are my gloves?" She looked around haphazardly. "Oh. There's his picture. That's Graham when he was younger. His hair's a little darker now."

The snapshot on the mantle was mounted behind glass in a gilded frame. Mrs. Atkins blinked and swallowed. The six-year-old who stood in the photograph holding a violin and frowning could have been Stephen at that age. He'd had the same dark intelligent eyes, moodily narrowed, the same delicate mouth, pulled in on one side causing a dimple. But no, she decided, studying the photograph more closely, he wasn't really like Stephen. Graham's ears were bigger, his jaw was all wrong. The resemblance was only in the way all little boys resemble each other.

"Is something the matter?" Mrs. Crowley had found her gloves and noticed Mrs. Atkins' scrutiny of the picture.

"No," Mrs. Atkins answered. "Your son is a fine-looking boy."

"Yes, isn't he? Well, have I got everything at last? My nephew, Barry, will be here any minute now, and if I'm not ready he'll . . ."

"Mrs. Crowley, don't you think I should meet Graham before you go? So he'll know who I am?"

"Meet Graham?"

"Yes. So he'll know . . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I mean, I'm afraid that's not . . ." Mrs. Crowley smiled apologetically. "Graham's not with us any more."

"I don't understand."

"Graham passed away," Mrs. Crowley said. "He and his daddy. There was an accident, nearly five years ago."

"What?" Mrs. Atkins said in a whisper.

"It was a plane crash," Mrs. Crowley said in an almost musical tone of voice.

"I'm . . . so sorry."

Mrs. Crowley smiled to show that the wound was not a fresh one.

"But how can—I mean what—?" Mrs. Atkins was at a loss.

Waving a hand, Mrs. Crowley said, "It won't be any trouble. It's just that I hate to go out and leave him here all alone. You can understand that." Her eyes pleaded. "He's a good boy, everything will be fine, you'll see . . . Oh, there's Barry." Mrs. Crowley hurried to the front door to answer the chime.

A tall sandy-haired young man entered. He leaned down to kiss Mrs. Crowley on the cheek.

"Hello, Aunt Ada. How are you?"

"Oh, fine, Barry. And all ready to go. I want you to meet Mrs. Atkins. Mrs. Atkins, this is my nephew, Barry. Mrs. Atkins is going to sit for Graham this evening."

"Mrs. Atkins." Barry smiled.

"Hello."

"Now don't you worry, Mrs. Atkins," Mrs. Crowley said. "Just relax and enjoy your evening. I'll be home by eleven-thirty at the latest." She went to the door with Barry following.

Mrs. Atkins sat and pressed a hand to her brow. It was moist. A few seconds later Barry returned. He spoke to her in a hushed voice.

"Mrs. Atkins, I hope you don't think this situation is insane. Aunt Ada's not crazy. It's just that since she lost Uncle Edward and Graham in that plane crash she's needed something to hold onto. She does eccentric little things like taking Graham's violin to be restrung or buying clothes for him because she says he's outgrowing the old ones. And hiring babysitters like yourself. In all other ways she's completely normal. Maybe it's even therapeutic. We don't see any reason not to humor her in these little charades."

"Yes. I see."

"I did want you to know I appreciate your going along. Good night."

"Good night."

Mrs. Atkins chained and bolted the door securely after Barry left, then went to check the rear and side doors.

There was no television, at least not downstairs. Mrs. Atkins sat on the couch in the living room and thumbed through the magazines on the coffee table. The house was quiet. Mrs. Atkins kept listening for a noise. She wasn't used to being alone. At home, even though Herb was confined to bed, it was reassuring to know he was in the house.

Mrs. Atkins got up and paced. The clock on the mantle ticked out each second. She examined the carved mahogany around the face, its ornate hands, the Roman numerals. And her eyes came again to the photograph of the sulky little boy.

Perhaps, she thought, Mrs. Crowley is right. Perhaps it is better to hold on in any way you can, to use any trick you can to ease the loss as long as you can. Stephen seemed so totally gone now. She hadn't saved his things—she couldn't bear to at the time—but now sometimes she found herself forgetting him. Occasionally she would be startled to realize that for a day, or even two or three, she hadn't thought of him. Maybe it would be better to pretend he was still alive.

But no, that would be wrong, she knew it. You had to face reality. Mrs. Crowley was living in a fantasy world, hiding from the truth. What had happened had happened and her pretending wouldn't change it. It was *not* therapeutic to let herself imagine her son was still alive. It was not right. It was dangerous.

Mrs. Atkins stopped pacing and sat down again. She picked up a magazine and started to read an article, tried to concentrate on it, to get her mind off. . .off what?

The couch was very soft. Mrs. Atkins felt drowsy. She lay her head back and relaxed. Her eyelids drooped. Soon she let the magazine drop to the floor. Her mouth lay open. She breathed heavily, asleep.

Later—how much later?—she awoke with a start. She had heard something. Something that made her skin feel clammy, her mouth dry. But the house was quiet, dead quiet, save for the ticking of the clock. It must have been a bad dream.

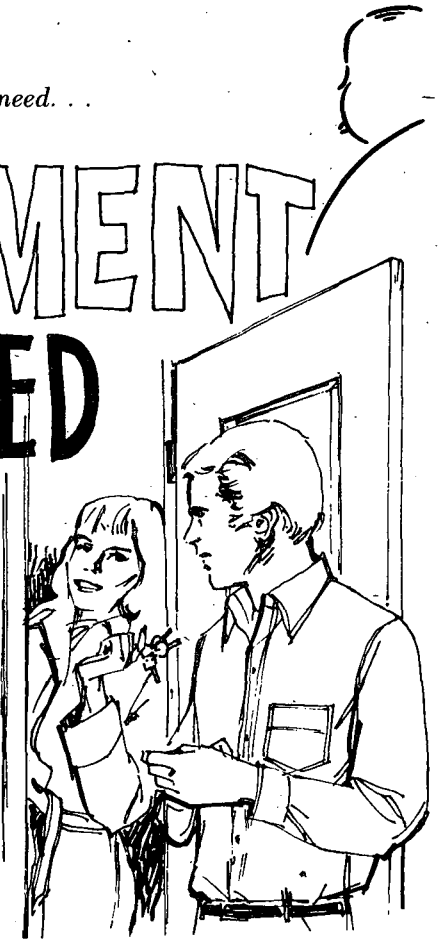
But then she realized it was no dream. Just as she shook the last of the sleep from her head, it began again, tentatively at first, then loud, and distinctly, from upstairs. A violin.

Maybe a little bit of luck is all we need. . .

JUDGMENT POSTPONED

by

Robert Edward Eckels



As a mark of how important a matter he thought it, Slingerland himself came down from the front office to introduce our new branch chief, calling those of us on the staff together into a group and making quite a little speech about how lucky we were to get a man as well qualified as Edgar Wilson to lead us. Slingerland didn't elaborate on those qualifications, and I presumed it was because Wilson's entire background was in Operations and not in Fiscal Control, which was our branch's area of

responsibility. That was an uncharitable thought, I knew, but under the circumstances—my circumstances at least—not an unnatural one. I'd spent over twenty years in Fiscal Control, the last eight as Number Two man.

Afterwards, as the rest of the staff were filing out, Slingerland touched my arm, stopping me. "I think you deserve a personal introduction, Oren," he said. "Ed—" he turned to Wilson "—this is Oren Anderson. You've heard me speak about him."

Wilson nodded, his eyes full on mine and appraising. He was an inch or two shorter than Slingerland, which made him about my height. He was about my age too—although you'd never tell it to look at him. There wasn't a line in his face and the deep even tan bespoke a good many hours spent under the sun, or a sunlamp.

"Oren was Lew Benton's right-hand man when Lew was branch chief," Slingerland continued, "and he's been sort of holding down the fort since Lew retired. How long has it been, Oren? Six months? Seven? Bet you're glad to get the load off your shoulders."

Wilson's mouth twisted into a slight and, I thought, sardonic smile. "I'm sure he is," he murmured. Then the smile faded. "I'll be talking to you later, Oren," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said and, recognizing a dismissal when I heard it, left.

I was conscious of a number of eyes following me as I crossed the office floor to my desk, but nobody said anything. Then George Leduc sauntered over. He is a tall gangling man, only slightly junior to me in the branch. "It was a rotten deal, Oren," he said, "getting passed over like that."

My face felt very tight and uncomfortable. "Perhaps," I said, swallowing hard, "but these things happen. And to tell you the truth, I never really expected to get the job."

Not at first anyway. Benton had as good as told me I wouldn't just before he retired. "I've recommended you, Oren," he had said, "but there's some feeling in the front office that we need new blood and that the place to bring it in is at the top. It's not fair, but—" He hadn't finished the sentence but I'd known what he meant: It's the way things are.

And I'd accepted it—until the months dragged by and the job still hadn't been filled, obviously because the front office was having difficulty finding a qualified candidate. Under the circumstances, it had

been impossible not to hope and in time even convince myself that in the end the company would turn to me.

But, of course, it hadn't worked out that way.

"Well," Leduc said now, "I just wanted you to know how I felt. And I'm not the only one. A lot of us around here are sorry it wasn't you."

Perhaps, but on the other hand there were some who had reason to be glad. One of these was Sally Brennan, the younger of the two stenos who did our typing and clerical work. She was a snip of a girl I'd clashed with several times about tying up the phone with personal calls and the length of her skirts.

Wilson hadn't been on the job three weeks when he appointed Sally his personal secretary at a substantial increase in pay.

I kept my personal misgivings to myself, but I felt it my duty to report to Wilson that this had upset the other steno—who was senior in service as well as age. He shrugged it off. "There are too many people around here hiding behind their seniority," he said.

I suppose I should have recognized that as a warning that my own time to be shaken up was coming. But I didn't and I was completely unprepared the next time he called me into his office.

He kept me standing before his desk like a penitent schoolboy. "Why are you still approving these things, Oren?" he said, tapping the payment voucher form on the desk before him. "Isn't that my responsibility as branch chief?"

