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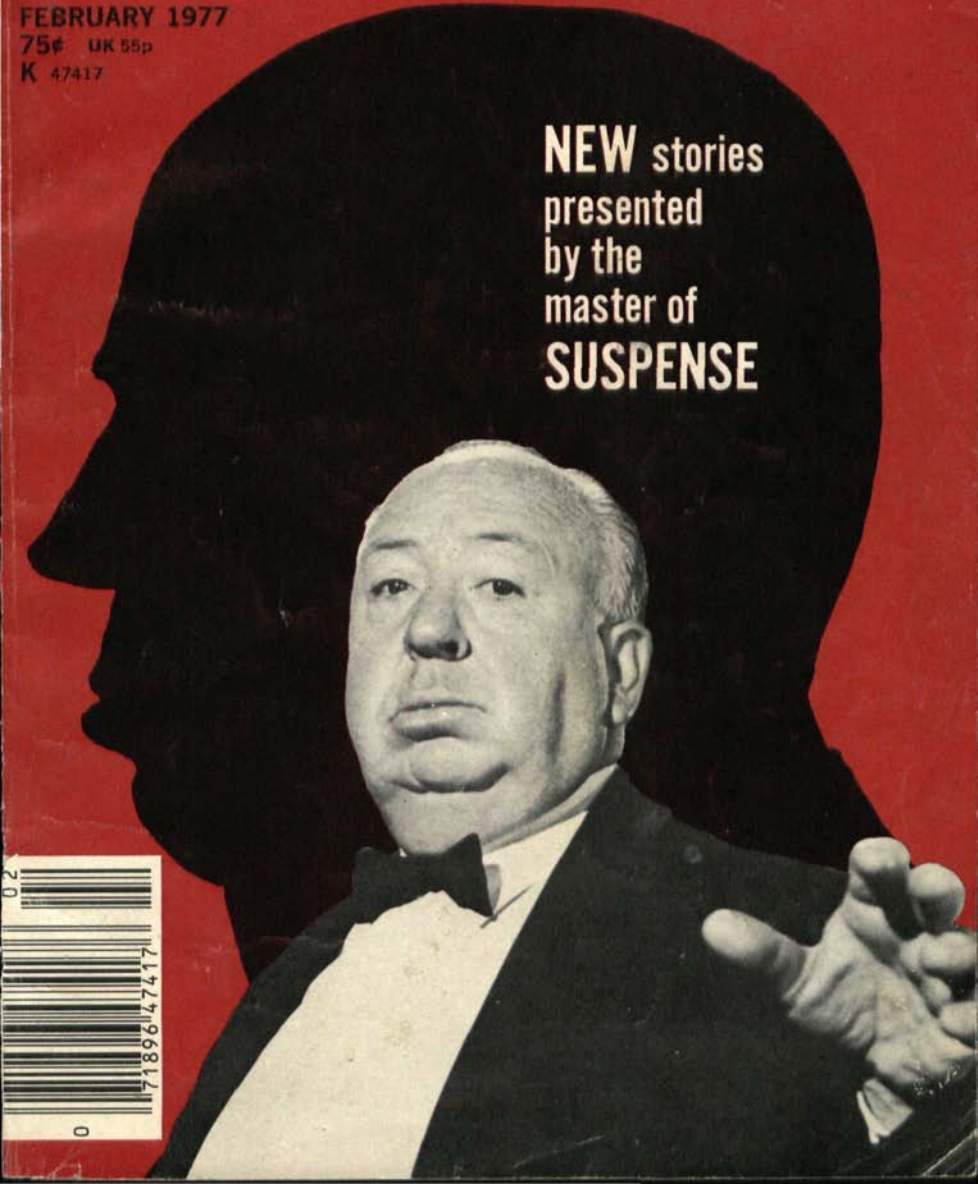

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VOLUME 22, NO. 2 FEBRUARY 1977

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 22, No. 2, Feb. 1977. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at 75 cents a copy. Annual subscription $9.00 in the United States and possessions; elsewhere $10.00 (in U.S. funds). 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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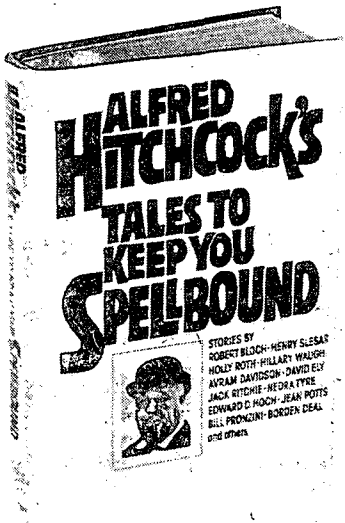

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February 1977

Dear Reader:

With Valentine's Day on the way, we offer you in this issue hearts (see *Anniversary Gift* by Edward D. Hoch) and flowers (see *The Day of the Flower Lady* by Stephen Wasylyk).

Love presents itself in a variety of ways in this month's stories—man for woman (and vice versa), parent for child (and vice versa), neighbor for neighbor, brother for brother—and all in relation to justice, truth, work, money, life, and death.

The emotion has its dark side, of course. Which is to say that your reading this month is full of conflict and contradictions. But all of it heartfelt.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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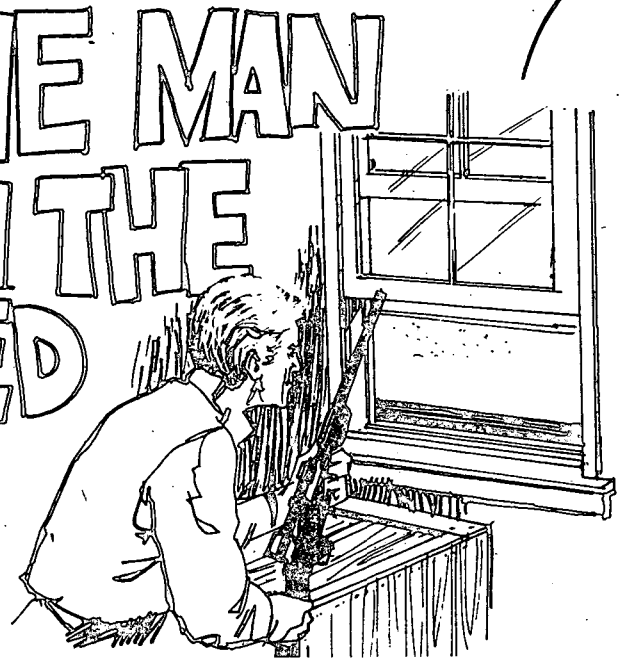
Nature abhors indifference . . .

THE MAN ON THE BED



by

ANTHONY BLOOMFIELD

He had been lying on top of the bed when they came. He had got up to take the chain off the door, then returned to the same position, staying on the bed all the time the two men were in the room. They had let themselves out, leaving him still lying on his back, staring sightlessly at the low ceiling.

He knew he should get up to refasten the chain. Besides, one of his visitors, the elder one with the bad teeth and long sideburns, had left a

cigarette smouldering in the ashtray, and its stink offended him. But why, in the name of God's creation, should he shift himself if he didn't feel like it? The cigarette would burn itself out.

The room contained the standard furnishings of a fourth-rate hotel. Nothing else was to be expected: The Movement had no time for superfluous luxury. When the man on the bed lowered his gaze he saw patched wallpaper, the mean, chipped hand-basin with its speckled mirror, a gimcrack dressing-table, and tilting wardrobe. Depressing, that was the word for it. But how do you empty a bottle that's bone-dry already?

Despite everything, see, he retained a sense of humor. The initial surprise on the faces of his two visitors had made him smile openly. They had tried, of course, to mask it—not for the sake of his feelings, but to sustain the image of their own implacability—and he had found this still more amusing.

To a man in his condition perhaps nothing could be entirely serious. There had been the portentous moment when they produced their offering. The fair-haired boy with the purple birthmark on his cheek had taken it stealthily from under his coat, balancing it on his palms as though it was an object fragile and precious. He still hadn't moved from the bed. The boy had been compelled to come over and place it in his hands. And then he had just tossed it, still wrapped, to the foot of the bed, like a box of cheap chocolates. That had really staggered them.

The man on the bed, remembering, smiled again. Not that he could blame them. He had been surprised himself, staggered, when he'd been told he was the man who had been picked for the job. And no doubt he had shown it—standing, blinking, in the smoke-filled room behind the bar, the hard light pouring down on him. And the rest in shadow, all their faces in shadow.

That had been three weeks ago. Across the water. A man like himself, his age, chosen for such a job wasn't just unusual, it was unprecedented. Of course, they hadn't told him why, and he hadn't asked. You don't ask questions like that. But he had puzzled over it for days. When he thought he understood, he had felt a moment of unfamiliar regret. At the same time, he must have given that grimace of private amusement. Both emotions, though, had quickly shriveled in the aridity of indifference.

One cause of surprise remained, however: how they had known. You wouldn't credit them with so subtle an insight, not even Number One, for all his sadist's instinct for vulnerability and shame. Is my state so obvious? the man on the bed had to ask himself. Am I marked with it, like the pox?

Stiff from lying so long, he got off the bed and crossed to the basin. He put on the light above the glass. The face that looked back at him was just the same as he remembered it. But, then, when you see it day after day you don't notice the changes. To remember how he had looked years ago was like trying to picture the face of a long-departed friend. In the glass, his eyes were deathly tired, his lips had almost disappeared, bitten in, and there were deep incisions running down from his nostrils. But men much younger, in both years and service to the Movement, carried more obvious stigmata. It couldn't have been his face, at least not *only* his face.

Yet, they had chosen him—a generation too old, and for years a back-room man—out of the firing line. He had been singled out because, somehow, they had uncovered his secret, the secret he'd believed to be his alone. Their choice made sense, he was bound to admit that: it had the remorseless logic of their fanaticism.

He lowered his head and, breathing noisily, splashed cold water on his face. He dried himself with the fraying towel. The cigarette had gone out, and he emptied the ashtray in the waste-bin. He used to be a heavy smoker himself, but he'd given it up two years ago; the desire had simply vanished. Not that there weren't still some pleasures left—a day at the races, a long hard session at the card-table, a decent meal—but these, and a few other mild gratifications, were essentially irrelevant.

With the thought of food, he glanced at his watch. He was not supposed to leave the room tonight; he had strict orders. To hell with them—they had chosen him for his unconcern, they could take the rough with the smooth! Standing by the end of the rumpled bed, he imagined the meal he would order—seafood first, oysters or prawns, then a good grill, with a bottle of tangy red wine. The last time he'd been in this city there'd been a French place quite close. But that had been—how long?—seven years ago. It would have vanished by now or have been turned into a take-away. These days nothing stays unchanged and recognizable for seven years.

He laughed at himself, acknowledging he had been indulging a fantasy. He had been too well trained. You don't lose the habits of a lifetime lightly. The cigarettes, they'd been the exception that proves the rule.

Just for an instant the anonymous diffusion of his anguish took on a more precise shape. He looked round the squalid room with loathing. When his gaze fell on the bed, on the package done up in oilcloth the two men had brought him, he remembered, and put the chain back on the door.

Then he sat down on the bed. He took up the squat package and unwrapped it. He straightened the folding stock, and lifted the rifle to his shoulder.

He lifted the rifle to his shoulder and looked through the sights at the doorway across the narrow street. It was a simple, unobstructed aim. He brought down the gun and laid it across his knees.

His seat was an old packing-case; apart from this and a pile of swept rubbish, the room he was in was entirely bare. The sunlight slanted along the street, leaving his window in shadow, with no inconvenient dazzle. He looked at his watch. There was half an hour to wait, assuming the intelligence was accurate.

This was the time when the strain told most acutely. He remembered it from the old days, before he had been taken out of the firing line. Everyone experienced it, even those with the strongest nerves, and he had prided himself on being a hard man. He knew this period of waiting was when some of them had cracked, some of the young ones who had followed him, so that when the door opposite opened—or the car came round the corner, or the patrol moved into the light—the simple aim had become an impossible complexity.

With a mild curiosity, he examined his own condition. His breathing and heartbeat were normal, his hands were dry. These were incidentals. It was the calmness in his mind that demonstrated the true measure of his detachment.

So they had been right. Number One had been right. Until this moment he could not have been absolutely certain of it. Now he knew they had picked the proper man—better than even the least nervous of his successors, all those eager young cowboys. The man at the window, with the gun across his knees, formed this reflection entirely without

pride. He was recognizing a fact, obvious, yet, even still, slightly painful.

Waiting in the vacuum of his indifference, he recalled the itchy unease of the man with the sideburns and his disfigured companion when they'd collected him from the hotel. He imagined them now sitting in the stolen car, their tension screwing tighter and tighter as the minutes passed. There was no contempt in his thought. You couldn't blame anyone for placing a value on survival.