"Well," I said, "technically, yes. But Benton never wanted to be bothered with details, so he left it up to me. I just assumed you'd want to operate the same way."

"I see," Wilson said. He paused for a moment and studied the form thoughtfully. "How many vouchers did you approve last week?"

I shrugged. "I don't know," I said. "They come in from the various divisions at odd times, but we average about twenty or thirty a week."

"I see," Wilson said again. He gave the form one final tap, then leaned back in his chair. "All right," he said briskly. "Let's see if we can't make some order out of chaos. Ask Sally to set up a control and hold the week's receipts until Friday. Then send the whole batch in to me at one time for approval."

"It'll mean slower payment," I said.

"Not that much slower," Wilson said. "And on the plus side it'll give us a better idea of what we're doing around here."

"Whatever you say," I said. I turned on my heel and went out to tell Sally what the new arrangements were.

Only, as I'd known all along, they didn't work out the way Mr. Order-out-of-Chaos Wilson expected. Early the next week he called me back into his office. This time a whole sheaf of payment vouchers lay spread out on his desk.

"All right, Oren," he said resignedly. "Tell me why these were all returned stamped Unable to Process."

I picked up the vouchers and leafed through them, although I really didn't need to. "It's very simple," I said. "The girls just forgot to add the proper accounting number. They frequently do that unless you remind them."

"Well then," Wilson said, "why in heaven's name didn't you remind them? And follow up to make sure they had before you sent the vouchers to me?"

"Because I never saw these vouchers," I said. "When you said you wanted to approve all vouchers yourself I assumed you meant just that and had these sent directly to you."

"Oren, Oren," Wilson said. "All I wanted was to set up a control. You can't expect me to know every little detail of how the forms should be completed. Not at first anyway."

Obviously not, I thought, but remained standing silently.

"Look, Oren," Wilson went on, "I want to work with you and I want to be fair. But you make it hard. Not only do you pull stupid little tricks like this but you're continually trying to undercut me with the staff."

"That's not true."

"I'm sorry," Wilson said flatly, "but I have reason to believe it is."

"Then I suppose there's nothing I can do or say that will change your mind," I said. "But you aren't the only one to have grievances, you know. I spent over six months doing two jobs and what did I get for it? Absolutely nothing. At the very least, I should have gotten a bonus or a raise."

Wilson regarded me soberly. "That would be up to the front office to decide, wouldn't it?"

"All they need is a reminder," I said. I hated myself but the truth was that I had overextended myself in anticipation of getting the branch chief's job and I needed the money badly.

"I'm not so sure about that," Wilson said. "I didn't want to tell you this, but the reason this job was left vacant so long was to give you a chance to prove you could do it. And you failed, Oren. So I really don't think a bonus would be in order even if I were inclined to recommend it. Which I'm not. In fact, about the only thing I'd consider recommending you for is early retirement." He leaned back in his swivel chair and folded his arms across his chest. "You might give that some thought," he added grimly, "and be guided accordingly."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Back at my desk I sat with my fists clenched on the blotter before me, stung by the unfairness of it all. Thinking back, I was convinced I had gone out of my way to support Wilson. After all, hadn't I told Leduc that I hadn't expected the job? And there were other occasions too when I could have been critical and wasn't. As for the vouchers—well, all I'd done was follow orders. It wasn't my fault the orders were foolish.

I didn't believe that about the job being left vacant to test me either. That was just an excuse to keep me from getting what the company owed me. And I had a good mind to go over Wilson's head to Slingerland to demand it.

But then I realized with a sudden sense of deflation that whatever his personal feelings, Slingerland would never overrule a branch chief. And there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

I was just sitting there staring at my hands when Sally came over with a stack of returned vouchers. "Mr. Wilson said to have you put the accounting numbers on these and then give them back to me to send over for reprocessing." She paused and looked down her nose at me. "He said to tell you he was holding you personally responsible for their not coming back again," she added.

I sighed. "All right, Sally," I said. "Just leave them."

I continued to sit there for another moment or two, then reached for my ballpoint to begin the mechanical job of entering the accounting numbers. As I did so, my eye fell on Wilson's initials on the "approved" line. Like so many VIPs he apparently considered careful calligraphy obsolete and his signature had deteriorated to a stylized squiggle. His ENW was barely recognizable as the initials the letters were intended to represent. I'd seen that signature literally dozens of times

since he had come into the branch—but what hadn't struck me until now was how easy it would be to copy.

Pushing the vouchers to one side I got out a sheet of scratch paper and began to try. My first attempts were well off the mark, but within a matter of minutes I had it down well enough to know that with more practice I would have no trouble duplicating it exactly. I crumpled the paper and tossed it in my wastebasket. The plan that would get me the money I needed was already formed in my head and ready for execution whenever I was ready.

But only when I was ready. I did nothing more now except complete the rejected vouchers and take them over to Sally, who stuffed them into an envelope without looking at them.

I cleared my throat. "From now on," I said, "let me see the vouchers when they come in and then again after Mr. Wilson approves them."

She looked at me curiously, "*After* he approves them?"

I nodded. I'd anticipated the question and it was a difficult one to answer. But I had to see the vouchers a second time. Once approved, they were never questioned except on format and that I could control. What I couldn't control was Wilson questioning one before approval. "If I'm going to be personally responsible," I said, "I think I'm entitled to double check."

I knew that made me sound like a prig, but maybe that was all to the good. Sally just gave me a scornful look, then shrugged, accepting the reason. And that was that. So far so good.

I knew, though, that I couldn't send vouchers through in my own name or risk having them mailed to my home. So at noon I skipped lunch and set about establishing the existence of a non-existent firm, the Acme General Supply Company. Actually, that's easier than you might think, requiring only a mailing address—accomplished by renting a P.O. box—and a bank account. Also, despite the banker's vaunted reputation, accomplished quite easily. The chink in their armor is that they never question anybody who *deposits* money with them. And once a depositor has the account established, all he's got to do is deposit a check, give it time to clear, and then withdraw the amount, using the signature card on file as his only identification.

Well satisfied with what I'd accomplished, I went back to the office only a few minutes later than usual and put in the rest of the day

working. At quitting time, I carried out a supply of blank voucher forms rolled up in my newspaper.

Later that evening I practiced Wilson's initials until they rolled off the tip of my ballpoint easily, effortlessly, and flawlessly. Then, using my old portable, I filled in one of the voucher forms, picking $197.50 as an amount neither too large nor too small to excite any suspicion. I double-checked each entry to make sure no oversight tripped me up. Satisfied, I picked up my pen again, hesitated only a fraction of a second, then dashed off Wilson's signature on the "approved" line. I compared it to Wilson's real signature and, try as I might, I couldn't distinguish between them. Smiling, I locked the voucher in my desk and got ready for bed.

Friday afternoon Sally laid the week's batch of vouchers, approved and bearing Wilson's initials, on my desk. She didn't speak, but her expression said clearly enough that she thought me an old woman. If only you knew, I thought as she walked away.

I made a pretense of going through the vouchers again. Then, when I was sure no one was paying any attention to me, I slipped the false one safely in the middle. To be perfectly safe, I waited another five or six minutes before taking them back to Sally. "All correct," I said.

"Dandy," she said and set them carelessly to one side of her desk.

That startled me, because I'd expected her to seal them immediately in an envelope where they would be safe from prying eyes. I stood hesitating by her desk. "Was there anything else?" she asked.

"No," I said and went back to my own desk. But I couldn't keep my eyes from sliding across to that exposed pile of vouchers. I was seriously considering getting them back on some pretext or another when the in-office messenger came in on his rounds and Sally hastily stuffed them into an envelope and handed it to him. I heaved a sigh of relief and sagged back in my chair.

The relief was short-lived. Despite my years with the company, I had no idea how long it took to process a check once the voucher was approved. And I spent the next week and a half literally on the edge of my chair, approaching the post office each day with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Until at last there it was—a slim brown envelope with the name Acme General Supply peeking through the address box. It had worked and I was home free. . .

My original intention was to stop as soon as I'd collected enough to pay off my debts. Perhaps if I had done that everything would have turned out all right. But the plan was working so well that it seemed foolish to give it up. Until, of course, Wilson called me into his office and showed me the pile of vouchers spread out on his desk. Then it seemed foolish to have ever started.

"What ever possessed you to do it, Oren?" he said. "Even if Sally hadn't noticed that we were consistently sending out more vouchers than we received, the auditors were bound to find you out."

I looked at him blankly. "I didn't know about any auditors."

"Of course not," Wilson said. "Only Sally and I knew in the branch. But a man with your background and experience must have realized that when expenses started running significantly and unexplainably too high, the company would take steps to find out why."

It was only later that the real significance of what he'd said came through to me. Right now I was too overwhelmed by the enormity of being caught to take it in.

Wilson looked at me disgustedly. "But apparently you didn't, did you?" He shook his head. "It's almost against my better judgment," he went on, "but I guess we do owe you something for all the years you've put in. So I'll give you a week to make 'voluntary' restitution before I pass what I know on to the front office. If you can do that I'll recommend there be no prosecution."

I stood up slowly. "Thank you," I said, and turned to leave.

Wilson stopped me. "Of course," he said, "there can be no question of your staying on here. I'll explain to the staff—until the news breaks—that you're on vacation. But leave your office keys with Sally."

I nodded and went the rest of the way out.

Sally accepted the keys gravely. "You may not believe this," she said, "but I really am sorry. I didn't have any choice though."

"No," I said, "you didn't."

I turned away thinking at least I had a week and that was *something*.

Something, perhaps. But as you know, if you've ever tried to raise a large amount of money under pressure, not enough. Still, judgment postponed once might be postponed again. And that hope sent me to Wilson's home the night before his deadline ran out.