He looked at his watch again, and, in ritual, reexamined the rifle, testing the firing mechanism. He activated a bullet up into the breach. Then, adjusting his position to ensure free movement, he settled himself to endure the time that remained until the door across the street was opened.

The door across the street was opened. The man in the empty room kicked back the packing-case, got down on one knee, and lifted the rifle to his shoulder.

A young man in a leather jacket came out of the doorway. He paused, looking perfunctorily around him before starting down the street. A plump, comfortable-looking woman was standing with her hand on the door. Then the target appeared. He halted, still in deep shadow, turning to speak to the woman. They were both laughing. He kissed the woman on the cheek and stepped briskly into the sunlight.

The man at the window squeezed the trigger, and through the magnifying sights of the rifle saw a jagged hole appear as the shell exploded in the target's chest. He lost the image as the man fell backward. He took him again, and quickly, before the screaming woman could move into the line of fire, pumped two more shots into the body squirming on the pavement.

Straightening up, he flicked on the rifle's safety-catch, pressed the catch at the top of the stock, and bent the stock back beside the barrel. He dropped the rifle into the special pocket inside his raincoat. Without another glance toward the street, he crossed the empty room and went out through the door, which he had left precisely ajar.

All his movements now were quick though punctiliously controlled. There was no scope for introspection even if he had the inclination. He ran down the stairs of the derelict house and clambered through the gaping window-space at the back. He ran down the garden and

bounded the wall. In the alley he continued to run, but on coming to the street he dropped into a walk. He didn't walk with any particular hurry. He was, you could see, a man without a care in the world.

When he reached the car he was breathing heavily, but that was a consequence of his exertions. The two men in the car were far more agitated. They had seen him approach in the driving-mirror. The younger man at the wheel tried to start the engine but stalled it. The other swore at him ferociously.

He got in the back, and the car started in a series of jerks. In three words he told them the operation had been successful, and settled back in his seat.

When the young driver looked in his mirror again he was astonished to see him with his head back against the cushions and his eyes closed, as though he were sleeping.

The man lay on top of the bed as though he were sleeping. He was fully dressed but for his jacket, which was hanging over the back of a chair. His overnight bag, already packed, stood by the door.

Inevitably, images of the morning's events passed behind his closed eyes, but he made no effort to focus them. Beforehand he had wondered abstractedly whether the operation might alter anything. Now he knew it hadn't, and he found himself regretting it had gone so smoothly. Mortal danger might have provided a more meaningful test. The reality was, he felt exactly the same lying here now as he had the night before—exactly the same as he had ever since he had entered the void. Whenever that had been. He could never pinpoint the precise moment when the world had lost its savor: the moment he had known beyond any shadow of a doubt he had no more desire to go on living in it.

Waiting for the two men who were, according to his orders, to take him back across the water, he would certainly have emptied his mind if he could. Living, there is, however, no escape from the random onslaught of memories. He recalled various episodes in his long service to the Movement. He thought of his wife who had run off eleven years before, of his only son, in another continent, who answered no letters. He remembered, even though it was so many years ago, his daughter who had died.

None of these thoughts nor the others that crowded his reluctant

mind offered singly or in accumulation a glimmering of comprehension.

Absence of cause was an intrinsic element. The meaninglessness was all-consuming. Such was his spiritual inertia that, though he had considered killing himself, to lose his life would be as pointless as continuing to exist.

Obviously they had discovered this. Obviously such a condition made him the ideal assassin.

When the two men entered the room, he was still lying on the bed. As they closed the door behind them, he lifted himself awkwardly and put his feet on the floor, his hands hanging between his thighs. No one spoke.

The young man with the ugly birthmark took a revolver clumsily from his coat pocket. It had a silencer already attached. He was sweating profusely. The man sitting on the bed gave the gun a single glance, then raised his eyes to the young man's face. A faint surprise appeared in a creasing of his forehead. Then he gave a little nod, as of understanding.

He sat quite still as the young man approached. Just as the gun came up, he lifted a hand. His eyes widened, and he started to open his mouth.

The young man shot him twice.

In the moment of dying the man on the bed knew he had been right—and at the same time totally wrong.

That was what I read in the look on his face before I pressed the trigger a second time and the mist came over his eyes and his open mouth spilled blood.

Between the killer and his victim there is a special intimacy. I would like to think of it as an understanding. Since that day I have identified my thoughts with his in obsessive repetition. About some details, I admit, my imagination may have led me astray; it is possible I have slightly distorted the panorama of his interior vision. About that last look on his face I have, however, no doubts at all.

He knew he had been chosen for his despair. His oversight was in not realizing that to the Movement his empty neutrality was also intolerable, making him more dangerous than any common turncoat or informer.

So profound a nonchalance was the ultimate repudiation.

This became apparent to him when he saw my gun. That nod he gave, amused almost, was because it had really always been obvious.

All this I reported to the Committee, and afterwards privately to Number One, who questioned me with a pitiless insistence. And it is true. I am convinced it is true.

As the months go by, however, and I come gradually to know him better, the man I killed, I begin to wonder. In his last breath, it seems certain to me now, he was bewildered. It was as though he had recognized some other, less explicit error. I keep asking myself, when he opened his mouth, before the blood came gushing out like a fountain, what he was going to say to me.

For the answer I must still wait. I must wait until I become wholly the man he was.

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The solution to the knottiest problem can be at our fingertips . . .

ENDS AND MEANS

by **Brian Garfield**

The judge put his coffee down and pushed himself back in the reclining chair until its platform flipped up under his feet. Harris watched the old man read the script. Attentive, undistractible, the judge read slowly and didn't look up when the telephone rang. It rang only twice; someone elsewhere in the house must have answered it.

Finally Judge Culver put the last page aside. "It's a good yarn. But you already knew that. Why bring it to me? I'm hardly a lit'ry critic."

"You may find this hard to buy, knowing me, but it's one of those times when I'm really not looking for a reassuring pat on the back. I want your judgment—there's something about the story that bothers me."

"If it bothers you then change it. You wrote it."

"The thing is," Harris said, "it's to do with justice. That's your department."

"Justice is the concern of any writer of dramatic works."

"Not in this sense. The whole story revolves around definitions of justice."

"Yes," the judge agreed.

"Well, look," Harris said, "I'm not sure it isn't too expedient. The resolution of the story. I liked it fine while I was working it out but in retrospect it strikes me there's a moral cynicism in it—it's a little too much like letting the ends justify the means. There's no problem about getting it published. The question in my mind is whether I want it published. Whether possibly it says something I don't want to say." He sat back on the couch and crossed his legs and laced his fingers behind his head.

The judge had a sly smile that crinkled the lines around his shrewd eyes. "You wrote it. Don't you know what it says?"

"I know what it says to me. I'd like to know what it says to you."

"The detective catches the murderer but then lets him go because he feels it was justifiable homicide. It's a sort of star-chamber acquittal."

"My protagonist places himself above the law."

"Yes," the judge said. "But of course you've contrived unique circumstances in this story."

"Does that matter? Do you think this kind of thing ought to be justified under any circumstance at all?"

"As I said, Jim, that's your decision to make. You're the writer."

"All right. But I'd like your judgment."

The judge had a weakness for long slender cigars. He had one going in his left hand; it had grown a tall ash. Now he tapped it off into the big glass ashtray by his elbow. "I've been on the bench quite a few years." The abrupt change of subject bewildered Harris. "Municipal court, superior court, now six years on the court of appeals. You may be asking the wrong man. If you want a cut-and-dried moral judgment

you'd be better off asking a preacher. I've seen the law bent. Too many times. Not always to the detriment of justice, either. I agree with you that it's morally disastrous to take the attitude that the ends justify the means. As a blanket principle, that is. But justice isn't an abstract. It's a guiding precept that ought to be adapted to the conditions of the individual case. I've been the law a few times myself, you know. Even broken it. Flagrantly. When it served what I felt were the interests of justice."

"You have?"

"I can't criticize your script. The best I can offer is a parable. An anecdotal illustration. Shall I try?"

"I wish you would."

"It's a true story. The participants have mostly passed on to their rewards by now; in any case the statute of limitations ran out long ago so it can't harm me—legally—to admit the part I played. At the time I had a hell of a tussle with my conscience. But I learned a great deal from it. Maybe I flatter myself, but I think it's made me a better jurist."

The old man drained his coffee, adjusted the cigar comfortably between thumb and fingers, and began his tale.

I was assistant district attorney at the time. Young, earnest, inflated with eager principles. And maybe a trifle ambitious. It was nineteen thirty-one, I think—give or take a year. I'm a bit vague on dates when I go back that far.

It was during Prohibition in any case. The Volstead Law had been around for more than a decade. Down here in the Southwest there'd grown up a well-established bootleg trade—some of it 'shine from back-country stills and downtown bathtub operations, but most of the hooch came in across the border from Mexico. It was big business. The illegality of it had caused the emergence of disciplined criminal mobs—the beginnings of what we now call organized crime. There was an enormous industry in producing and distributing booze. In terms of the complexities and the quantity of distribution it was a far vaster operation than today's narcotic drug trade, because there were so many more customers. Half the population, at least.

The result was that even in a cowtown like Tucson we found ourselves up against a powerful underworld organization. Now the truth is

we tended to wink at the bootleg trade, as you probably know. Nobody except a few overeager glory hunters had much interest in nailing whisky peddlers. Most of us spent half our evenings patronizing speakeasies.

But the booze trade had brought the crooks out of the woodwork *en masse*. Our problem wasn't booze, except indirectly. Our problem was the by-products of the trade. The constantly increasing economic and political power that the criminal mobs developed. We weren't concerned, really, about so-called white slavery or gambling or the other victimless crimes. What alarmed the honest folks was the specter of a takeover of our society by the criminal element. They were buying politicians. They were extorting fortunes from the business community through their bald-faced protection rackets. You don't need a long litany of their crimes—the point is, we were concerned, we didn't want to see things get out of hand. Bootlegging was one thing. Giving the mobsters enough power to elect a governor was another thing entirely. These people had—have—no respect for rudimentary human rights, let alone laws. We had to fight them. We know it now; we knew it equally well then, as anyone who's ever seen "The Untouchables" on television knows.

Down in Tucson our local crime czar was a fellow who went by the name of Irwin Sterrick. It wasn't the name he'd been born with but never mind.

Sterrick ostensibly was a restaurateur. He owned three establishments—steak houses, you know the kind of place. Gin and bourbon in coffee cups, slot machines in the rest rooms. A cut up from speakeasies. He didn't actually own any of the wholesale operations and he didn't actually run the extortion rackets, but he was the key man in the setup. Within the criminal organization he'd worked his way up from bookkeeper to chief accountant to high factotum. It was a loose confederation—the "organized" in organized crime is a misnomer—but to the extent that there's a single boss in any company, Sterrick fulfilled that function here. If an underling wanted to start a new operation he had to get clearance from Sterrick; usually he got his financing from Sterrick as well. Sterrick controlled the coffers. Major transactions went through his hands. It wasn't *his* money, most of it, but nearly all of it passed through his office in one way or another. He kept the books.

We knew if we could nail Sterrick and get our hands on his books we could cripple the mob for quite a while. Sterrick was getting altogether too powerful and we had to stop him.

Naturally the federal officers were eager to nail him as well. They wanted to put him away on income-tax violations. But none of us had any success in our initial efforts. We knew he kept detailed books—even criminals have to have records so that they can check up on one another and make sure nobody's cheating—but when we subpoenaed them the books would mysteriously disappear ahead of the officers with their search warrants. It appeared there was no lawful way we could solve the problem.

Things were heating up to a boil because there was a gubernatorial primary coming up. Sterrick's handpicked candidate had a pretty good chance of sewing up the nomination. If we allowed them to railroad their man into the governor's mansion in Phoenix, we knew we'd face a terrible situation. The state would have been thrown wide open to a massive criminal invasion.

The only way to stop it was to get Sterrick out of the way. Then the local political bosses who'd been in his pocket would be free to move in other directions.

We had a meeting in the courthouse. Carefully selected people—the deputy police commissioner, the district attorney, two assistants. I was one of them. And the mayor. None of us was under the thumb of Sterrick's machine. But we couldn't be sure of many other officials. We had a council of war. I won't bore you with the details but the upshot was that I was appointed a select committee-of-one to concentrate on the Sterrick issue. I was pretty much given carte blanche and I insisted that I be allowed to keep my operation secret until it produced results—I didn't want to have to turn in regular progress reports because a secret is only a secret as long as only one person knows it. I had a few ideas but I didn't want any risk of their getting back to Sterrick through his city hall contacts.