He lived at the end of a secluded street in the western suburbs. I

shivered in the wind as I stood on his step, pushing the door buzzer. I could hear the chimes sounding faintly from within but otherwise the house was silent. I pressed harder, half panicked that he might not be home and that my time would run out by default. But then suddenly the door was jerked open and Wilson glared out at me. "For God's sake, Oren," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to talk to you," I said. "And I didn't want it to be at the office."

He hesitated, glancing back into the house. For a moment I was afraid he was going to slam the door in my face, but then he shrugged and moved aside to let me enter. "All right," he said.

"You'll have to excuse the clutter," he went on loudly, leading me down the hall, "but my wife's visiting her sister and I've been batching it the last week and a half."

He opened a door at the end of the hallway and ushered me into a pleasant paneled room furnished as a study and warmed by a gas log blazing in a stone fireplace. A door to the left of the fireplace led deeper back into the house and stood slightly ajar.

One other thing struck my eye immediately—two glasses standing side by side on a low table, both partially full and one unmistakably edged with lipstick. So that was why Wilson had been so long answering the door and why he had spoken so boomingly. He had a woman here with him—and not his wife.

Wilson frowned when he caught the direction of my gaze. "All right, Oren," he said irritably, "what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"I need more time to raise the money," I said. "Another week—"

Wilson shook his head. "No," he said. "If you don't have the money now, you won't have it in another week."

"Yes, I will," I said. I plunged on breathlessly. "I have some property. The sale's all arranged but the man needs some time to get the money together." That was a lie, but a week was a week no matter how it was gained. And in that time I might be able to find out more about the woman Wilson was seeing and use it as a lever to force him to drop the charges altogether.

Now he took a cigar from his breast pocket and held it lightly between his fingers, chest high. "How much would you net?" he said.

"Six thousand," I said eagerly. "Enough to cover the vouchers and even leave—"

"Leave what?" Wilson cut in. "Six thousand dollars isn't a tenth of what you stole."

"That's not true," I protested. "Tally up the Acme vouchers. They come to just over $3000."

"I'm sure they do," Wilson said. "But add in Calvert Associates, Jefferson-Leeds, and all the other phony companies you invented and the grand total comes nearer $75,000."

I just looked at him. "No," I said finally, and my voice sounded weak even to me. "I don't know anything about any of those other companies."

"Oh, come on, Oren," Wilson said. "You don't really expect anybody to believe that, do you?"

Suddenly everything clicked into place and my temper flared. "No," I cried, "and you don't expect anybody to believe it either, do you? My God, I should have realized that I hadn't stolen enough for it to be noticed! I was careful to keep the amounts low for just that reason!

"But *you* didn't have to be careful, did you? Because you'd set me up as the perfect scapegoat. That's why you gave me the week's grace. You thought I'd run, leaving you free to tell whatever story you liked. Well, it's not going to work that way. I'm going to see that everybody knows the truth."

"That's enough!" Wilson said sharply. "I really don't know what you hope to gain by trying to smear me with wild accusations you couldn't possibly back up in a thousand years. But let me tell you this—the net effect is to kill any hope you ever had of mercy from me." He made a short emphatic gesture with his cigar. "You say you'll have $6000 in a week? Good. You'll need it for a lawyer." And with that he turned abruptly to stick the cigar in his mouth and strike a match on the stone of the fireplace.

That sent me completely over the edge. I grabbed up the nearest object to hand—a heavy glass ashtray—and smashed it down against the back of his head. Wilson lurched forward against the fireplace, then crumpled up and lay motionless on the floor.

For a long moment I just stared at him. Then I bent, pulled him away from the fire and felt for his heartbeat. There wasn't any. I'd killed him. I gave in to panic then and fled.

Somehow I drove more or less sanely back to my apartment, but I remember none of it. My first coherent recollection is of standing just

inside my apartment door, breathing hard and trying to think what to do next. And realizing that there was nothing I could do. Even if I hadn't left my fingerprints smeared over everything, that hidden woman had heard the whole argument—and possibly even seen me. She'd send the police straight to me and there would be no escape—except one.

Without taking off my coat I walked to the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet, and took out the bottle of sleeping pills I kept there. It was almost full. I shook two out into my hand, washed them down with a glass of water, then shook out two more. And stood staring at them, unable to raise my hand to my mouth a second time.

Finally I put them back in the bottle and went into my bedroom. I lay down still clothed and eventually the two pills I had taken took hold and I slept.

The phone woke me the next morning. Feeling utterly defeated, I dragged myself out of bed to answer it. But it wasn't the police as I expected, it was Slingerland.

"Oren," he said, "thank God you're home. Something terrible has happened and we need you back at the office right now. I hate to ask you to cut your vacation short, but—well, frankly, Wilson's dead and we're not sure whether it was an accident or suicide. He had a gas fire in his study and somehow or other the gas was on but not lit and then he struck a match or something. There was a hell of an explosion and we'll probably never know for sure what *did* happen."

His voice trailed off, then picked up again. "You're bound to know sooner or later, Oren, so I might as well tell you. Wilson was approving false vouchers to nonexistent companies. He was aware that we were calling in auditors and knew he was bound to be caught, so it looks as though he took the easy way out."

I started to tremble, remembering how close I'd come to taking that way myself.

"Can we count on you, Oren?" Slingerland persisted.

"Yes," I managed to say. "Of course."

"Fine. And, Oren, I think we're going to reconsider our position on you as branch chief. You may not be the world's greatest administrator, but at least you're honest. And there's a lot to be said for that."

"Yes," I said. I put the phone down. I was almost afraid to let myself

believe it had really happened. But it had. Incredible as it might seem, that gas fire *had* exploded, obliterating the evidence of what had really happened, and I was free to tell any story I liked about the vouchers.

But why hadn't Wilson's girl friend gone to the police? It stopped me for a minute, then I realized she was probably married herself and afraid of scandal. Whatever her reason, she hadn't come forth and because of that my world was suddenly a brighter place. I went to shower and dress with a mental reservation to keep it that way. No more fooling with vouchers—if for no other reason than because I could never be so lucky again.

I was just tying my tie when the door buzzer sounded. I finished the knot, pulled it straight, then went to answer the door.

Sally stood smiling cryptically and dangling a set of keys from her upraised finger—the keys I'd given her when Wilson had fired me. "You'll be needing these now that you're coming back to the office," she said. "I thought I'd bring them over and save you the trouble of asking for them."

She put the keys in my hand and moved past me into the room.

"Really, Oren," she said, her smile fading, "for a man who's supposed to be smart, you certainly behaved stupidly last night. Running off and leaving him lying there like that!"

I had the presence of mind to slam the door and lock it. "You," I said. "You were the woman at Wilson's last night."

"That's right," she said. "And damn lucky for you I was too. If I hadn't been there to blow out that fire and then set up a kitchen timer to strike a spark half an hour later you'd be in handcuffs now instead of sitting on top of the world."

"But why?" I said.

"Because it wasn't Ed who set up those other false vouchers, lover, it was me. It took me about three weeks to figure out what you were up to, then—well, what you could do I could do. In perfect safety too, because any time I needed to I could just point the finger at you and you couldn't prove you hadn't done the whole thing yourself.

"Of course, now that he's dead, poor old Ed makes an ever better scapegoat." She sighed. "Although in one way it is a pity. His signature was so absurdly easy to forge.

"Still," she went on, "now that you're going to be branch chief, that won't be a problem at all. Will it?"

But what an odd combination the survivors can be. . .

A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

by BILL PRONZINI & BARRY N. MALZBERG

Midway through the cocktail party—another of the dull, pointless affairs Marcia regularly insisted on having—Blume and Cutting went out onto the penthouse terrace to continue their discussion.

It was a warm night, and this high up, 24 stories above the city pavement, you could not smell the pollution. The air was scented with lilac from the small bushes Marcia had planted in boxes around the stone floor. Drinks in hand, they stood near the wall at the far end beneath the awning and spoke in soft intense tones.

"Listen," Blume said, "we've *got* to go through with a merger. It's a simple matter of survival. Why in hell can't you see that, Frank?"

"Oh, I see a certain validity in it, all right," Cutting said. He could not hold his liquor very well and was somewhat drunk already. "The point is, I don't like you, Roger. I don't like you at all as a person, and I'd no doubt learn to loathe you as a partner."

"The feeling is mutual," Blume told him acidly. "But it's irrelevant."

"Is it?"

"You know it is. The development of that new type of circuitry back East and the cutbacks in government subsidy have created a buyer's market. Only one company can survive—"

"Exactly," Cutting said. "Mine."

"Don't be a fool. As long as I keep Blume Electronics afloat, you'll keep losing money—and vice versa." Blume spread his hands in a gesture that was half angry, half imploring. "Look, between us we've got the best engineers in the country. Team them up, streamline operations by eliminating unnecessary personnel, equipment and space, and we could start showing considerable profits inside of a year. Profits, man—black ink instead of red."

"I don't like the idea of sharing profits with you."

"No?" Blume studied him for a moment. "I don't see why it should bother you," he said. "After all, you haven't seemed to mind sharing Marcia with me these past few months."

Cutting had not expected this. He jerked in surprise, averted his eyes, and took a long swallow from his glass. Blume watched him calmly, waiting. The party noises drifted out from the apartment.

"I don't think that's very funny," Cutting said finally.

"Oh, come on, Frank," Blume said, "I've known all about it from the beginning."

"You don't know anything. There's nothing to know."

"Have it your own way."

Blume shrugged and fell silent, staring out over the lights of the city. He was conscious of Cutting's eyes on him, and he smiled to himself. Cutting was not the kind of man who could endure silence, particularly on a subject as volatile as this one.

Thirty seconds went by before Cutting said, "Blume—if you suspected something between Marcia and me, why the hell didn't you say so long before this?"

"I saw no point in it. You're not her first conquest, you know—not by any stretch of the imagination."

Cutting scowled. "That's another damned lie."

"No, I'm afraid it isn't."

"She's not that kind of woman—"

"She is that kind of woman and a whole lot more. You don't know her like I do, Frank."

"I still don't believe you."

"All right," Blume said. "Don't."