The practice of criminal law in the halls of justice is pretty much a give-and-take affair, as you know. If you want to get a conviction against one felon sometimes you have to grant immunity to another. It's not a system I've ever enjoyed working in but it's better than most of the alternatives. Plea bargaining was just as commonplace in those days as it is today. In return for a lighter sentence a criminal might

agree to turn state's evidence. It really amounted to our only major source of information. The town's population was only about twenty thousand. The mobsters knew every cop on the force by sight. We could hardly infiltrate them with an undercover spy—they'd know him instantly. So we had to rely on criminal informants.

At that time I had three cases awaiting trial. I mean I had a dozen or so but there were three that had some importance to this matter. One was a man named Mendes who'd had the bad fortune to be arrested with a pocketful of numbers-racket slips. He was a runner for Sterrick's mob. The other two were independent small-time crooks who'd been arrested on felony charges—one was a forger who'd been passing checks around town, the other was a minor-league safecracker who'd done a pretty good job of getting into one of our bank vaults but got tripped up by a silent alarm system—he was caught redhanded coming out of the bank with the loot.

Because of the threat we faced, and the autonomy I'd been given, I made a deliberate decision to bend the law. That's really the point of this little morality tale.

I took Mendes into an interrogation room and sweated him down. I made it clear, without putting it in so many words, that we might see our way clear to dropping the charges against him if he'd provide us with certain bits and pieces of information. I didn't tell him what information we wanted. I asked him all sorts of random questions about Sterrick and various mob operations. Most of them he refused to answer. He pointed out that if he unloaded he'd be killed as soon as the mob found out. I just kept asking questions. He'd answer a few of the seemingly harmless ones. By that process I managed to get the information I wanted—without letting him know that it was what I'd been after.

What I found out from him was the location of Sterrick's books. The organization's books.

They were kept, as I'd suspected, in a safe. The safe, Mendes informed me, was in a real-estate office on North Stone Avenue. It was one of those outfits that handled insurance and realty. A legitimate front for illegitimate operations. The outfit was in the name of one of Sterrick's cousins. I suppose they actually did some insurance and realty work. But it was also where Sterrick did his bookkeeping. In the back room. They had two or three accountants who worked in that

room full-time. At night they had a private watchman there. Mendes had seen the safe several times. It was a big sturdy Kessler box, far too heavy to be stolen. There was an electric alarm system and of course the safe was never left untended—when the accountants weren't there, the watchman was.

We put Mendes on ice. I didn't want him leaking anything back to Sterrick. Later on, when the matter was concluded, we turned him loose as we'd agreed. He was picked up again a few months later and spent most of the rest of his life in prison on one charge or another.

The state primary was coming up in June. This was April—we had about seven weeks. I had the accused forger brought up to the interrogation room. We had him cold on passing some very heavy paper—forged checks for thousands of dollars. It could have cost him several years if we'd prosecuted fully. He knew that—he was a practical fellow. He and I reached a mutually agreeable arrangement. In return for certain services he was to perform, he'd be turned loose in another state and no fugitive warrant would be issued. This, of course, wasn't illegal; it was a decision on my part, morally and ethically questionable to be sure, but legal in the sense that a prosecutor has the right to decide whether or not to prosecute any given case. I didn't acquit the forger of the charges against him; I simply decided not to prosecute them. If he ever returned to Tucson after we exiled him, he could be picked up and tried on the original charges.

I then interviewed the accused safecracker, separately, and reached a similar agreement with him.

I hadn't broken the law. So far.

The next step required connivance by the police department. I went to the deputy commissioner's office and managed to secure his participation in the scheme without telling him what I had in mind.

The watchman at the realty office worked a twelve-hour shift. We didn't have minimum wage laws or security-guards' unions in those days—it was the Depression, of course, and the man was lucky to have a job at all. He would arrive at the office at seven-thirty in the evening. The accountants, and sometimes Sterrick himself, would still be there at that hour; they left the accounting room normally about seven forty-five or eight o'clock, turning the place over to the watchman. He went home about seven-thirty or eight the following morning, as soon as the first shift of bookkeepers arrived for work to tote up the previous

night's receipts. The bookkeeping work wasn't round-the-clock but it was a seven-days-a-week operation; Sterrick's people didn't take business holidays; they staggered their work days instead. Obviously that was necessary because so much criminal activity takes place at night and on weekends.

The safe usually was locked and unattended, except for the watchman, through the night. The watchman—a trusted young cousin of Sterrick's, not brilliant but very loyal and as tough as they make them—undoubtedly had instructions to destroy the contents of the safe if anyone arrived with a subpoena or warrant. Mendes had boasted to me about the security arrangements. In addition to the electrical alarm system there was a device, triggered by a switch on one of the desks, that was designed to release phosphor pellets inside the safe and ignite it. That would destroy the safe's contents instantly, of course. But clearly the watchman must have had instructions not to destroy the papers unless there was a clear danger of their being removed from the safe. It might not cripple Sterrick's business to have those facts and figures lost but certainly it would cause a colossal headache. That button wasn't to be pushed on any mere whim.

We were counting on that.

The watchman had a trivial criminal record. It was of no account but it made our next move more plausible.

I arranged for the release from jail of our friends the forger and the safecracker. Armed with a police revolver, I took them with me in my car to a dusty lot less than a block from the rear entrance of the realty office. From there we watched the place. It was about eight in the evening; by now the bookkeepers had gone home and the watchman was on duty inside.

A police car arrived and the two officers went to the back door and knocked. There was some dialogue between them and the watchman on the far side of the door—we couldn't hear it—but I saw one of the officers take out his revolver and bang on the door with it. Finally the door opened and the watchman appeared reluctantly. One of the officers spoke sharply, and I saw the watchman, half in anger and half in puzzlement, take out his wallet to show his identification. Then he made as if to back inside the building. Possibly he meant to go to the telephone to report that he was being arrested. But, according to our prearrangement, the officers didn't allow him to reach the phone. They

took him in custody, handcuffed him and drove him away in their car. Leaving the back door of the office slightly ajar.

The watchman would be taken down to the jail and held incommunicado in a detention cell until six the next morning, when he would be turned loose with apologies—a mistaken arrest, the real culprit's been found, sorry for the trouble. That sort of thing.

In the meantime as soon as the police car disappeared, I and my two low-life cohorts entered the realty office and closed the door behind us. I had a gun and the two men knew it; they had no chance to run out on me. But we passed the time amiably enough—a curious admixture of types, as you can imagine.

First it was the safecracker's turn. He had to find the alarm system, disengage it by bridging the wires so that an interruption wouldn't set it off, then set to work on the safe itself. It had to be opened manually: no drilling, no explosives. Because I wanted no indications afterward that it had been tampered with.

It took him until well past midnight. The forger and I sat half-dazed with boredom because we weren't allowed to speak; the safecracker required absolute silence. He had a physician's stethoscope and an emery board—no other tools. He used the coarse board to file his fingertips at intervals while he worked with painstaking slowness twisting the safe's two combination dials. With the stethoscope pressed to the steel he listened for the fall of tumblers. For a while I was sure he wasn't going to get it open. But in the end it yielded. It had taken five hours.

Now the forger and I took the safecracker's place by the open safe. I went through the safe's thickly packed contents until I'd identified the items I sought: the organization's accounting books. I had quite a thrill of excitement just to lay eyes on those documents. They revealed, even to my untrained financial eye, an entire spectrum of information about the mob's methods and operations.

But we weren't there simply to give me a chance to gloat over Sterrick's secrets. It wasn't possible simply to steal the books. If I took them away with me, they'd be inadmissible in court. It's not enough to present evidence, of course; you've got to show how you obtained the evidence. In this case I had no warrant. I was trespassing, I'd committed the felony of breaking and entering, and if I made off with Sterrick's books I'd be guilty of theft as well.

No. I wasn't there to steal those books. I was there to photograph

them.

The forger wielded the camera—it was his expertise. Page by page we photographed the ledgers and notebooks. It took hours.

I was sweating, examining my watch every few moments. The last page wasn't captured until after six o'clock; by then we knew the watchman had been released and was on his way back to the office.

We packed up the scores of rolls of film we'd exposed. The forger took his last close look at the ledgers. He had to know exactly the style, make, color, and condition of the books so that we could purchase identical blank bindings in which he could perform his forgeries, based on our photographs. He had to remember the color of each ink used, all that sort of thing.

We left the office at ten minutes past six. I'm sure the watchman must have returned within minutes. Later we learned there'd been an intensive debriefing session. Sterrick and his men had grilled the watchman for several days. They examined the office and the safe with a fine-tooth comb. But finally they decided nothing had been disturbed. The watchman kept his job, and his arrest that night was chalked up as a simple case of mistaken identity.

It took our forger nearly the full seven weeks to complete his work; it was a monumental job. The man was physically and emotionally exhausted at the end. I felt he'd earned his freedom. He and the safecracker were taken under police escort by train to El Paso where they were given their freedom. I never saw or heard from either of them again. I hope they stayed out of trouble.

We made our move while the forger and the safecracker were still on the train; we wanted to take no chances on one of them phoning Sterrick with what he knew.

We had three days' grace before the primary elections. I wasn't sure it would be enough time to swing the primary, but it had to be tried. Without any attempt to maintain secrecy I went before the superior court bench with applications for a warrant to search the realty-insurance office and a subpoena for the books and record-ledgers of the Sterrick operations.

Naturally the word of our attack preceded us. By the time I arrived with my phalanx of detectives, the safe in the back room was empty except for a few props—insurance policies, land deeds, and so forth. All very innocent and aboveboard. Everyone in the office had been

herded into the back room while the safe was being opened. I lingered briefly in the front room, then joined the others in back. I pointed out to the detective in charge that our warrant gave us the right to search the entire premises, not merely the safe; I instructed him to give the whole place a thorough toss.

A while later, to my loudly expressed amazement, a young officer discovered an entire set of criminal ledgers in the bottom two drawers of one of the salesmen's desks in the front room.

The rest of the story would strike you as both foregone and anticlimactic, I'm sure. We nailed Sterrick. We didn't have time to prevent Sterrick's man from being nominated in the gubernatorial primary but he was forced to resign from the race as a result of the revelations that came out of the trial evidence. A party caucus nominated another candidate—a reasonably honest one—and he was elected in due course; it was a one-party state in those days, of course.

Sterrick spent seventeen years in the state penitentiary and finally died there. And your obedient servant, the ambitious young assistant DA, went on to become county prosecuting attorney and then a judge.

Now the question is: was justice served?

Harris uncrossed his legs and sat up. "They must have suspected those books were forgeries."

"Of course they did," the judge said imperturbably. "The defense brought in a whole gaggle of experts to try and prove that the documents had been forged—that those weren't the handwriting of Sterrick and his bookkeepers."

"Then why wasn't your case thrown out?"

"The experts went away without testifying."

Harris said, "I don't understand."

"Well, they determined that the books weren't forgeries. When they told that to the defense lawyers, the lawyers bundled them out of town as fast as possible. We had to bring in our own experts to testify to the legitimacy of the books. Naturally I'd have preferred to have the testimony of the defense experts but they'd skipped town too fast."

"I'm not sure I'm keeping up with you."

The judge flashed his shrewd smile again. "They weren't fakes, you see. That night we broke into the safe to photograph the books, my safecracker friend noted the combination down for me after he'd

opened it. I had the combination. The night before we raided the place, I had two policemen roust the watchman again. They never took him farther than their car, which was parked just around the corner. He wasn't out of sight of the safe for more than three minutes. But it was time enough for me to slip in and substitute our forgeries for the real books. Then, the next day, I planted the *real* ones in that front-office desk. So you see we weren't defrauding anybody. We came with a warrant and a subpoena. We found exactly what we were trying to find: Sterrick's books. The real ones. And we presented them in evidence."

The judge lit a fresh cigar. "Of course Sterrick didn't know how we'd done it. When he learned we were on our way with our warrant, he had the safe emptied and its contents removed to some secret hiding place—possibly over in another county, I have no idea. He didn't realize, of course, that the ledgers and books he was so carefully hiding away were fakes, designed to resemble the real thing. We'd switched books on him, that's all."

Harris grinned at him. "You old fox."

"We played it absolutely straight, as far as the trial was concerned. We faked no evidence. We defrauded no one. But, at the same time, I'd broken half a dozen laws to nail this one. Now how would you judge the case, Jim? Ends justifying the means? Or absolute moral justice?"

Harris shook his head slowly. "I'm just not sure."

"To tell you the truth—even after all these years—neither am I."

Finding happiness can be the worst luck . . .

THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE

by
Elsin Ann Graffam

We had so much fun. I don't remember about when I was *real* little, but I'm ten now and I know we had a good time, just the two of us, ever since my father went away.

Mom had his picture on the mantel and she talked about him all the time—how he loved me so much and what he was like and stuff. My Dad was a great guy, on the football team at college and everything. Then he was a stockbroker and married to Mom. Mom was glad he

bought stocks for us because that meant she didn't have to go out to work and leave me when he went away.

I was three when he went away and I don't remember him. I tried to when I was little, but I just couldn't. But it was O.K. He was sort of alive to me in the picture. Mom would say, "Daddy would be so proud to know you had all A's on your report card," and I'd look at his picture there on the mantel, and he'd be smiling, happy for me. I bet you didn't know that pictures could smile, did you? Well, they can.

People called Mom a widow and I didn't find out until last year what it meant. Dad was an old man. He's got grey hair in the picture and that means you're old. Mom doesn't have grey hair. She's young. And pretty. She's got a lot of fluffy blonde hair around her face and big blue eyes. She's the most beautiful lady in the whole world.

I'll never leave my mother. The other guys, you know, they say they're going down to Florida and dig for treasure or go overseas and look for monsters in some lake. They can't wait to leave home. But not me.

I can't tell them that. I told Billy Earle once that I'd never leave Mom and he laughed at me. But they can't understand. They don't have a Mom like mine. All their mothers have lines between their eyes. That means they frown a lot. My mother never frowns. She's the nicest person on earth. I'll never leave her. I told that to Dad a year ago and he looked down at me from the mantel and said, "You're a good boy, Glenn."

Maybe the guys don't understand, but Dad does.

Everything was real neat until Mr. Knott came along. One night last summer I woke up because I thought the TV was on too loud. I went into the living room to tell Mom to turn it down, and there was a man sitting on the sofa. Mom jumped up when she saw me. "Is anything wrong?" I asked her. "No, everything is wonderful," she said.

I didn't like Mr. Knott. He was old and he had a big nose.

"Who is he?" I asked her. She said, "This is Mr. Knott and he's my friend."

I went back to bed but I couldn't sleep. I thought I was the only friend Mom had. I hoped with all my might that Mom would never see him again. But she did. He was over a lot. Mom would say, "Come on, Glenn, just say hello to Mr. Knott."

When my tenth birthday came last October, I shut my eyes real tight when I blew out the candles, and I wished that Mr. Knott would go away and never come back. But it didn't work.

After a while the lady down the street came to babysit me. Mom would go out with Mr. Knott. I'd lie down on my bed the whole time they were away, thinking maybe I'd die of sadness and then Mom would be sorry for what she did. But I never died and Mom kept on seeing Mr. Knott.

Once they were away for a whole weekend. Mom kissed me goodbye that Saturday morning and hugged me real tight. But I didn't care—nothing mattered any more, not after that rotten old man came along. I wanted more than anything else for it to stay that way, just the two of us, Mom and me. The way it's supposed to be.

"Surprise!" Mr. Knott said to me that Sunday night when he and Mom got home. "Your mother and I were married yesterday morning," he said.

Mom said, "That's right, Glenn. I didn't want to tell you because we were afraid you wouldn't understand. But we're all going to be so happy!"

We, we, we. Only the "we" wasn't Mom and me, it was Mom and that old man.

You don't die from crying, or I'd be dead now. I never said a word to him, or looked at him. Mom and he would talk and I'd feel like I was in a deep dark hole. The more days that went by, the deeper and darker that hole got. It was blacker than night there.

Dad didn't like it any more than I did. Sometimes I'd stand in front of the fireplace and look at his picture on the mantel, and you know what? He was *crying*. Big tears came down the glass in the frame. They made a puddle on the mantel.

One night when I was talking to Dad, the puddle ran over and made spots on the rug. Mom came in the room just then and asked me what I was doing.

"Look!" I said, "Dad's crying because you married that man! See?"

She looked at me funny and left the room. Right after that I heard Mom and Mr. Knott arguing. It was the first time in my life I ever heard my mother yell.

The next day I got home from school and threw my books on the sofa. Something was wrong. I looked around the room. Then I saw it.

Or, I mean, I didn't see it. There was a blank space where Dad's picture should have been.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" she asked. As if she didn't know!

"My Dad's picture is gone!"

And she said, "Well, Mr. Knott thought it was a good idea to put it away since he is your father now."

I banged my head against the mantel and yelled that Mr. Knott was not my father, I had only one real father and he was the man in the picture.

Mom said, "Glenn, you're old enough to realize that a lady needs a husband. Your father has been dead for six and a half years. I was all alone. Now I have somebody to love me. Mr. Knott is my husband and the sooner you accept that the better off we'll all be!"

She had frown marks between her eyes.

That night the babysitter came over. Mom and Mr. Knott went to the movies. I was glad they were gone. I snuck into Mom's bedroom and opened the top drawer of her dresser. I knew it would be there. I was right.

I took it out and looked at it. In the little bit of light from the hall Dad's face was more alive than ever. His eyes looked right at me and he told me exactly what to do.

That was five days ago. I'm out of that dark hole now. Things are fine again. It's just Mom and me, the way it's supposed to be.

Some cops came and talked to me after they took the body away. Mom was crying. "Don't worry," the biggest cop said to her. "They can't touch the boy. He's too young to know what he did."

Mom shook her head until her hair was flying and she said something I don't understand to the cop.

"That's exactly," she cried, "what they told me six and a half years ago!"

There is no mistaking the power of diplomacy . . .

HUNT AND YOU SHALL FIND

by PAULINE C. SMITH

There were three indications that Friday afternoon that Miss Mildred Holquist might be suffering from some kind of strangely new nervous attack. First, when she walked into her boss's office and handed Mr. Davenport her salary check, it fluttered between her trembling fingers like a struggling bird. Second, her rather thin lips showed a surprising and quivering fullness as she parted them with a request for his signature. Third, she was already wearing her coat and carrying her purse

even though it was several minutes before closing time and Miss Holquist *never* prepared to leave before the dot of five, usually not until quite some time after.

These three indications filtered hazily through Mr. Davenport's preoccupation with the papers on his desk only to reach his startled consciousness halfway through the flowing signature he was in the act of affixing at the bottom of the check. He wrote the Eugene with his usual careful flair, flourished the upper loop of the initial C., lightly bringing his pen down with a shaded stroke, and looked up suddenly. "Miss Holquist," he remarked sharply, "are you all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Davenport," she said, a catch of uncertainty in her voice.

It was then he noted that she was not wearing her glasses—and her eyes, usually impassively windowed, now appeared naked and almost shamefully anticipatory. Mr. Davenport's legal mind rapidly added up the ponderables and concluded that his spinsterishly plain secretary was going off for the weekend with a man.

It was impossible! He took another studied glance, then turned again to his signature, writing the name Davenport in his usual ornamental style.

"There you are," he said to his glowing-eyed secretary, and watched her leave the office.

As soon as he heard the hall elevator rumble softly down, he rose and opened the door to his reception office (Miss Holquist's domain). It was neatly closed down and empty—and it was not yet five o'clock.

He walked back to his own office and slanted the window blinds downward so that he could see the street. In minutes, it would be dense with commuters, but now, not yet five, only occasional passers-by moved quietly before the storm.

He leaned forward, parting the slats to see Miss Holquist emerge below and step erratically toward the curb. A car, appearing to Mr. Davenport's oblique vision to be one of the bumptious, arrogant little sports jobs, darted from a parking space and rolled up before her. The door swung open and Miss Holquist stumbled inside, her sensibly shod feet flying for an instant before the door closed and the car spun off into the traffic.

Mr. Davenport straightened the window blind, dropped to his chair, and stared blindly at the papers on his desk. He was seeing a new Miss Holquist from the Miss Holquist he thought he knew, and the vision

not only unnerved him but caused him to review the vague plans he'd had for her.

Miss Holquist sat in rigid embarrassment in the bucket seat, her emotions showing only through the tense cords of her neck and the throb of the pulse in her throat. She nodded brightly at her companion's sallies and smiled tightly at his banter, wondering how in the world she could see the weekend through. She had known him for only three cocktails, three dinners, and two drugstore lunches.

Impulse had led her to the cocktail lounge the evening they met—impulse following weeks of daring herself to do so. She knew she looked like the neat, competent, well-paid secretary she was. She also knew she looked every minute of her forty years and every inch of her spinsterhood. Therefore she was startled when the man with the distinguished silver sideburns and smooth voice asked to sit with her.

His name, he said, was Hunter Courtland. "Hunt and ye shall find," he quipped, "court and ye shall get," at which she giggled girlishly, dropping her eyes to stare myopically at the tabletop. He called her Mildred from the beginning, and offered up a history of himself, airily unsubstantial as to fact. She listened, thinking him wonderful simply because he was there and had selected her and was a man. She answered all his discreetly put questions with directness and unswerving truth.

He drew her out with special attention to her work and she became loquacious, for her job was her life and her identity. She spoke of her boss, Mr. Davenport, a widower, an older man, a corporation lawyer immersed in negotiations, mergers, and contracts. She typed them all up, she explained—she kept the books and wrote the checks.

Hunter was impressed—and invited her to dinner in the adjoining dining room.

Mildred had not quite known what to do when, after several more evenings and drugstore lunches, he invited her for away a weekend. This promised to be a real relationship—the only one other than Mr. Davenport's nebulous hints that he would need someone to share his semi-retirement once his last daughter had married. So she had accepted the invitation, sure that she must.

Now that they were actually on their way, she smiled nervously at his quips—then, as he cruised to a stop before her apartment building,

she reached for the door handle. But Hunter was out and around to her door in an instant and she wondered then, with the shock of sharp suspicion, why he had selected *her* for a rendezvous. She halted momentarily, about to ask him point-blank, but he urged her out of the car and up to her apartment, where her traveling bag, newly purchased for the occasion, rested on the center of her living room rug in gaudy isolation.

"All ready!" cried Hunter Courtland with enthusiasm.

She glanced blindly at her watch. "I have my salary check. The bank stays open until six on Friday nights. I should get it cashed before we leave . . ."

It was then that he made her feel cherished.

"What do you need with money?" he asked. He caressed her shoulder and reached for the bag.

Mr. Eugene C. Davenport couldn't get the picture of the new Miss Holquist out of his memory.

In the back of his mind, for the last five years, he had thought of her as his eventual companion once his last daughter was married, the house was empty, and he was ready to enter into semi-retirement. The thought had been neither garlanded with romance nor fired by carnal desire, but it had offered a sensible solution to his old age—a comfortable solution, waiting only for the right time to put it into operation.

And now Miss Holquist had invaded his buttoned-down plans with this damnable vision of her bare-eyed and tremulous!

During the weekend, filled as usual with his older daughter's children and his younger daughter and her bridegroom, he finally brought his dreams into focus.

It was while his middle grandchild splashed him by the poolside and his younger daughter, torn between filial and about-to-be-wedded love, dropped her bombshell—"Daddy, we've decided that after we're married, we're coming here to live so you won't rattle around in this big house alone"—that Mr. Davenport shouted, "No!"

And he outlined his plans for the future.

"*Miss Holquist?*" cried his daughter.

"Miss Holquist," he said impatiently, and felt a wondering thud of his heart.

"Daddy! That's *sweet.*" Her voice lifted with relief that he would not

have to rattle around the empty house alone and that she and her groom would not have to rattle around with him.

Sharing her sense of deliverance for an instant, Mr. Davenport then recalled his last view of Miss Holquist, so fluffy and tremulous, and wondered if she were still available to him.

Mildred Holquist's virginal worries for the weekend proved to be unfounded. Hunter was a gentleman. He had reserved adjoining rooms and confined his intimacies to light kisses and companionable hugs.

Along with her profound relief, Mildred felt a nagging disappointment—until, over champagne in their rooms, he explained that this was what he meant by a weekend together—an open-door friendship—a preamble to love in preparation for the legal and lasting physical bond he hoped for.

"Oh, Hunter," she breathed.

He kissed her, they drank to the future, and she slept a sound champagne sleep alone—while he borrowed the check from her purse and practiced with pen and paper. Two diligent and skillful nights were more than adequate.

"Why don't we go back to the city this morning?" he suggested at Sunday breakfast. "Beat the traffic. Take it slow."

"Oh, yes," agreed Mildred, willing to agree to anything.

On the return trip, he talked of himself, not precisely but rather at random, promising in gossamer phraseology a world of love together, shortly, in a faraway city where he was known and well established.

She drank in his words as she had his champagne and tossed to the winds her ephemeral fantasies of a life with Eugene Davenport, clutching instead this future with Hunter Courtland.

"You know, darling," he said, "I have such a loving image of you at the job you do so well. Why don't we go on up to your office and you show me around?"