This time fifteen seconds passed before Cutting said, "Why haven't you divorced her if what you say is true?"

"She won't give me a divorce. I've asked her dozens of times. I think she enjoys tormenting me, even though she denies it."

"You make her sound like some kind of—" Cutting let the sentence trail off.

"Some kind of what, Frank?"

A headshake.

"Well," Blume said, "how about 'black widow'? They devour their males after they've finished mating. Metaphorically speaking, that's an apt description of Marcia."

Cutting stared at him. His expression told Blume the words had touched a nerve.

"Now that you've gotten involved with her," Blume said, "you've probably already begun to realize what she is. Maybe you've even been thinking of dropping her, getting out from under. But she won't let you do it, will she?—not without a hell of a battle, not until *she's* good and ready to end it herself."

Cutting passed a hand over his face.

Blume said, "You remember Chuck Ames, don't you?"

"Ames?"

"A young engineer I hired a couple of years ago. He drove his car into a utility pole one night, blind drunk, at seventy miles an hour. Remember that?"

"I think so."

"Do you know why he was drinking so heavily?"

"If you're going to say it was because of Marcia—"

"That's exactly what I'm going to say," Blume said. "Just another of her conquests, but weaker than most of us, a little more unlucky."

Despite the night's warmth, Cutting seemed to shiver faintly. "Why are you telling me this? If you think it's a way to get back at me . . ."

"Not at all," Blume said. "I'm telling you for one reason only. The merger. You're holding back on it because of Marcia, that's obvious. She's against a merger for reasons of her own, and she's certainly communicated that to you. I'd also venture to guess that you don't particularly relish the idea of entering into a partnership with the husband of the woman you've been having an affair with."

Cutting was silent.

"You see how tightly she's got you wrapped up?" Blume asked. "Because of her, you're willing to throw away the only hope you've got to forestall a business disaster—"

Blume stopped talking. At the periphery of his vision he noticed Marcia approaching from the direction of the open terrace doors. He glanced at Cutting, saw the other man stiffen, then returned his gaze to Marcia. She wore a pink organdy evening gown, and the pale light from the moon gave her blonde hair a frosty tint, put an almost iridescent sheen on her bare shoulders.

"Well," she said, "I thought I might find you both out here. Talking merger again, I suppose."

"Yes," Blume said. "Among other things."

"I still think it's a mistake. Don't you agree, Frank?"

"I'm not sure," Cutting said without looking at her. She was standing closer to him than to Blume.

"Of course it is," Marcia said. "You two are hardly partnership material." She laughed softly, but it was a sound that made the hairs on Blume's neck prickle.

He said, "A merger is the only answer."

"Nonsense." She moved still closer to Cutting, her bare shoulder against his arm.

"It's the only hope for us," Blume insisted, but he was talking to Cutting now. "A matter of survival, pure and simple."

"No," Marcia said.

There was a moment of silence. Then Blume said, "You do see what I mean, don't you, Frank?"

"Yes," Cutting sighed, "I see what you mean."

They looked at each other, and then at Marcia standing between them with her back to the terrace wall . . .

The police accepted their explanation that Marcia's fall had been a freak accident. There was no reason to believe otherwise, and no one inside the apartment had seen or heard anything. If it had been a dull party, it had also been a noisy one.

When the authorities and the shocked guests had gone, Blume poured Cutting and himself a nightcap. "We'll go ahead with the merger on Monday," he said.

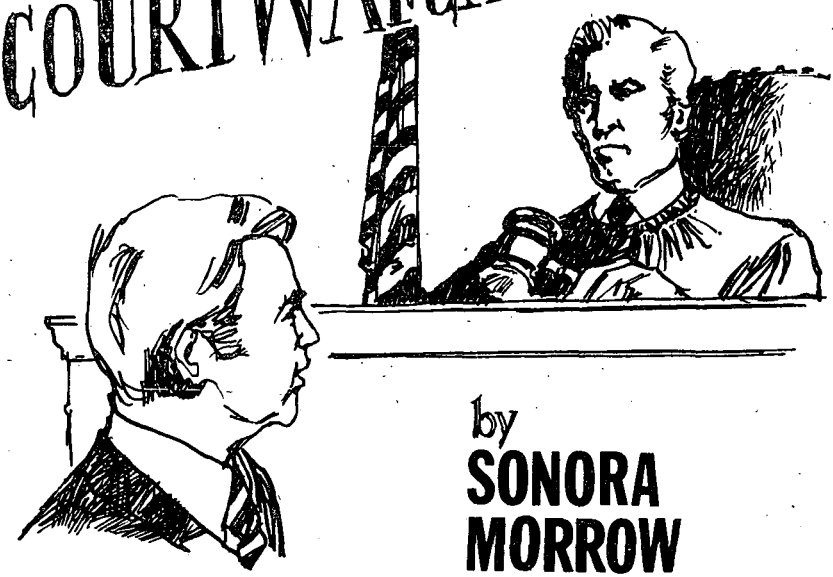
Cutting nodded solemnly. "The sooner the better."

Blume smiled in a weary humorless way and raised his glass. "To survival?"

"To survival," Cutting said.

We can all be assured of our day in court. . .

THE COURTWATCHERS



by
SONORA MORROW

Judge Ronald Z. Robbins had been told many times that he was a lucky man, and each time he smiled to himself that luck had nothing to do with it.

At fifty-three, he was a Superior Court judge, twice elected, and he had his eye on the governor's mansion up at the capital. He had a faithful, attractive, and ambitious wife, and two children, all of whom looked good in the family section of the newspapers. His son Michael

drank too much, but his mistake of hitting and injuring a pedestrian in a crosswalk while under the influence, and his numerous citations for drunk and reckless driving had all been handled quietly, at some financial cost, and he had no police record.

Rebecca, his daughter, whose addiction to "kicks" of any kind included marihuana, uppers and cocaine, also had no record despite her arrests for "possession." Arresting officers had been paid to forget and the reports became ashes. Let the opposition dig, Robbins and his family were above reproach. And their fourteen-room home welcomed all the best families for brunch, cocktails, and buffets. Their swimming pool was enjoyed by the children of the best families. Ronald Z. Robbins had it made.

The first of the month was a big day at Hartley's Hotel for Senior Citizens. It was Social Security and pension-check day. Mrs. Martin, the manager, always distributed the mail to her tenants personally. Too many checks had been stolen when placed in individual letter-boxes.

Martha Davidson, seventy-four, dressed neatly to walk the two blocks to the bank to cash hers. Dear Mr. Dalkis, the only car owner in the hotel, always drove those who wished to go to the supermarket in the afternoon. Mrs. Davidson had wondered about Mr. Dalkis when he first moved in. He was younger than the rest, only in his early sixties. He was a retired police officer and she knew his pension was sufficient to allow him to live in a much nicer place. Not that the Hartley wasn't nice. Each apartment had a nice bed-sitting room, a tiny but utilitarian kitchen and private bath. And there was a recreation room with plenty of comfortable couches and chairs, a piano, and a color television set.

She'd mentioned it to him one evening.

"Mr. Dalkis, you're so much younger than we are and I'm sure you could live in a better place. Why are you here?" Once she'd said it, she drew back in horror. Mama would never have approved of such forwardness. "I *am* sorry," she said quickly. "It's absolutely none of my business. Please forgive me. Old people sometimes take such liberties."

He'd smiled and patted her hand.

"Not at all, we're friends and neighbors and it's no secret. Twenty-two years ago my wife and only son were blown up in our car. The

bomb had been meant for me. I stayed on with the department, but I couldn't stand our home and its memories. I sold it and moved to a nice apartment. But when I retired last year I realized I didn't have any real friends. And I have no relatives nearby. I began to hate that cold apartment and the strangers who lived in the building. I wanted to be with warm friendly people to whom I might extend a helping hand when needed."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you picked our place. You *are* a *good* friend."

And after that she'd looked upon him as the brother she'd never had.

The teller at the bank counted out her money carefully, smiled at her, and said, "Have a good day."

Half a block from the hotel two youths came from behind her and nudged her, one on either side.

"Cashed your old-age check, have you, my beauty?" said the one to her left. He was about six feet tall with long blond hair and bright blue eyes. He wore a leather vest with fringe on it. A Fu Manchu moustache drooped over each side of his full lips.

"Hey, man, you're scaring her," the other young man said. Shorter than his companion, he had black curly hair held at the nape of his neck by a rubber band. His eyes were brown and he had a two-inch scar on his left cheek. "She isn't mean or selfish, she's going to share with us, aren't you, grandma?"

Martha clutched her worn purse close to her body.

"Get away from me, you hooligans, get away!" She tried to walk faster, looking desperately around, praying for some good citizen or a policeman to notice her predicament, but no one did.

"Give me that purse, you old crone," the blond one said and pulled at it, hurting her arm. She struggled and the dark-haired boy pushed her to the pavement. They grabbed the purse and ran down the street, ducking off into the first alley.

Martha's ankle and arm hurt and she wondered if she'd be able to get up.

Cars went by on the street, but there were no pedestrians.

Painfully, she got to her feet, took a deep breath, and moved slowly on toward the hotel. . .

Mr. Dalkis was in the recreation room and she called out to him.

He helped her to her room, depositing her gently on the bed, and went to get her a shot of brandy. Between sips, she told him the story.

Within ten minutes two uniformed police officers were taking the report.

"Do you think you can positively identify the men?" one of them asked.

"Anywhere, anytime," she said. "I may be seventy-four, but my eyes are good and my faculties are just fine."

"We think we know who they are—it shouldn't be hard to pick them up."

"And my money?" she asked. "Will I get it back?"

"We'll do our best. You're a very good witness, Mrs. Davidson. We'll be calling on you for identification when we arrest them."

"I'll see that she gets to the station," Mr. Dalkis said.

When they were gone, Martha began to cry.

"My rent, my groceries, my medical insurance," she moaned. "What can I do? How will I live this month?"

"Hey," he soothed, "I thought we were good friends and good friends help each other, so you're going to let me replace the money you lost."