"But, Hunter!" His suggestion startled Mildred. "You can visit me there in the morning."

"No," he insisted, "Davenport will be there."

Enchanted by the idea that one man in her life might wish to avoid another man in her life, Mildred let him drive her to the office and led him through the doors of the building. In the self-service elevator, she fished in her handbag for the key. "Here it is," she said, unlocking the

door and introducing him to the reception room. "This is where I work."

The reception room, as well as Mr. Davenport's office beyond, had a look of polished, solid solvency and Hunter rubbed his hands together. "Darling," he said, "I hope it won't distress you to leave all this. I know you're important to him, but you have become far more important to me."

She shook her head, her eyes dewy, her lips trembling, and he said, "Where's your stenographic notebook?" She went around the desk, opened the center drawer, and from beside a giant checkpad produced the spiral notebook. Hunter's eyes glowed. "Do me a favor. Go into your boss's office while I write you a note. When you come to work in the morning, it will be here to start your day."

Mildred clasped her hands over her mouth and moved tremulously into Mr. Davenport's office, where she stood before the windows looking down on the Sunday-empty street.

Hunter flipped the pages of shorthand notes until he found an empty page. There he scrawled a few words, replaced the book, and turned to his true interest, the checkpad. He lifted the top page of triple checks and, from the next, carefully tore out the top one. This he slipped into the check protector on Mildred's desk, adjusted the figures, and, as he brought the handle down with one hand, he closed the desk drawer with a click.

"O.K.," he called merrily, sliding the check into his jacket pocket. Catching Mildred in his arms as she entered the reception room, he gave her a long, heartfelt kiss that left her trembling.

"Now," he said, "I'll get you home in time to have a long dream of us. I'll call you tomorrow."

On Monday Mr. Davenport wanted to approach Miss Holquist head-on, but although she looked like the old Miss Holquist, with shining glasses and smoothed-down hair, her movements were will-o'-the-wisp and he was put off.

Alone in his office, getting no work done, he spent the morning rehearsing what he would say and trying to plan a definitive move. He decided that when she brought him the bank-deposit slip to be signed, he would invite her to lunch and at lunch he would propose marriage. He sat up straighter and waited out the minutes until Miss Holquist,

with her new lighter step, entered with the checks and the deposit slip.

He signed the slip and started to open his mouth. She said, "Mr. Davenport, it appears you have not quite completed your signature on my salary check." She set the carelessly signed check down before him.

Mr. Davenport corrected his omission and before he could voice his invitation, Miss Holquist was gone again, cavorting from the office with a sprightliness he'd never imagined possible.

Miss Holquist was not as carefree as she appeared. The note she had torn from the spiral spine of her stenographic pad, folded and placed in her handbag, had been brief, without salutation or signature—"Thank you for everything," it said. Somewhat impersonal and slightly disappointing, but the only near-love letter she had ever received. When had he meant when he promised to phone her "tomorrow?" This morning? In the afternoon? She hurried to the bank and from there to the drugstore, thinking he might be waiting there as he had in the past, but he wasn't.

Mr. Davenport had no lunch. He sat at his desk, brooding, wondering as to his next move, when he received a call from the bank.

"Made out to *whom?*" he asked.

"For *how much?*" he said.

"Bring it over, by all means!"

The check was made out to Hunter Courtland in an excellent imitation of Miss Holquist's small printlike handwriting and signed with Mr. Davenport's flourish, but instead of his distinctive initial C (with a dot in the center of the lower loop) he saw what appeared to be a carelessly drawn *L* without any dot at all—a duplicate of the interrupted signature on Miss Holquist's salary check he'd so recently repaired.

While Mr. Davenport contemplated the check, the bank manager explained how Hunter Courtland, a new depositor who had opened an account with a sizable deposit three weeks before, appeared at the bank this morning as soon as it opened, closed out his account, and cashed the check. The discrepancy in the signature had not been discovered until it was being processed . . .

Mr. Davenport continued to contemplate the check.

"Then we became concerned . . ."

"I too am concerned," remarked Mr. Davenport.

The manager swallowed. "Is it your signature, sir?"

"Well, it looks almost but not quite like mine. Since my secretary makes out the checks and does my bookkeeping, let me show it to her."

Mr. Davenport ascertained from the checkpad in Miss Holquist's middle desk drawer that the check had indeed been torn from it. He also was certain, by printing a sample, that the figures on the check had been made by his own check protector.

He left the door open between his office and the reception room, sat at his desk, and awaited Miss Holquist's return. He laid a piece of paper across the face of the check, blocking out the name of the payee and leaving his own signature in view. He promised himself not to postulate as to her weekend. He would be gentle, understanding, and tactful. He would go easy on her, save her pride, offer his protection.

"Miss Holquist," he called as she opened the outer door of the reception room.

She looked drawn, her eyeglasses fogged, her hair flat. She moved through her office to his with a slow step and stood before him, distracted by possibilities. Had Hunter called while she was gone?

"Miss Holquist," said Mr. Davenport, "would you say this is my signature?" He moved the check across the desk, his fingers firm on the concealing slip of paper.

"Why, yes it is, Mr. Davenport," she said, glancing at the check, the sandwich she had eaten alone at the drugstore fisting in her chest as she realized that Hunter had not called.

"Look closely, Miss Holquist," suggested Mr. Davenport.

She bent and peered, adjusting her glasses. "Why, it's written exactly as you signed my salary check."

"Probably because it was copied from your salary check, Miss Holquist."

"What?" she said. (Hunter might be busy this moment making plans, tying up his business interests, buying her a ring, making dinner reservations.) She fluffed her hair with distracted fingers.

"On one of my business checks, over the weekend, right here in my

office, using my check protector, Miss Holquist."

"How strange!" (She was foolish for being impatient—he had said only that he would call, not when.)

"Miss Holquist!"

She jumped, and latched onto the hope that if Hunter didn't call, he would be waiting for her at the street entrance as she left at five o'clock . . .

"Miss Holquist—Mildred—the check is a forgery." Mr. Davenport lifted the slip of paper to reveal the name of Hunter Courtland written in a perfect facsimile of Miss Holquist's finicky handwriting.

She bent over the check. Her eyes blurred. She remembered Hunter's playful insistence on visiting her office, his "thank you for everything" note on the ruled pad . . .

"Miss Holquist." Mr. Davenport's voice was kind. "If you would just describe this Hunter Courtland. It's an alias, of course. We need a physical description, some idea of how he operates."

Mildred shuddered, remembering his arms about her, his lips on hers, the champagne and the promises.

"Mildred," Mr. Davenport said gently, "how did you get tangled up with him in the first place?" Her desperate eyes were mute answer. Of course he had picked her up somewhere, somehow, deftly and with flattery, spotting her as a well-paid, well-informed secretary and an easy mark. Mr. Davenport's voice hardened, his resolution to employ tact and diplomacy flying out the window. "You must have learned *something* during the weekend."

Her eyes blinked. She made an attempt to speak around the terrible lump in her throat. Mr. Davenport saw not her distress but her implied rejection of him, and ploughed on at the top of his voice: "You were conned just as many women before you were conned. He probably picked you out at a glance and went right to work. He knew what to look for—an older woman, a secretary with executive responsibilities who lives alone, and is lonely, receptive to flattery, ready to tell and do anything in gratitude—" Mr. Davenport dropped to his chair and said, "Dear Miss Holquist—dear Mildred—please understand how I feel about you."

She was not listening. Instead, she heard him declare her a gullible old maid, eager for attention, unable to get an honest man for honest reasons, one of many such women.

She straightened, her hands fisted, her eyes glaring behind her glasses. She swallowed the lump in her throat and said, "Mr. Davenport, you have it all wrong. Hunter Courtland is my lover. We wanted money and we took it. Don't worry, you'll get it back."

Blindly, she marched from the office. She entered the elevator and, several minutes later, the bank, where she closed out her personal account and transferred $5,000 to the account of Eugene C. Davenport, Attorney-at-Law.

Mr. Davenport couldn't believe it. He was almost certain that Miss Holquist was no thief and that Hunter Courtland was not her lover. He wondered if he had handled things differently if he might not have had a part-time wife, part-time secretary for his semi-retirement instead of $5,000 more than he really needed and an unwanted daughter and new son-in-law rattling around his house.

Miss Mildred Holquist, on a bus headed nowhere in particular, $5,000 poorer, her weekend bag at her feet, wondered what might have been had she not entered that cocktail lounge and been taken in by Hunter Courtland and made a fool of. Would Mr. Davenport actually have married her? She thought not. No, her dreams about Mr. Davenport were no doubt as evanescent as those she had had of Hunter Courtland—whoever he was.

A man in a hospital bed is different from the same man anywhere else . . .

ROOM 423

By

EDWARD WELLEN

When his world reformed out of darkness, it came back to light with the unreal clarity of the all-too-real. Sid Benton saw in a lasting lightning flash that he lay in a hospital bed and that handcuffs linked his right hand to the raised rail of the bed.

A plasma bottle hung from a stand and a yellow fluid trickled through clear tubing and dripped into a vein in his left arm. A numbness more frightening than pain gripped his bandaged and taped chest,

his heart beat erratically like syncopated thunder in his pillowed ear, his mind hunted itself.

A rustling movement drew his gaze to a man sitting near the closed door. A cop. The cop wore a green operating-room mask over nose and mouth and slouched, turning pages of the daily rag. Benton's slight shifting caught the cop in midyawn. The cop's outlined mouth stayed open a moment, then snapped shut.

The cop shoved himself to his feet, folded the tabloid and slipped it under the chair cushion, then crossed to bedside and with an unreadable flicker of a glance at Benton pressed the button of the cord that would flash a light at the nurses' station. The cop picked up the bedside phone. His voice was a filtered hush of expectancy.

"This is room 423 . . . Yeah, you got it, that's the one. Will you page Inspector Nolan? He's probably grabbing a bite at the snack bar. Tell him to come to room 423 right away . . . Thanks."

The cop had hardly hung up when a woman in white jacket and white slacks, wearing a green O.R. mask and with a stethoscope coiled in a pocket, entered briskly and stepped to Benton's side.

She inched the steel circlet higher on his wrist and took his pulse. Benton felt his pulse flutter at the small shake of her head he thought he detected as his life flowed under her fingers. She sounded him with the stethoscope. Her eyes looked grave but she said nothing. Recoiling her stethoscope and stuffing it again in her pocket, she turned away, tearing herself from Benton's gaze. She eyed her wristwatch, then confronted the cop.

"Where's your impatient inspector? I have other cases, you know, and there's nothing more I can do here."

The cop shrugged, then cocked his head and glanced out into the hall. "Here's Inspector Nolan now."

Inspector Nolan came in tying on a green O.R. mask. His eyes took in the cop, the protruding tip of the tabloid under the seat cushion, the woman doctor, the dripping tube, and Benton. His gaze held on Benton while he spoke to the doctor.

"What do you say, doctor? O.K. to question him now?"

The doctor moved to meet the inspector before answering him. Her voice penetrated Benton's mind all the more for being muffled and hushed.

"Naturally, I don't like it, because it won't do him any good, but go

ahead and question him if you have to. It won't make that much difference. But you'd better hurry."

The inspector nodded and strode to Benton's side. He made a gesture and the cop shoved the chair near and the inspector sat down beside Benton. The doctor stepped back to the wall and leaned wearily against it, arms folded and head slightly averted. The inspector brought his face close to Benton's.

"Can you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Benton nodded.

"Can you talk?"

Benton nodded again. Then, his throat constricting, he wondered if it was true. He tried. "Yeah." A weak croak, but he had not made himself out a liar.

"Fine." The inspector hitched the chair nearer, but sat no easier. He seemed to be trying to rush but not get ahead of himself. "I know how it is when you suffer a blackout. After you come to, you can't remember what happened to you right before the lights went out." The inspector shot a look at the doctor and got a confirming nod. "In case it's that way with you, Benton, here's what we figure happened.

"Somebody—or maybe a couple of somebodies—jumped you and worked you over. Tore you up inside real bad. A bone splinter from your rib cage nicked your heart. Seems there was a lot of internal bleeding before some old lady going through garbage cans in the alley stumbled on you.

"Well, they got you to the hospital and the doc here sewed you up. But they can't stop the hemorrhaging. Do you know what that means?"

Benton stared blankly, not wanting to know what that meant.

"Whoever did it to you got away. We'd like to get our hands on them." Inspector Nolan's voice was purposeful without intensity, as though in grey pursuit of the truth. "Talk, Benton. Do you know who would have reason for wanting to beat you up or knock you off?"

Benton felt a tight-faced grin form. It would've been easier to name those without reason for wanting to beat him up or knock him off. Benton shook his head. All he knew about his attackers was that they had to be outsiders. Everybody in town knew better than to try to score by harming a pusher with mob ties.

Inspector Nolan sighed. "O.K., Benton. Forget that and listen to this. Reason we handcuffed you, you're under arrest. We found enough

heroin on you to prove you're a pusher."

Out of habit, Benton smiled. The mob would get him off. It always had got him off. The fix was in. The mob had the town in its pocket. Then his gaze followed Nolan's gesture toward the far corner. For the first time Benton noticed a self-standing tray. A bottle bearing a hand-lettered label and dangling an evidence tag stood on the tray: no doubt a cooked-up sample of his H.

His mouth twitched to know his attackers hadn't scored. Maybe the little old lady of the garbage cans had scared them away. So what if his H had wound up in the hands of the cops? The mob would see to it the evidence vanished before his case came to trial—if it ever came to trial. At worst, the mob lawyer would huddle with the prosecutor and plea-bargain him into a jolt he could do on his head.

Then the room and its meaning closed in on him. Was this the one jolt the mob could not spring him out of?

Hard to think with the inspector yapping at him. Better not to think. Let the inspector yap on.

"Not saying anything? Well, at least you're not bothering to deny you're a pusher. That's a good sign we're getting at the truth. And the truth is, Benton, you hooked and serviced a large clientele of junkies." The inspector paused as if to recharge himself. "There was a teenaged girl named Leandra Collins. Name ring a bell?"

Now Benton knew what had tried to flash through his mind when the two silent men with team precision swallowed his shadow with their shadows, swept him off the sidewalk and into the alley, and began beating up on him. It was the family likeness, not only to each other but to the girl as well. The Collins kid's older brothers?

The inspector's voice picked up as though Benton's belated flash, visible in Benton's eyes, encouraged him. "The Collins girl overdosed the other day. Know anything about it?" The inspector waited in vain for something more than a stony look, then went on.

"The crime lab analyzed the H in the girl's blood. It has the same strength and adulterants as the H you carried. They're a perfect spectroscopic match."

A settled hopeless expectation took hold of Benton in the hush that followed. It was a death-chamber hush.

Did it matter that the cops could trace the Collins kid's O.D. to him; that they could pin a death on him? All that was what the mouth-

pieces called moot. He was filled with an awareness of his own death.

The inspector wasn't letting him off the hook, wasn't letting him escape the knowledge. "I'm going to give it to you straight, Benton. You're on your deathbed. So what do you say? We'd like to clear up the Collins kid's death. Tell us if you were her connection. Get it off your conscience."

Conscience. That was worth a laugh but Benton could manage only a smile. If he admitted anything now it wouldn't be on account of something you couldn't find on any chart of the brain.

Not that it mattered now what he admitted to. He couldn't give himself away if he was already as good as taken. But he could enter into a kind of plea bargaining. Suppose there was the slightest chance of something behind what so many believed. Why not copper his bets by coming clean?

"Yeah, I knew the Collins kid. I got her hooked and I dealt. Near the end she had to feed a three-bags-a-day habit. She would've done anything to get a fix. But she lost her appeal quick, and anyway I made it a practice to get cash on the line. Last time I saw her she said she would turn me in if I didn't come across. So I gave her a bag. I been milk-sugaring the stuff I sold her, but this time I slipped her the purest junk I had—a deck with twelve grams of H. I didn't stick around to see it, but when she shot up it must've stiffed her out just like that."

Release lightened the gloomy cheerfulness of the room. Then purpose darkened the charged silence. The doctor left the wall and walked around the bed. She shut off the golden flow of life. Alarm surged up in Benton.

"What are you doing? You call yourself a doctor? You're supposed to keep me going as long as you can!"

The inspector answered for her. "You weren't in the slightest danger of dying, Benton. You didn't lose a lot of blood, there's no damage to your heart, there was no operation. The only treatment you've had is a little something to make your heart flutter in a scary way. We figured if you believed you were dying you'd tell the truth for the first time in your life."

Outrage outweighed relief at reprieve. Benton pulled himself up to a sitting position with his handcuffed hand.

"It'll never stand up. You didn't give me my rights. It was—it was

entrapment." He felt a surge of power. Maybe they had the truth out of him, but what could they do with it? He eyed them in contempt. "What did you do, take my 'deathbed confession' down on tape? No court would let that into evidence."

The inspector shook his head. "That wasn't necessary. We only needed to hear you speak the truth."

One by one, the inspector, the doctor, the cop pulled their masks down.

The family likeness. The inspector and the cop were fakes. They were the two guys that had worked him over—worked him over as an excuse to knock him out and stage his coming to.

Benton went cold, then hot, then cool. A lot of good it would do them to know the truth. Let them try taking it to court. He didn't have to be a lawyer to know they were the ones breaking the law. Man, all the counts he could rack up against them.

They had assaulted him. They had kidnapped him. They had held him under duress. If they took the witness stand the mob lawyer would slice them to bits. Never mind court, even let them just talk about his guilt to anyone else and he could sue them broke. That is, if the mob let them live long enough to talk.

But revenge could wait till he was free.

"O.K. You had your fun. Now let me loose."

The woman in white, an older Leandra Collins, moved away from the wall. She walked past the bed to the standing tray in the corner. Benton rolled his eyes to watch her fill a syringe with liquid from the bottle.

Too silent for a hospital. Where were the summoning pings, the rolling of gurneys, the chatter of patients' television sets? The hospital room was a fake too! No one would come if he called!

As if out of habit the woman readied an alcohol swab. Then, with a twitching smile that seemed to form at catching herself doing a needless thing, she tossed the cotton ball into the wastebasket. The two men held Benton still while the woman rolled Benton's right pajama sleeve above the elbow and found the vein.

Seeing things for oneself can be a painful experience . . .

A PICTURE IN THE MIND

by

Francis M. Nevins, Jr.

Barbara Blair wasn't sure why she decided to cancel her direct flight from Los Angeles back to New York. It had been four years since her last visit to the midwest city where she'd grown up, but she didn't miss the place. She could just as easily have called her father long-distance from Los Angeles or Manhattan to tell him of her decision. Maybe she just wanted to see as well as hear his reaction. Seeing for herself meant a lot to her.

At a newsstand in Los Angeles International Airport she bought a paper to read on the flight. SUPREME COURT SAYS DEATH PENALTY NOT CRUEL AND UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT, the headline read. When the 707 reached cruising altitude she unfolded the paper and read through several commentators' columns on the subject of the day. The Supreme Court had ruled in 1972 that capital punishment as then applied by the states was unconstitutional, but most of the states had promptly enacted new death penalty statutes which the legislatures believed would meet the high court's objections. No executions had actually taken place since the 1972 decision, pending the expected ruling on whether any use of the death penalty violated the constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Now the way was clear for those convicted of capital crimes to be executed.

When the plane touched down she checked her bags and camera case at the airport and taxied to the downtown business district. It was after five when she paid the driver in front of the Fidelity National Bank Building, but she knew her father usually didn't leave his office until six. Without consulting the building directory she strode into the elevator at the end of the long marble foyer and pushed the button for twelve, turning right when the cage slid open. The heavy cedarwood door at the end of the carpeted corridor read 1201 MARTIN BLAIR, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW, in raised black letters. As she twisted the knob and walked in, a muted signal that reminded her of a hospital bell pinged overhead. Blair came out of the inner office in shirt sleeves, an appellate brief clutched tightly in his hand like a life preserver. When he saw her he tossed his papers on the receptionist's desk and ran to throw his arms around her.

"Barb, oh honey, where have you been all this time, what brought you back? Oh, it's so good to see you again!"

She kissed her father politely and disengaged herself. "Still in New York," she said. "Still free-lancing."

"Ah, that's great. You know, ever since you were in grade school and I bought you your first Brownie I thought you had the eye of a first-rate photographer." His voice dropped as if he were afraid an outsider would hear him. "I've missed you a hell of a lot, honey."

"I've been busy," she said simply, without apology. She couldn't find the words to tell him that ever since her last visit, four summers ago, ever since that awful morning on Lake Tasca, even the thought of com-

ing back was enough to make her shudder. "Isn't that what you always used to say when you never had time for me? I'm busy, I've got to be in court tomorrow, this or that appeal is coming up?"

"I was a bum parent, I know. But you don't realize what long exhausting hours it took to build up a practice like this, and make enough money to send you to all those schools and away to Europe and everything. If only your mother hadn't died when you were so young things would have been different. I just wasn't cut out to be both parents to a little girl. I gave you money and expensive toys instead of giving you myself, I guess. You know I'd sacrifice anything for the chance to do it over."

Barbara didn't believe him. The parties, the assortment of after-hours women, the wooing of lucrative clients over golf or tennis had meant more to him than she had, and he hadn't changed. In his early fifties he was still a handsome, vigorous man, his skin dark with summer tan, and he loved his pleasures. She wondered if he was still sleeping with Julie Stewart. Glancing across the reception foyer she noticed that the plate on the executive secretary's desk no longer bore Julie's name but that of a woman she hadn't heard of before.

"I dropped off on the way back to New York," she said, "to tell you something. I applied for law school six months ago and Columbia accepted me. I start right after Labor Day."

He seemed to have no reaction at all. "That's nice," he said tonelessly. They sat in the twin armchairs in the foyer and he lit a cigarette, tossing the match into the ashstand between them.

"You don't seem pleased," she said. "Most lawyers get deliriously happy when they hear their *sons* want to be lawyers too."

"I'm just not sure it's right for you, especially since you're doing so well already as a photographer. Why did you decide to switch?"

"I want to make a difference in the world," she said. "Not just for myself, but for all women. We still have a long way to go."

He was silent for a minute, tapping the polished stem of the ashstand absently. "Honey, I'm not about to argue the rights and wrongs of feminism with you," he said finally. "But I do care about you and I'd hate to see you ride for a fall. How much do you know about what it means to be a lawyer?"

"Not much from you," she said. On the rare occasions when they were together he had not wanted to talk about his work. She had spent

a few weekends on a Caribbean island with a young associate in a Manhattan law firm, but that was none of her father's business and she saw no reason to tell him that the young man was her only source of information about the practice.

"Do you mind if I try to discourage you from following in my footsteps?" he asked her hesitantly. "I know you'll make up your own mind, but let me have a crack at it, O.K.?" He gave her the big open grin she had seen him use so often, the grin which he cultivated like an actor and which had won him many clients and many women.

"Give it your best shot," she challenged him.

He uncoiled himself out of the armchair and paced back and forth in front of her as if she were a jury. "If you're going to practice law," he began, "you have to accept the adversary system. You can't afford the luxury of standing by your own values and beliefs about right and wrong when they conflict with the interests of your client. You're a technician. You're like a hired gunfighter in a Western. You can't have an independent conscience. Let me ask you, suppose the court assigned you to defend some indigent who was accused of—let's say of rape. He admits to you he's guilty. Could you plead him not guilty, go into that courtroom and cross-examine the woman who was raped, make her go over her entire sexual life under oath until she was in tears and the jury believed that she was a nympho or a hooker and either way that she was asking for it?"

She sat very still and thoughtful but said nothing.

"You'd have an ethical duty to your client to do all that," Blair went on. "If you didn't live up to that duty, and the man was convicted, a federal court would probably reverse the conviction on the ground that he didn't have competent counsel. That, honey, is the adversary system."

"You make it sound disgusting," Barbara said. "I know some lawyers and most of them aren't disgusting, they're people just like anyone else." But she said it as if her mind were on another subject while her lips moved mechanically.

Martin Blair stopped pacing, and perched on the edge of the receptionist's desk with his head lowered in concentration. He seemed to be trying to make up his mind whether to say something more. He ground out his cigarette stub in a little china tray on the desk and sprang to his feet again.

"Look," he said, "I hate to bring back bad memories, but I have to get through to you. Here's what the life of a lawyer is all about. Remember what happened four years ago up at Lake Tasca?"

She remembered all too well. There were times when she could replay the events of that morning in her mind with every nuance of visual detail as achingly vivid as the finest photograph. Four summers ago . . . She had graduated from college and was taking a few months off before tackling the job market and her father had invited her to spend some time at his lodge in the mountains. "Spend the whole summer if you want," he'd said to her over the phone. "I'll get up there when I can, and maybe I'll bring Alec along, my new law partner. You haven't met him yet, have you?"

She had said she would spend August at the lodge. She had always loved the high wooded country around Lake Tasca—the tang of pine needles, the crisp breeze, the rabbits scurrying through the forest, the chill delight of swimming naked in the ice-blue lake as the sun rose over the water. The lodge was not the usual primitive rustic retreat but a sprawling three-bedroom ranch house, with a sunken living room. It was fully equipped with electricity, several phones, a functioning fireplace, and a well-stocked liquor cabinet.