She smiled through her tears. "But it's just a loan. I'll pay it back."

"Naturally," he replied, "or I'll sue you."

Miserable as the experience had been, Martha began to enjoy the aftermath. Mrs. Martin brought her magazines to read, the Rothbergs on the third floor brought her chicken soup. Mrs. Linden gave her one of her prized African violets to enjoy. It seemed that every one of the fifteen tenants at Hartley's wanted to contribute something to the comfort of one of their own. They saw to it that she soaked her injured ankle three times a day and old Miss Temple lent her a little silver dinner bell that had been used to summon servants before the Civil War.

"In case you need anything and no one's around," she said in her soft southern accent. "It was my grandmama's."

A week later Martha was asked to come down to the police station to make identification of two suspects. Mr. Dalkis drove her and sat beside her in the large auditorium where the lineup took place. Martha

felt as though she were in a theater and the suspects were actors on stage. An officer came and sat beside them in the front row.

"Now take your time, Mrs. Davidson, and be absolutely sure," he said.

The short dark hoodlum was in the first line of suspects and the blond was in the second group. Martha picked them out unerringly and offered to swear to her identification on a Bible.

"That won't be necessary at this time," the officer had smiled at her. "We have enough to give the district attorney along with your statement. With any luck, we'll have the preliminary hearing within a few weeks." He looked at Mr. Dalkis. "The clowns will be out on bail within hours. Will you look after the lady?"

"Count on it, George," Mr. Dalkis replied grimly.

Mr. Dalkis had a conference with Mrs. Martin, and she called an informal meeting in the recreation room that evening.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Dalkis has something to say to you all and it's very important, so please give him your full attention."

He stood in the center of the room. "As you probably know, I'm a retired police officer, so I'm speaking from experience. The two men who assaulted Martha and stole her money have long police records. They both have been in and out of Juvenile Hall since they were twelve, before going on to bigger things and spending time in the County Jail. They're immoral and vicious and wouldn't hesitate to harm Martha to keep her from testifying against them."

The old people looked at each other with fear in their eyes.

"Now, Mrs. Martin and I will work together to keep this hotel as impregnable as possible. The front and back doors will be kept locked with a dead-bolt, which means you can only be let in by someone from the inside. I will take any of you to the store or the doctor or wherever you want to go anytime."

There was murmuring within the group and Mr. Stendahl said, "Seems like even though they're the criminals *we're* in prison."

"I know," Dalkis sympathized, "but it's only until after the trial and they're put where they belong. And it's for the safety of all of you."

The preliminary hearing was held three weeks later and the two men were held over for trial on the strength of Martha's positive identifica-

tion. Several other elderly victims were present who were "pretty sure" they were their assailants, but they'd been frightened and confused. The attorney from the public defender's office conferred with the two men and informed the judge there would be a jury waiver.

The trial was held before the Honorable Judge Ronald Z. Robbins, Superior Court.

The two defendants were neat and clean in suits, fresh shirts, and ties.

The prosecutor decided against putting the vague witnesses on the stand and concentrated on Martha Davidson, whose testimony was firm and credible.

The public defender cross-examined her.

"Mrs. Davidson, how old are you?"

"Seventy-four."

"Isn't it possible that your eyesight is not what it once was?"

"It is not possible."

"Oh?" The defender spoke as if to a child. "And how can you be so sure?"

"Because," she replied, "my eyes were just examined by Dr. Arnold A. Portland three months ago and my vision is excellent."

He decided to try a new approach.

"Mrs. Davidson, have you ever seen those two men before?" He pointed to the defense table.

"Before what?"

There was a sprinkle of laughter from the spectators. The judge rapped with his gavel.

"Before today."

"I've seen them three times. When they knocked me down and stole my purse, the day I picked them out in the lineup, and at the preliminary hearing."

"All right. Now before you answer my next question, I want to be sure that you understand that your testimony might well put those two young men behind bars. . ."

"I certainly hope so," Martha muttered audibly.

Judge Robbins admonished her. "Madam, just answer the questions you are asked."

"And," continued the defender, "I want you to be sure that there is

not the *slightest* shadow of a doubt in your mind that those two men"—again he pointed—"are the ones who took your purse."

"There is no doubt in my mind. They *are* the hooligans who did it."

"Please, your Honor, may I ask that the word 'hooligans' be stricken from the record?"

The judge nodded and instructed the court stenographer.

The two suspects, each in his turn, took the stand and swore they were miles away at the time of the crime. No witnesses were produced to confirm their alibis.

Each side rested his case.

Judge Robbins again used his gavel.

"I find the defendants guilty. Is there a request for probation?"

The defender nodded.

"Then the probation hearing and sentencing will take place three weeks from today in this court at 10:00 A.M."

That evening the Hartley Hotel residents had a party, courtesy of Mr. Dalkis. There were buckets of take-out chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, rolls, a large cake, and plenty of punch and coffee.

Martha enjoyed herself immensely. But she wished she had gotten her money back.

There were no spectators in court the morning of the sentencing and the judge instructed the two men and the defender to come before him.

"You have been found guilty of assault and robbery and have requested probation. The probation report has been read and considered. You are each sentenced to one year in the County Jail, sentence suspended, and you will be on probation for two years. You will report regularly to your probation officer. Court will recess for fifteen minutes."

The prosecutor stood up and said, "If your Honor please."

Judge Robbins looked at him. "You have something to say to the court?"

"I do."

"Approach the bench."

"Your Honor, the probation officer especially recommended no suspension or probation. These men are repeaters, a menace to decent citizens . . ."

The judge held up his hand.

"I am allowing you this leeway, Mr. Land, because I am aware of your fine record. However, it is my opinion that those two men, boys really, coming as they do from a poor background were culturally deprived, and no useful purpose would be served in confining them with hardened criminals."

He rose and walked into his chambers.

As the prosecutor prepared to leave the courtroom, Mr. Dalkis approached him.

"You don't know me, Mr. Land, but I was on the police department for thirty years. No one knows better what a monstrous judgment this is. We police keep arresting them and the courts keep turning them loose. Smack in the middle is the law-abiding citizen who keeps getting robbed and assaulted and sometimes murdered because of it. Isn't there anything more we can do?"

Land sighed deeply. "If you can think of anything legal, let me know." He shook Mr. Dalkis's hand. "Nice talking to you."

There must be something we can do, Dalkis thought, there *must* be.

He didn't say anything when he got back to the Hartley. As far as the old people were concerned, especially Martha, the men had been found guilty. They didn't know about self-serving judges, suspended sentences, and probation. In their day a criminal was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to a reasonable length of time in prison.

Instead, the following week he traded in his sedan for a nine-passenger station wagon and addressed them in the recreation room one evening when they all were there.

"Friends," he began, "the older we get the more we seem to resist change. Some changes are for the better and some are not. We can remember better times, decent times, trusting times. We all remember the Depression of the thirties when the crime rate was at its lowest and people helped each other as best they could."

The senior citizens nodded. They did remember, each in his own way.

"Well, I have to tell you now that those men who hurt Martha did not go to jail."

There was a loud protest. Questions came from all sides.

He held up his hand. "Unfortunately it's not unusual, but it *is*

wrong. I've thought and thought about what to do, and I think people like us can make a small dent in this stupid system. Will you help?"

"How?" Mr. Stendahl said. "I'll do anything if it might work."

"Since we have a lot of free time, how about alternate groups of us spending our weekdays in court, watching judges?"

"Watching judges?" Miss Temple said.

"They're the ones who put the criminals away or turn them loose. Maybe it's time we citizens oversaw their operation. We are taxpayers, after all. And it's our lives that are at stake."

The next day and every day in his court thereafter Judge Robbins noticed a small group of old people sitting in the front row listening to all his cases. They were quiet and concentrated hard. At the end of the second week, he asked his bailiff who they were.

"I don't know, your Honor, just old people with nothing to do, I guess."

"Well, they bother me. They all keep staring at me."

"I don't think there's any way to remove them, sir, unless they create a disturbance."

Subsequently, such letters to the editor began to appear in the newspapers:

"As a spectator in Judge Ronald Z. Robbins' court daily, I'm beginning to wonder what his thoughts are on crime and justice. In the past weeks he has suspended sentence on two convicted rapists, four drug pushers, a burglar, and four hold-up men. The cases are public record for any concerned citizen who cares to read the transcripts.

J. Dalkis."

A television special-events reporter heard about the daily spectators in Judge Robbins' court and brought his cameraman.

Outside, he asked J. Dalkis, who seemed to be the spokesman for the group, why they appeared every day in court.

"It seems to me," said ex-Police Sergeant John Dalkis, "that any citizens who have the time should see how the system we're paying for works—or doesn't work, as the case may be."

"Are you saying that Judge Robbins is not a good judge?"

"Young man, I am fully aware of the slander laws, and I will make

no statements regarding his Honor. Let his record speak for him."

"Are you going into other courts to watch other judges?"

Dalkis smiled. "Anything is possible. My hope is that our small group will expand into hundreds and even thousands. *Caveat emptor* is still a good bit of advice."

Judge Robbins' court began to fill every day. Citizens in all age brackets listened to his every word, watched his every decision.

His two before-dinner martinis began to become six or seven and he often skipped dinner. They won't stop, he convinced himself, until they find out about Michael and Rebecca. They're out to get me.

The final straw was the article in a national weekly magazine. Titled "What Makes Robbins Run?" it extolled the virtues of the group of mostly older citizens who had come to be known as The Courtwatchers.

Many a judge shook in his chambers, but Ronald Z. Robbins called a halt. He resigned his bench "due to ill health" and took his family to Bermuda.

The television reporter who had first interviewed Dalkis came to the Hartley, again with his cameraman who took pictures of the residents while the reporter interviewed John Dalkis.

"Mr. Dalkis, do you feel you and your courtwatchers drove Judge Robbins out of office?"

"Not at all." Mr. Dalkis tried to look somber. "I had the feeling for a long time that his Honor was a very sick man."