She arrived at the lodge at the beginning of the month and called Martin long-distance at the office to let him know she was in residence. For the next week she had the place to herself, to swim and walk the woods and read and think about the future. Then Martin had called from the city, and the following day, early in the afternoon, he drove his Fleetwood into the clearing in front of the lodge and hauled two suitcases and an attaché case out of the trunk. She ran out to greet him.

"I brought you some company," he said. "Alec Moore, the young man I took in as a partner last fall. His car was right behind me all the way up, he should be here in a few minutes. I think you'll like him." As he spoke a Ford compact crunched over the dirt road through the pines and the young man behind the wheel braked the car to a sudden stop and opened the door. He was tall and fashionably long-haired and athletic-looking in an open-necked print shirt and jeans.

From the moment Martin introduced her to Alec, she felt uneasy. He was her father's partner, but there was a subtle tension crackling

between the two men. Alec carried his bags into the bedroom that would be his and made a separate trip back to the Ford for his portable tape player and cassettes.

While the casserole she made for dinner was in the oven, Martin took the Fleetwood into the village seven miles north to stock up on groceries. Barbara expected Alec to make a pass at her and was surprised—half pleased and half disappointed—when he did not. He seemed to prefer telling her about her father and himself.

"We make a good team," he said, slashing boldly with the carving knife as he helped her slice cucumbers for the salad. "I bring in business, I know how to sell the young executives that run the smaller corporations nowadays, and Martin slogs away at the work that keeps 'em paying us annual retainers. Just in the eight months I've been with Martin the firm's income has gone up 167 percent. I get half the profits, of course, and then there are some fringe benefits." The way he said it hinted that one of those benefits was the favors of a woman in the office. As far as Barbara knew, the only attractive woman who worked for her father was Julie Stewart who had been sleeping with Martin, she knew, for at least the past two years. She wondered if that was the reason for the subtle tension between the men.

The Fleetwood squealed to a halt outside the lodge and Martin stormed into the living room, a cardboard carton of groceries cradled in his arms, a newspaper folded upright between two cans of peaches. "Damn it, we're going to have to get someone out here tomorrow to install burglar alarms around the place," he said.

"Why, what's the matter?" Alec laid down the knife and helped him with the unwieldy carton.

"It's in the paper there. There's some nut loose in the mountains, probably one of those guys that escaped from the asylum for the criminally insane back in June. He's broken into some places, stolen food and valuables, and slashed one woman with a knife when he was caught in the middle of a burglary over in Shannon's Crossing. The paper says he's still at large, the troopers haven't even come close. My God, Barb, why didn't you say something about this when you called?"

"I haven't looked at a paper or turned on TV since I got here," she said. "Now you're beginning to scare me."

"This may not be the right time for any of us to be here," Martin told her. "Alec, let's make sure our hunting rifles are oiled before we

turn in tonight."

After the dinner dishes were put away, Alec brought out his tape apparatus and played some of his favorite jazz cassettes for Barbara as they lounged beside the fireplace, keeping the volume low so as not to bother Martin who sprawled in a recliner chair at the other end of the room, the chair's arms and his own lap covered with legal papers. For Martin this was a working vacation. He was representing a former high executive of the phone company who had been fired without cause and was suing for breach of contract; the case had reached the state supreme court and oral argument was scheduled for early the following morning.

"It's ninety miles to the capital," he said, yawning, as the antique clock bonged ten times, "so I'll have to be out of here before dawn tomorrow. You kids enjoy yourselves while I'm gone. If everything goes all right I'll be back for supper. Don't forget to check all the doors and windows before you turn in." He collected his papers and arranged them in his attaché case, wished them good night, and trudged down the hall to his bedroom.

Alec, in bulky sweater and jeans, padded to the bar and filled two liqueur glasses with Grand Marnier and handed one to Barbara where she reclined on a pile of cushions. He seemed distracted and indrawn, as if it were he and not Martin who had to argue a big case in the morning. He bolted down his drink and looked over his shoulder at the corridor leading to his and Martin's bedrooms. After the Brubeck tape they were listening to had come to an end he picked up the player and the pile of cassettes and said good night, leaving Barbara to check the locks on all the doors and windows before she turned in.

When the songs of hundreds of birds finally awakened her she fumbled on the night table for her watch and saw it was already past eight, much later than she had expected to sleep. She lay back on her pillow for a minute, savoring the brightness of the morning. Then she heard a phone ringing, muffled by the closed door of her room. The other bedrooms, the ones off the long corridor, had extension phones, but her room was directly off the living room and did not. She threw on a robe and opened the door. The phone was on the glass-topped table near the fireplace.

"Barb?" She recognized her father's voice at once. "Look, honey, I've got a problem. I'm in a booth on Highway 37, about fifty miles

from you. I left at six without waking anybody up and I was driving along when I suddenly remembered there are some notes I need for the argument this morning which weren't with the papers I went over last night. I think they may have gotten into Alec's briefcase by mistake when we packed for the trip. Is he up yet?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just woke up a few minutes ago myself." She looked down the corridor at the other end of the room. Both bedroom doors were closed. "Want me to knock on his door?"

"Yes, please, he has to find those notes and read them to me over the phone. Go wake him and I'll hang on. Wait a minute, before you do that . . ."

It was then that the scream came. She had never heard a more horrible sound in her life, a tearing terrifying wail, loud enough to shatter glass. She almost dropped the phone in her shock.

"My God, Barb!" Martin shouted over the phone. "What was that?"

She froze in panic, her feet suddenly icy against the cold fieldstone floor. "I . . . I don't know. It came from Alec's bedroom. I don't want to go and see what it was but I have to."

"Listen, honey, take my rifle!" Blair roared. "The shells are in the buffet drawer. Load the rifle and take it with you and for the love of God be careful!"

She put down the phone and found the rifle and shells and tried to load it but couldn't work the mechanism. She cursed and held the weapon by the barrel like a club. She inched down the pine-paneled corridor, past the closed door of her father's bedroom on the left, past the bathroom door on the right, until she stood in front of the second door on the left, which was Alec's. It was closed tight. She knocked with the stock of the rifle. "Alec! Alec!" She pounded harder. No answer. She was beginning to tremble uncontrollably. Somehow she reached down with her left hand and turned the knob and flung the door back.

She screamed. The rifle clattered to the floor and her hand flew to her mouth.

Sunlight flooded the bedroom, making the softly whirring cassette player on the night table glisten. Alec lay in bed, his body twisted like nothing human, the sheets and his bare chest matted with still-wet blood. The window on the far side of the room stood open, a jagged hole in the pane a few inches below the lock, a square of the screen

cut away as by a knife. Three fat blue flies buzzed happily over the body.

Barbara ran out the door and back along the corridor to the living room, and snatched up the phone desperately. "Dad, something's happened to Alec, I think he's dead. I think that madman in the papers was here just a few minutes ago and tried to break in through Alec's window and Alec woke up and the madman stabbed him. Now get off the line, I have to phone a doctor and the police."

"Oh God, no," Martin whispered. There was silence for a moment, then he said, "Honey, I'm going to call the court from here, speak to the clerk. I'm going to tell him what you just told me and get the oral argument postponed. Then I'll drive straight back to the lodge. I'll probably get there by ten-thirty or eleven. Please don't worry, honey, I'll be there as soon as I possibly can."

It was almost eleven when she heard his Fleetwood braking in front of the lodge. Through the front windows she could see two state police cruisers, a lab truck, and an ambulance parking around the front door. Martin raced into the living room and bent over her as she lay on the couch. A young black man in a white intern's jacket stood over her. She could see and hear what was happening, but she couldn't move or speak.

"I gave her a sedative, sir," the intern said. "She was alone here for almost two hours, not knowing if that lunatic was far away or in the woods just outside or if he'd come back and go after her next with that knife. Her nerves were pretty shot."

"How about Mr. Moore?" Martin demanded.

"I'm sorry, sir," the intern said.

Martin had to hire an ambulance plane to fly him and his daughter back to the city. They left Lake Tasca the next day, and eventually Barbara's nerves improved and the nightmares went away, except once in a while when she would relive that morning in her sleep and would bolt awake with a howl of fright. Martin sold the lodge at a loss as soon as the troopers were through with their investigation. The man who escaped from the asylum was never found.

"Suppose they arrested that maniac today," Martin said. "He'd be an indigent, of course, so he's entitled to counsel. The man confesses

Alec's murder to his lawyer. What does the lawyer do?"

"Plead him guilty. Put that monster in the electric chair!" Her voice rose to fever pitch, then she caught herself. "Maybe try to get him committed to a psychiatric institution, one he can't escape from."

"No, he doesn't," Martin corrected her. "He moves for a complete dismissal of the murder charge. And I'm not talking about an insanity defense. Not only can't the man be convicted, he can't even be put on trial."

Barbara hugged herself, as if she were under attack.

The lawyer lit another cigarette, and tossed the match into the ashstand. "When was Alec killed?" he asked her.

"August 1972," she answered mechanically. "What's that got to do with it? I'm no lawyer but I know there's no statute of limitations on murder."

"Do you remember what the Supreme Court ruled about the death penalty in June of 1972? A case called *Furman v. Georgia*?"

She remembered that name from the newspaper she'd read on the plane. "Wasn't that the first death penalty case, the one where the court said that capital punishment was arbitrary and discriminatory the way the states were applying it then?"

"That's right. And do you recall a case called *People v. O'Connell* that our state supreme court handed down a few weeks after Furman?"

She shook her head, bewildered.

"The court held in *O'Connell* that without a valid death penalty on the books there can't be such a thing as a capital offense. And that means that even though murder isn't usually subject to any statute of limitations, any murder committed between June and November of 1972 when the legislature passed the new death penalty statute is subject only to the general statute of limitations—two years. If you committed a murder within those months and weren't caught for two years, you get a free ride."

"My God," Barbara burst out. "Is that what you call justice?"

"It's the law," Blair told her. "And if you were the assigned counsel for the maniac who killed Alec, you'd have an obligation to make that argument for your client and push it all the way." He grinned at her, a sick and mirthless grin this time. "And you'd win."

An hour later she left her father's office, pale, her mouth trembling.

It wasn't so much what Martin had said, though that was frightening enough. It was what he had left unsaid. She saw the whole picture now, and what was more important, she heard the sound now. The low whir of the cassette in the tape player on Alec's night table. The sound she had kept suppressed even in her nightmares, the sound that told her that it was her father who had murdered Alec. She knew it now, but she could never prove it, and even if she had all the evidence in the world he was beyond punishment. For the murder, and for what he had done to her.

His motive was obvious. With Alec dead the profits the young man had netted for the firm would all be Martin's, and so would Julie Stewart whom Alec had taken from him. His plan was complex but brilliant in an obscene way. First, invite Barbara for an extended stay at the lodge, then time his visit and Alec's so that he would have a legitimate reason to leave before dawn the morning after their arrival. But he hadn't left; not before dawn at least. He had slipped outside through his own bedroom window, taken the emergency brake off his Fleetwood and let it coast downhill out of earshot to a hiding place, quietly cut the screen, broken the pane, and unlocked the window in Alec's room, then re-entered the house through his own window. Then going to Alec's room, he had stabbed him to death in his sleep. He had slipped into Alec's tape player a special cassette he had prepared back in the city and brought with him, a cassette that was blank except, at a precisely calculated spot on the tape, for that awful wail of terror.

He had then returned to his own room, dialed his own number on the extension phone—she knew there was a way to do that, and the former high executive of the phone company that he was representing could have taught him the trick—waited for her to answer, and pretended that he was calling from a booth fifty miles away. He had to keep her on the line while the cassette moved through the tape player, until that scream tore through the house. Then, as soon as she came back to the phone and reported Alec's death, all he had to do was hang up, slip out his own window again and go downhill to where he had left the Fleetwood, drive away, and a few hours later come back.