"You mean sick in body or sick in mind?"

"I'm not a doctor."

"You really were the spearhead of this courtwatching movement, Mr. Dalkis. Have you any plans for the future?"

"Yes, I have. I'm making arrangements to buy a very large old home in Alexandria, Virginia, just across the Potomac from Washington, D.C."

"You mean you're planning a Congress-watching group?"

"Well, the home will accommodate thirty elderly people who won't have much to do during the day—and, well, a thing like this spreads. Hopefully, we'll have as many people watching congressmen in session as the seats will accommodate."

"And do you think that will help this country, Mr. Dalkis?"

"It couldn't hurt," the ex-cop beamed.

Women's revenge isn't always because of the love of a man. . .

THE WHITECHAPEL WANTONS

by
Vincent McConnor

A door opened, the angry sound of rusty hinges echoing through the empty street, but no one heard.

And nobody saw the figure of a girl, briefly visible against a blur of candlelight that revealed a narrow hall with steep wooden stairs.

The girl closed the door and, fumbling with her key in the dark, locked it again. You couldn't be too careful, although, up to now, the

Ripper had always killed in the streets. Mostly in dark alleys—some of them not far from here.

She had known all of the girls, Polly Nichols and the others.

The newspaper said that Polly was the second to die.

Hesitating on the top step, peering up and down the silent street, she returned the key to her purse and slipped it into the pocket of her jacket. Now both hands were free for any emergency she might have to face.

The ground-floor shop next door, which did a brisk trade in pickled eels during the day, was shuttered for the night.

Nobody ventured out after dark any more unless it was urgent business. It was the women who were in danger, but men stayed off the streets at night because the police were stopping them to ask who they were and where they were going. If their answers sounded suspicious they were taken in for questioning.

The pubs were suffering. There were still a few regulars every night, but a girl was afraid to speak to a stranger because he might be the Ripper. Nobody knew what he looked like.

She was probably the only one in all of London who had seen his face and she wasn't going to tell the police!

Shivering under her thin summer dress, she clutched the short velvet jacket more securely around her. The air was as sharp as a knife and it was only early October. Another week and she would need to find herself a winter coat from a pushcart in Petticoat Lane.

She glanced at the sky above the low rooftops and chimneys and saw that clouds were shoving across the stars. There was no moon.

As she came down the two splintered steps to the cobbled street, she wondered what name she ought to use tonight.

This week she had been calling herself Annie but somehow that always seemed a bit common. Maybe tonight she would use Violette again. Tht nice young toff last week had said it suited her when she told him her name was Violette. He had been ever so kind, paid her two whole shillings . . .

Passing a row of dark shops, heading toward the street lamp at the corner, she kept close to the buildings, hurrying her steps as she skirted the mouth of each alley.

London had been choking with smoke and fog each time the Ripper killed. Tonight, at least, there was no fog.

She had decided to tell Cora what she knew and explain about her plan. It couldn't work unless somebody helped her and Cora was her dearest friend now that Polly was dead.

Her plan. She shivered again. She had never thought she would plan to kill anybody. But Polly had been her friend since the first week she had arrived in London. They had met that rainy night near the Haymarket. What a silly innocent she was in those days, fresh from Liverpool. Only three years ago . . .

She had never seen Whitechapel until Polly brought her here, insisting she move in and share her lodgings.

That night last month when the two constables had pounded on the door waking her from a sound sleep, she couldn't believe what they told her. She had thought Polly was asleep in the other bed. Their questions had frightened her, and when they took her to identify the body she had fainted.

She still lived in Polly's room, but it was getting harder to pay the rent each week. Business was terrible because of the Ripper and it wouldn't get any better as long as he prowled the streets. She never had so much as two shillings in her purse any more—barely enough to buy a scrap of food each day. Something had to be done and the police weren't doing anything.

She reached the street lamp and turned down another dark street.

Last night in the Black Swan one of the girls said the Ripper must be a constable or he would've been caught long ago. Everybody laughed but at the same time they had wondered if the Ripper could be a policeman. Some of them were terribly nasty to a girl, cruel and insulting. Although there was a new one—Constable Divall—who was ever so nice. In his twenties and not at all bad-looking.

There were so many extra constables on night duty in Whitechapel now that nobody could slip out to do an honest job of burglary any more, afraid they'd be picked up by the police searching the streets for the Ripper. What made it even worse was that some of the constables were not in uniform and those who were traveled in pairs. Though you couldn't blame them, the whole city of London was in a fair panic.

And she was the only one who knew for certain that the Ripper wasn't a policeman!

Now she could make out a blur of gaslight at the far end of the narrow street.

Cora should be in the Black Swan by now. It must be past midnight. The empty streets were frightening. At any moment he could appear out of the dark and come lurching toward her.

She had seen his blond hair under a black bowler, his face pale against the high collar of his black coat. She'd glimpsed his eyes when Polly took his arm and, giggling as usual, disappeared into the fog with him. Never to be seen again, at least not alive . . .

Reaching the protective circle of light from the gaslight on the corner, she paused to look in every direction, then darted across the cobbles toward the Black Swan.

A dark shape moved near her feet.

She gasped with fright, then realized it was only Old Cobbie, drunk as a lord, sprawled on the paving stones.

Grasping the wrought-iron handle, she pushed against the heavy oak door and entered the pub.

A candle in a brass lantern guttered above the bar.

Three faces turned to stare. The owner, Tom, behind the bar and two of the regulars, all three with drinks in their fists.

"Evenin', miss!"

"Seen Cora t'night, Tom?"

"Showed up ten minutes ago. She's in the back."

Violette crossed to the bar, sawdust crunching under her thin slippers. "Nobody on the street t'night."

"You girls come rushin' in like the Ripper's after ye."

"Maybe he is! He got Polly, didn' he?" She never stood close to the bar when she ordered a drink because it wasn't ladylike to lean against the polished wood the way men did. "I'll have a mild, please." She brought out her purse, selected a coin from the few she owned, and put it on the bar. "A girl can't make a livin' on these empty streets."

"If Scotland Yard don't soon catch the blighter we'll all be out of business, every bloomin' pub in Whitechapel. Here y'are, me girl." Tom handed her the half-pint and turned back to his cronies.

Violette carried her beer around the corner toward the back, noticing that there was no fire on the hearth to send a flicker of warmth across the smoke-blackened beams of the ceiling. The only light came from a wax-encrusted candle in the mouth of a wine bottle on the table where Cora sat—the only person in the room.

Cora waved, pushing a scarlet feather away from her eye and ad-

justing her velvet hat more firmly on her black curls. "I thought maybe you wouldn' be comin' out t'night, Annie."

"I had to." She set her beer on the scrubbed wood table and sank onto a bench, facing her friend. "Rent's due t'morrow, so I've got t' earn a bit of money. An' I'm not Annie t'night—I'm Violette."

"Whatever you say, Vi. As I came here I saw nothin' but constables in the streets, strips of rubber nailed t' their boots so the Ripper wouldn' hear 'em comin'."

"I didn't see nobody." She took a first gulp of beer, observing that Cora, as usual, was drinking gin and had been reading something on a crumpled sheet of paper. "I have t' talk to you, luv. About Polly."

"Oh?" Cora held the sheet of paper across the table. "Did you see this?"

As Violette took the slip of paper she saw that it was a printed leaflet.

"Police 'ave spread these all over Whitechapel!"

Violette held the leaflet close to the candle so that she could read the words.

POLICE NOTICE.

TO THE OCCUPIER.

On the mornings of Friday, 31st, August, Saturday 8th, and Sunday, 30th of September, 1888, Women were murdered in or near Whitechapel, supposed by some one residing in the immediate neighbourhood. Should you know of any person to whom suspicion is attached, you are earnestly requested to communicate at once with the nearest Police Station.
Metropolitan Police Office,
30th September, 1888

"Someone in the neighbourhood?" She looked at Cora. "They're

bonkers! He's a toff from the West End." Handing the leaflet back across the table, she asked, "Where'd you get this?"

"Found it under me door this afternoon."

"My landlady must've gotten one but I didn' see the old girl before I came out. Been avoidin' her." She took another gulp of beer.

"Ivy tol' me last night they're sayin' the Ripper's a famous surgeon from Harley Street! That's why he slices all his victims up so neat!"

"Ivy's a fool. Nobody knows for certain who he is—or, for that matter, how many girls he's done in."

"They're also sayin' the Ripper's a woman."

"The Ripper's a *man*! A real toff."

"Oh?" Cora folded the sheet of paper and tucked it into her purse. "How d' you know what he looks like?"

"That's what I wanted t' tell you."

"What?"

"I've seen him."

"The Ripper?"

"With me own two eyes."

"When?"

"The night he killed Polly. We was in a doorway near Swallow Court, Polly an' me, keepin' out of the cold. She seen him first, comin' down the street, an' went t' meet him—hopin' for a bit of luck, of course! I watched while they talked, standin' close t'gether in the fog, then he offered her his arm like a regular gent an' they turned back, same way he'd come. I thought, of course, they was goin' to a hotel. I had no idea it was the Ripper."

"Did he see you?"

"I never moved out of the doorway."

"But you had a good look at him?"

"I'd recognize him anywhere!"

"Have you told the police?"

"Wouldn' I be the fool t' do that! I ain't told nobody 'til this minute, not even you! An' I'm only tellin' you t'night 'cause I need your help."

Cora stared at her suspiciously. "What sort of help?"

"Well, Polly was my best friend in London. Now you're the only friend I got." She glanced toward the front of the pub to be sure the men at the bar couldn't hear what she was about to say. "The police ain't goin' t' catch the Ripper 'cause they don't know what he looks

like. But I do! I've seen him! An' I'm goin' t' get rid of the blighter!"

"Get rid of him?"

"For Polly's sake! Put an end to him—once and for all. That's what I'm goin' t' do. So a girl can be safe on the streets again . . ."

"Then you *are* goin' t' tell the police what he looks like?"

"I wouldn' dare! If the Ripper found out I'd seen him—that I know what he looks like—my life wouldn' be worth a ha'penny! He'd come after me with his bloody knife! You've got t' help me, Cora. I can't do it without you. It'll take the two of us!"

"Do what, Vi? What the devil are you talkin' about?"

"I'm goin' t' kill the Ripper."

"*Kill* him?"

"Of course I have t' find him first, but . . . "

She explained her plan in a rush of words, and then arranged to meet Cora the following afternoon, to search through the nearby docks for a crate. A wooden crate large enough to hold a man's body.

Walking toward the docks late the next afternoon, they discussed the plan over and over, working out exactly what each would have to do.

Cora was dubious at first, but then she was caught up in the excitement of the idea and began to make suggestions of her own.

They located a discarded wooden crate outside one of the warehouses, which they lugged between them back to Violette's lodging. Mrs. Paddick, her landlady, watched them ease their awkward burden through the narrow hall, past her open kitchen door, with suspicious eyes. " 'Ere now! Wot's this?"

Violette winked at Cora as they set the crate down with a hollow thud. "Cora's helpin' me put this in the alley, Mrs. Paddick."

"Wotever for?"

"Had t' find a large box for Polly's belongin's."

"The poor girl!"

"I'm sendin' her clothes an' things to her family in Birmingham. You won't mind if I leave this out in the back for a few days, will you? It's much too heavy t' carry upstairs."

"Leave it there as long as you want. Nobody'll touch it."

"It could be a week or more before I can pack everything."

"Take y'r time, luv. Let me know if there's any way I can 'elp." She moved back into the dark hole of her kitchen. "Stop by when ye finish

there an' I'll 'ave a nice hot cup of tea for ye."

"That's ever so kind, Mrs. Paddick!" Cora called after her.

"She's in a right good humor t'day," Violette whispered. "I paid me rent this mornin' so she'll leave us alone. Anyway, the ol' girl's so deaf she never hears nothin' no matter how many times I come in an' out at night."

They carried their wooden box through the open back door and set it down next to the dustbin in the grimy back alley.

Violette raised the hinged lid and let it fall back down the side, then turned the crate over, with Cora's help, so that the open side, out of sight from the door, faced the dustbin.

She demonstrated how Cora could hide inside the crate until she was needed and showed her the barrow that was always propped against the wall next door, behind the eel shop. They would load the crate onto the barrow, push it down the alley to the next street, and in a matter of minutes reach the river. She also pointed to a small ax resting near a stack of firewood that was used in the eel-shop kitchen and showed her where to place the ax beside the back door so she, Vi, would be able to find it in the dark when she brought the Ripper here . . .

They went over the plan several more times in Violette's room after their tea in Mrs. Paddick's kitchen. They stretched out on the two lumpy beds and continued to discuss the plan until they fell asleep.

Later, just before midnight, they went out together.

And for the first time in many weeks they felt safer in the empty streets.

The next day they decided it would be much more practical, as well as cheaper, for both of them if Cora moved in and shared her room.

Mrs. Paddick didn't suspect that she had a new tenant. She was, as Violette had said, extremely deaf and seldom came upstairs unless there was trouble with one of the lodgers.

The two girls saw to it that there was nothing to arouse her suspicions. Even when they brought visitors to their room Mrs. Paddick heard nothing and, from long experience, probably wouldn't have complained if she had.

Violette and Cora went out together each night around midnight and walked through the dark streets and alleys of Whitechapel. But Violette saw no sign of the Ripper.

The entire city of London was in a state of hysteria because any night now the Ripper was expected to kill again. It had been more than a week since the last body was found.

The newspapers printed fresh stories every day.

And, strangely, a deluge of toffs from the West End began to swarm through Whitechapel every night to see the places where Jack had slashed his victims. The pubs began to flourish again and a girl could make several shillings a night. Most of them, like Violette and Cora, took to walking in pairs—like the police—for their own protection.

The two girls went to the Black Swan every night to have a drink and catch up with the day's gossip. With the increase in business even Violette was drinking gin now.

It was crowded and noisy, every table occupied in the back room, where a new barmaid darted back and forth with trays of drinks.

Violette watched the activity, seated at her usual table with Cora, sipping at her glass of gin.

"You think he'll show up t'night?" Cora asked in a whisper.

"T'night or t'morrow night," Violette answered, feeling the warmth from the gin flowing through her body. "Whenever he shows up, we'll be ready for him."

"S'pose he never does come back?"

"He will."

"S'pose all these people keep him away. He might go to another part of London—Chelsea or Soho."

"I think, t'night, we should keep away from the busy streets—stay in the alleys, around Swallow Court, where Polly met him."

"Whatever you say."

"More gin, ladies?"

They looked up to see the blonde barmaid, smiling and eager, her apron splashed with beer.

"Not just now," Violette answered. "We'll be havin' drinks later, with some gents."

"Watch out for the Ripper." The tousled barmaid leaned closer, lowering her voice. "I heard just now, he's left-handed."

"Fancy that!" Cora exclaimed, glancing at her friend. "Left-handed."

"Who said he was?" Violette asked. "I thought nobody ain't ever seen the bloke."

"Gentleman told me it's in the newspaper t'day. Scotland Yard found

out from the knife wounds in the last girl's body. Cut her up somethin' 'orrible!"

"A likely story!" Violette scoffed. "How could they tell he's left-handed from that?"

"I wouldn' know, luv. They say the Queen gave orders t' the 'ome Secretary t'day. t' catch the Ripper in a hurry so the ladies of London can walk the streets in safety again." She darted away, in response to a summons from another table.

"Ladies?" Cora laughed, the feathers quivering on her hat. "That's us!"

Violette frowned. "Left-handed, is he?" She shivered suddenly.

"Drink up, luv!" Cora raised her glass. "We'd better be on our way."

Violette noticed, as they came from the Black Swan, that mist was rising between the damp cobbles and a dirty grey fog was pressing down from overhead. "The Ripper will be out t'night, I know he will . . ."

"If you say so." Cora peered up and down the narrow street but there was nobody in sight.

They turned into the first alley, choking and coughing as their lungs filled with the acrid coal smoke the fog was pushing down from nearby chimneys.

There were lanterns on the stone walls, but their light was so dim that they had to feel their way along them. The rough surface dripped with moisture and, within seconds, their fingers were cold and wet. "What a filthy night!" Violette grasped Cora's arm with her hand so they wouldn't become separated. "I almost wish I was home in Liverpool."

"Do you ever think of goin' back, Vi?"

"Not really. I s'pose I could get me old job again, workin' as housemaid."

"You liked that?"

"Cleanin' an' pickin' up? I hated it!" She glimpsed a misty circle of light from a street lamp at the end of the alley. "Here's Swallow Court."

"I don't know this part of Whitechapel."

Violette wiped her damp fingers on her coat. "There's a doorway over there. We can stand out of the fog an' still see the street."

"Where you an' Polly stood that night?"

"That's right." Violette kept close to a building, looking for the remembered doorway. "We knew this street well, Polly an' me. Came here many a night." She glimpsed the dark entrance with its recessed doors through drifting veils of fog. "Here we are!" She led the way under the shallow arch and leaned back against one of the heavy oak doors.

Cora huddled beside her. "The fog's gettin' heavier."

"He'll be here t'night, I know he will." Vi motioned across the street. "You can't see it now but there's another alley over there."

"You really think he'll be out?"

"I'm sure of it!"

"Maybe we shouldn't wait . . ."

Vi turned to face Cora. "You backin' out?"

"No!"

"Do you remember what you have t' do?"

"I remember, Vi. Everything . . ."

"When I see him I'll go straight t' meet him, catch him before he can slip away. You hurry back t' Mrs. Paddick's an' through the downstairs hall t' the alley. Be sure t' put that ax where I showed you, next to the door so I can find it in the dark. Then hide inside the box until I bring him. You'll hear us but don't make a sound. An' don't show y'r face 'til I call you."

"I'm scared, Vi."

"So am I."

"He could kill us."

"We have t' do this. For Polly—for what he did t' her an' all them other poor girls."

"I know we do."

Violette froze. "Here he is!"

"You're sure?"

"It's him. You know what t' do!"

Violette stepped down from the doorway onto the wet cobblestones.

"Be careful, Vi," Cora whispered.

She hurried toward him through the swirling fog. It was the same pale face and the same blond hair under the black bowler. The same coat with the high collar. Tonight he was wearing grey gloves.

He saw her coming toward him and began to smile.

Violette slowed her steps.

"Good evening, miss . . ."

"Evenin' . . ." She listened for Cora's footsteps behind her, but there was no sound of any kind.

"Miserable evening, what?" He continued to smile.

"Yes." He wasn't a bad-looking sort. Nice smile. White teeth under a small moustache. She mustn't let him force her into Swallow Court where he had taken Polly.

"It would be much more pleasant inside somewhere, don't you think?"

"I—I've a place near here."

"Could we possibly go there, do you suppose?"

"Why not?"

"Splendid! Can you find your way in this fog?"

"Oh, yes." She trembled as she felt his gloved hand under her arm. The same hand that had killed Polly.

"It's nearby, you say?" He walked beside her, back the way she had come.

"It's a nice room where nobody will bother us. Ever so cozy . . ."

"You're not London-born, are you?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Your accent sounds like Liverpool."

"I'm not sayin' where I'm from."

He laughed. "It doesn't matter."

"We go through here." She turned with him into the side street, avoiding the alley Cora would have taken. This should give Cora time to reach the house ahead of them.

What would happen if Cora got lost in the fog? She had said she didn't know this part of Whitechapel.

Dear God! Don't let that happen . . .

"Have you been in London long?" he asked.

"Long enough t' know my way round."

"I shouldn't wonder!" He laughed again.

They saw only one person, an ancient Chinese, slinking close to the dark shopfronts.

Violette found the house without difficulty, unlocked the door, and motioned for her escort to enter. "We mustn't talk," she whispered.

"The landlady lives on this floor an' she's a holy terror." She closed the door behind them and saw that he seemed taller when he removed his bowler. The only light came from a flickering candle in a niche near the stairs. "We go through the back."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"There's another house in the rear. Where I live . . ." She moved ahead of him through the narrow hall, into the shadows. The floorboards creaked underfoot but there was no other sound in the house.

Violette saw that the rear door was closed.

Had Cora gotten here ahead of them? It would be terrible if the street door flew open behind them and Cora came rushing in.

Would she be there in the back, crouched in that crate?

Violette reached the door and saw that the bolt had been pulled back.

Cora was here!

She opened the door and raised her voice as she spoke to warn Cora they had arrived. "Here we are. You go first."

"As you wish." He stepped outside, into the fog again. "I say! It's dark out here."

"Stand still for a minute. 'Til you can see where you are."

"Good idea . . . By the way, you haven't told me your name."

"Violette."

"Violette? I rather like that."

She could see his bare head now, dark against the grey fog. Bending quickly, she felt beside the step until she touched the cold wooden handle of the ax. Lifting it slowly with both hands, she had a sudden aversion to what she was about to do. Never in her life had she done anything like this before. But she had to do it!

"Well, now! Which way do we go?"

The sound of his voice released her.

Violette raised the ax above her head and, with all her strength, crashed the metal head against his skull. Incredibly, as she watched, he dropped out of sight without a sound.

She had done it!

The ax slipped from her hands.

For a moment she didn't move.

The distant moan of a foghorn sounded a warning from the river.

Violette stepped down onto the hard ground and cautiously thrust

her right foot out until she touched his body. She gave it a tentative kick. There was no reaction.

Only then did she find her voice. "Cora . . ."

The two girls didn't speak as, side by side, they pushed the awkward barrow through the dark streets.

Everything had worked out as they had planned.

The Ripper was dead and Violette felt no remorse. She had only paid him back for Polly and those other poor girls.

She remembered her grandmother back in Liverpool reading from the Bible. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot . . ." Her grandmother said what it really meant was a life for a life.

Jack the Ripper's life for Polly's life! And for all the others.

The only noise was the creaking of the barrow as its wooden wheels bumped over the damp cobbles. No sound came from the crate, which they had covered with an old blanket, or from the silent thing that was stuffed inside.

Jack was in the box! Violette smiled at the thought . . .

She was surprised that he had died so quickly. It took so little to kill a person. She'd had no idea it was that easy.

Cora, beside her, was gasping from the effort it took to push the clumsy barrow through the fog.

Her own breathing, she realized, was becoming more difficult. Each time a wheel stuck, refused to bump over a large cobblestone, they had to lift the barrow clear before they could push on.

The foghorn sounded much louder. They must be getting close to the river. Soon they would reach the old warehouses. After that, and they would see the wharves.

She could smell the river now.

The police would fish his body out of the water, but they would find nothing to tell them who he was. They wouldn't even know he was the Ripper. She had taken all the money from his pockets and stuffed it, uncounted, into her purse. There had been no wallet. And not much money, a few pound notes and some coins.

Also, to her surprise, there had been very little blood. Early tomorrow, before Mrs. Paddick was awake, she must go down to the backyard and clean away any spots.

The barrow struck another cobblestone and wouldn't budge.

"Damn!" Cora exclaimed. "Is it much farther?"

"We're almost at the river. I can smell it." Vi released the wooden handle and circled the barrow to see what was hindering their progress.

Cora followed and bent beside her to peer underneath.

"Wot's all this?"

Cora screamed at the sound of the ominous masculine voice.

Both girls straightened as two uniformed figures appeared out of the fog.

Violette recognized one of the faces. "Constable Divall!"

"Somethin' wrong here, miss?" Divall moved closer, followed by the other constable.

"I'm helpin' me friend move," Violette answered quickly. "An' the bloomin' barrow got stuck."

"Let's see if we can help. Give me a hand, Thompson."

The girls held their breath as the other constable joined Divall to ease the wheel over the obstruction, then watched apprehensively as they lifted the barrow between them and carried it several paces before they set it down again.

"You've got somethin' right heavy here!" Divall turned to look at them again.

"It's me friend's trunk," Violette explained.

"That's right!" Cora managed to say. "Me trunk."

"All her belongin's. She's movin' t' a new lodgin' house. Thanks ever so much, Constable."

"My pleasure, miss." Divall touched his helmet as he continued on with the other constable. "Watch out for the Ripper! He could be out on a night like this."

"We'll be careful!"

Cora giggled nervously.

Violette saw now why she hadn't heard the approach of the two constables. They had thin strips of rubber—probably cut from bicycle tires—nailed to their boots. She didn't move until they had faded into the fog.

Cora sighed. "That was awful close."

"He's not a bad lookin' sort, for a constable. C'mon, luv! Before we're caught again."

They grasped the handle of the barrow and, pushing harder than before, continued on their way. The fear of meeting other policemen strengthened their arms and quickened their steps. And they remained silent, saving their breath, until they found themselves on a wooden dock with the Thames lapping among the pilings underneath.

There were several lighted lanterns at irregular intervals along the side of the large warehouse.

They pushed the barrow to an open space at the edge of the rotting wharf.

Violette pulled the blanket away and, with Cora's help, managed to tip the crate onto the wooden planks of the wharf. Then, grasping the handle together again, they used the barrow as a ram and, pushing with all their might, shoved the crate to the edge. One final violent push and the crate scraped over the side.

It struck the water with a tremendous splash.

The two girls hurried to the edge of the wharf and looked down. In a spill of light from the nearest lantern, they saw circles of waves spreading out from the spot where the crate had entered the water.

They waited, peering down, but it didn't come to the surface again.

Without a word they turned the barrow around and, hurrying now, headed back the way they had come.

The door opened but the sound of rusty hinges was muffled by the fog.

Violette came out, closing the door and locking it.

She saw that the fog was much heavier. The street lamp at the distant corner was completely blotted out.

As she came down the steps to the cobbled street she decided that it was a bit late to go back to the Black Swan. Instead she turned toward Swallow Court again. There was nothing to be afraid of there now that the Ripper was dead.

Cora was getting ready for bed when she left. It would have been impossible for her to sleep for another two or three hours—she was much too excited by what she had done . . .

Maybe she would meet a nice young toff from the West End. She couldn't take him back to her lodging because Cora would be asleep there but at least she didn't need to worry about the Ripper any more. He was at the bottom of the Thames.

When she and Cora had reached the back alley at Mrs. Paddick's, the first thing they had done was put the barrow back where it belonged behind the eel shop. Then, in the dark, she had wiped the ax clean and set it in place beside the stack of firewood.

Early tomorrow she would go down and make sure there were no other bloodstains anywhere . . .

When they went upstairs to their room, she had found several dried bloodstains on her skirt. Cold water got rid of them, but she would have to wash the skirt tomorrow . . .

The sound of her heels echoed sharply against the cobbles but that didn't matter now. She didn't care who heard them.

She had taken his money from her purse and, spreading it out on the bed, divided the pound notes and coins equally with Cora. Each of them had ended up with more than three pounds. Three whole pounds!

Apparently he had left his wallet and personal papers at home in case the police picked him up. There was nothing in his pockets that told you who he was . . .

Cora, stretched out on the other bed, had laughed. "Maybe he wasn't the Ripper!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Polly could've gone with another man first—the one you saw—then met the Ripper later."

She had continued folding the pound notes into her purse. "No, he was the Ripper all right. But we'll never know who he was—his name or nothin'."

Of course he was the Ripper! That's why his pockets were empty . . .

She sensed rather than heard that someone was following her.

As she reached the alley that led to Swallow Court she touched the damp plaster wall so she wouldn't lose her way.

The lanterns, hanging from spikes, were like small holes in the fog.

Now she could hear footsteps behind her on the cobblestones.

Maybe this would be a nice gent. Young and pleasant . . .

He was much closer now, almost at her heels.

Violette smiled as she turned to greet him.

A dark figure loomed out of the fog.

She was unable to see his face, only that he was raising an arm as though he was about to lift his hat. His left arm.

Something in his gloved hand caught a glint of light from the nearest lantern.

A knife! In his left hand!

The Ripper was left-handed . . .

Violette tried to scream, but his other gloved hand grasped her throat. She saw the arm swing down and felt the first hard thrust of the knife into her flesh.

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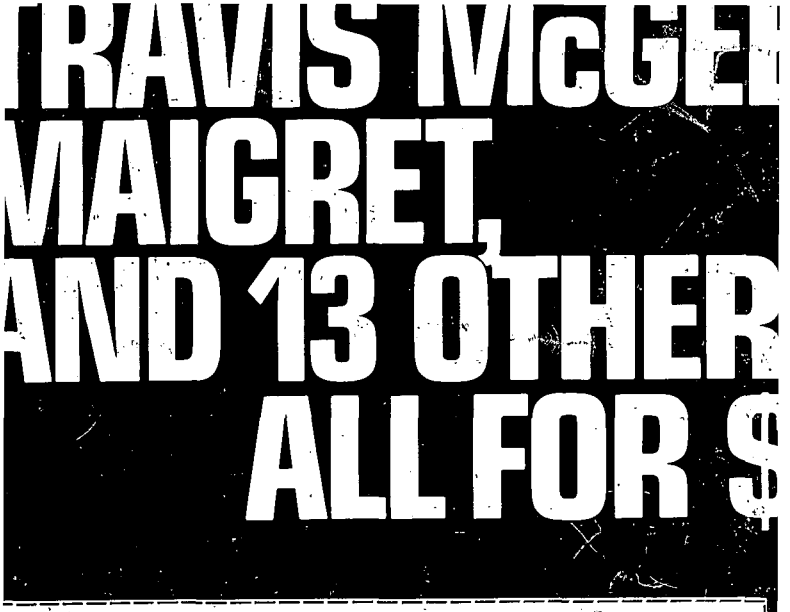

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