The only risk he had run was that the police would notice the apparently blank cassette in the tape player, and the chance of that happening was minimal. He deliberately murdered his partner and came close to destroying his own daughter in the process. But if he successfully

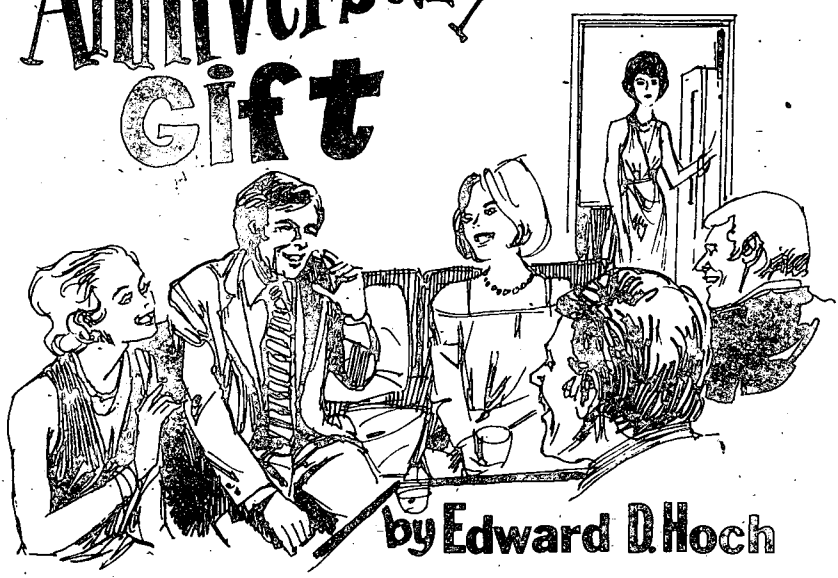
waited out the two years, no court in the world could touch him afterwards. And what good would it do for her to go to the ethics committee of the bar association with what she knew? He must have retrieved and erased the cassette years ago. She had nothing to offer them but the picture in her mind.

She knew that when she returned to New York the first thing she would do would be to call Columbia University and withdraw her application for law school. If Martin Blair represented what legal training did to the conscience, she wanted no part of it.

The seeing for herself which had always been so important to her didn't mean much anymore.

Twice-told tales are vexing, but when they are told more than twice . . .

Anniversary Gift



by Edward D. Hoch

George Kreston loved to tell the story about how his wife tried to kill him when they were ten years old. It was his favorite party story, one to be dragged out with each new group of friends. Harry O'Toole had heard it many times before, but he always listened because there was some sort of morbid fascination in the thing.

Usually it started while Selma was in the kitchen preparing drinks, and someone—a newcomer to the charmed circle—would comment on

how beautiful she was. That usually set George off. He'd smile a bit, as if remembering, and then say, "I always thought she was beautiful. Hell, I married her, didn't I? Even though she tried to kill me when we were ten years old."

There might be a few gasps, or looks of disbelief, or even chuckles from the nonbelievers. Then he would launch into his story. "Our families were quite close, and we used to vacation together up along the Maine coast. It's beautiful country, with that rocky coastline and all those little islands. We had a cottage in Jericho Bay, on a little island just off the shore. It wasn't even really an island, because it was connected to the mainland by a toll bridge. We kids always objected to that bridge, and we sort of boycotted it, traveling back and forth by rowboat so we could at least *pretend* it was really an honest-to-goodness island. Selma's family owned the boat, so I was pretty much dependent on her for my transportation. My family had a big inboard that none of the kids was allowed near.

"Anyway, this summer when we were ten was an especially cool one. I remember us being bundled up in blankets at night, and even wearing sweaters during the day. I'd gone down to the boat this morning without my sweater, and I was really cold. Selma had left one of her jackets in the boat so I put it on. Well, you should have heard her when she saw me! You'd have thought I was trying to steal it! She went to pull it off me and it ripped, and then she was really furious.

"I asked her to take me across to the mainland, and she didn't say anything at first. She was busy looking at her ripped jacket, trying to see if it could be sewed. Then finally she motioned me to get in the boat. Well, you have to realize that I've never been a really great swimmer. I could swim if I had to, maybe the length of the average pool, but that was about all. The distance between the island and the shore at this point was maybe two or three hundred yards, a long way for even a good swimmer."

At this point in his story, George always had every ear. He would steal a glance at his wife, standing in the kitchen doorway or lounging in the big green chair that was her favorite, but her face never betrayed a trace of the emotion she might feel. He could have been talking about a perfect stranger for all the reaction she showed.

"Well," he continued, "to make a long story short, when we were about halfway across, she deliberately capsized the rowboat. She

started rocking it from side to side until I was terrified, and then tipped the whole thing over. She was always a good swimmer herself, with strong, long legs, and I suppose she could have swam to shore if necessary. But I was helpless, and in a panic besides. I tried to get a grip on the overturned boat, but she kept pushing my hands away—not saying a word, just pushing my hands away. I guess it was then that I saw her eyes, with the terrible gleam in them, and realized she wanted me dead."

"What happened?" someone always asked, after waiting a moment for the story to continue. "You surely didn't die."

George Kreston chuckled. "No, I didn't die. But I came darn close. With her pushing me away from the boat, and me swallowing water as I struggled, I wouldn't have lasted for long. But then some neighbors came by in their boat. They'd seen the whole thing from the shore and come out after us. They pulled me in, spouting water like a beached whale, and picked up Selma too. Her parents heard about it, and she got a spanking, but that was about all. No one who wasn't there could believe that she was seriously trying to kill me. We'd been playmates for years, and they attributed it all to a childish prank."

"Did you stay playmates after that?"

"Well, we were on the island together, so we naturally saw a lot of each other. But you can believe I never went out in the boat with her again. Actually, that was the last summer my mother and father had the cottage, so we sort of drifted apart. It wasn't till high school that we started really dating—the last year of high school, when it developed we were both headed for the same college. I suppose we each thought it would be a good idea to have someone available for dates during our freshman year, till something better came along." He'd glance sideways at Selma as he finished the story. "But I guess nothing ever did, because we got married right after graduation."

The last time that Harry O'Toole heard the story was on the long Memorial Day weekend, traditionally the start of the summer-party season in their circle of friends. There were a few newcomers present who hadn't heard it before, and they reacted with proper awe. "And you really married her after she tried to kill you?" one young guest demanded, still not quite able to accept it all.

"Of course. Why not? That all happened when we were ten years old."

One man turned on Selma now. "Did you mean to kill him then, that day with the boat?"

Selma smiled her sweetest smile. "I suppose so. To be perfectly honest, I can't remember a great deal about that day—not nearly as much as George always seems to remember."

"Have you ever wanted to kill him again?"

"Well, we've been married ten years," Selma replied, as if that answered the question. "Ten years next week."

"Do you have a boat?" the man asked.

Selma laughed, showing her perfect teeth. "No boat. Perhaps I should give him one as an anniversary gift."

The party drifted on, as parties will, running slowly downhill as the guests began their departure. Harry O'Toole was the last to go, and Selma pulled him aside. "Do you have a minute, Harry?"

"For you, anytime."

"It's about George's anniversary gift."

"The boat?"

"No, silly! I'm giving him a hi-fi, and I'd like your help installing it. He has a meeting next Friday night, and that's just before our anniversary. If you're free that night . . ."

"Sure, I guess so." Harry was an electronics engineer, and by this time he'd grown used to the friends who always wanted him to look at their television set, or fix the FM radio. Sometimes he even did it because he helped people whenever he could. He was an easy-going bachelor, still in his early thirties, and he felt that the repair jobs were some small repayment for the cordiality his friends showed him.

"Then I'll see you Friday," she whispered. "It's not being delivered till that afternoon, so I won't have to keep it hidden."

"What make is it?"

"Japanese. It cost a small fortune, believe me."

He nodded and walked with her to the door. George was there, holding out his hand. "Leaving so soon, Harry?"

"The weekend's over. It's back to work tomorrow."

"So it is. What were you two whispering about just now?"

"George, you shouldn't ask. We were setting up a rendezvous, and you know the husband's always the last to know."

George chuckled and slipped his arms around their shoulders. "You two—you're probably the best friends I have in the world."

They said goodnight, and Harry headed down the walk to his car. Somehow, George's parting show of affection had left him feeling uneasy. He didn't like to be thought of as George's best friend, and he especially didn't like to be thought of as one about whom George didn't have to worry.

It was on Wednesday, over a casual lunch at a crowded downtown restaurant, that an acquaintance named Green mentioned the possibility of Selma Kreston's unfaithfulness.

"Do you see much of Selma any more, Harry?" he asked, spooning lukewarm chicken-noodle soup into his mouth.

"I was at a party just the other night—Memorial Day—at their house. Why?"

Green wiped his chin. "I hear she's playing around."

"What? Selma? I don't believe it!"

"I just know what I hear, that's all. I doubt if she'll divorce George and give up all that money though."

"Who's the guy supposed to be?"

Green shrugged his square shoulders. "I don't know. I didn't hear his name. She's still got her looks though, huh? No six kids running around to fatten her up."

"They never had any children," Harry said. "Never wanted any, I guess."

"How about some dessert?" Green asked. "You going to have some dessert?" The subject of Selma Kreston had passed from his mind, but it remained in Harry's.

He went out to the Krestons' home on Friday evening, as he'd promised Selma. She was wearing tan slacks and a loose sleeveless blouse, and she looked about nineteen.

"You're here! Good!"

"I said I'd come. Now where's this monstrous anniversary gift?"

"Follow me." She led him around the back of the house, past the lighted swimming pool they rarely used except on the hottest days, and pulled open the tall glass doors to the enclosed patio.

"This is it?"

"This is it."

She snapped on the light and he started examining the piled boxes

and crates. After a moment he gave a low whistle. "You must have a few thousand dollars in equipment here."

"I suppose so. It's what he wanted, and tenth anniversaries don't come every day. Or even every year."

He set to work, with her help, stringing the wires and positioning speakers. It took the better part of two hours before he'd completed the work to his own satisfaction. He turned to ask Selma how she liked it. "What do you think?"

She selected a record and placed it on the turntable. "We'll see."

The music boomed out with all the vigor he'd expected, and he saw her smile with pleasure. "You're a wizard, Harry. An absolute wizard."

"Thank you, ma'am," he answered with mock dignity.

"There's just one other thing—we should have a set of speakers out by the pool, on the other side, there. Think you could do it?"

He surveyed the situation carefully. "Sure, I could do it, but we'd have to use some extra cord, to keep it far enough away from the water. Electric wires around a pool can be dangerous."

There was just a flicker across her face as he said the words, not enough to register as any sort of expression or emotion. "We'd have to be careful about that," she said.

"George doesn't use the pool much, does he?"

"Not much. Why?"

"Oh, I've never seen him in it, and I remember his story about what a poor swimmer he was."

"That's a vile story. Vile!"

The emotion of her words surprised him. He'd never heard her complain about George's story before, though he had often supposed she wasn't too pleased by it. "I can imagine it would upset you," he said. "Why does George keep telling it?"

"To torment me, I suppose. His own little sadistic game. Sometimes I think he only married me to get revenge for that day I almost drowned him."

He'd never asked her the question before, but now, facing her like this beneath the dim patio lights, it seemed the proper time. "I've heard others ask you if you meant to kill him that day."

"It's a standard question. They always ask it, and I always answer that I can't remember it very well, that I probably did."

"*Do* you remember it?"

She turned away. "As if it were yesterday."

"And the boat?"

"What does one plan when you're ten years old? I wanted to get back at him for ripping the jacket. I wanted to . . . I don't know."

Harry turned away. "I guess I've often wondered why you married him."

"He was on his way to being wealthy, successful. And I'd known him for so long. It just seemed as if we'd always been meant for marriage."

"And now?"

"And now it doesn't seem so much like it any more," she answered, a tinge of sadness in her voice.

"I see." He brought the wire around, looping it through the bushes but keeping it far away from the pool itself. After a moment he added, "There's someone else, isn't there?"

She turned, defiant. "Sure, there's someone else. *He* plays around. Why shouldn't I?"

"Have you thought about a divorce?"

"Not really. Maybe I like this life too much. Even an alimony settlement wouldn't keep me like this. I'm spoiled, Harry. It happens to people."

"Yes, it does."

"Are you almost finished there?"

"Almost. I don't like having these wires so close to the pool though."

She lit a cigarette. "That's the way I want them."

"All right." He shrugged and finished connecting the speaker.

She invited him for a drink, and he was still at the house when George Kreston drove up the hill, closely followed by a stranger in a little white sportscar. He hopped out, obviously pleased with himself, and hurried toward his wife, barely acknowledging Harry's presence.

"Happy anniversary, dear," he said, kissing her gently.

"The car? For *me*?"

"For you."

She ran to it, as excited as a child with a new toy, and somehow Harry O'Toole felt glad for her. The evening had not been entirely pleasant, with its undertones of past violence and present unfaithfulness. He hoped that the car would do something toward bringing them closer, but he wasn't really sure that there was still time. . .

They had a small dinner party on Sunday evening for their anniversary, and Harry came with a girl he dated occasionally. They could hear the sound of the hi-fi from the bottom of the hill that led up to the Kreston home, and Harry wondered what the neighbors would be thinking.

George greeted them at the door, all smiles and just a bit drunk. "Glad you could come, glad you could come! Did you see the hi-fi Selma give me? Listen to that tone!"

The music was indeed impressive, seeming to fill the entire house with the gentle strings of a full orchestra. A few of the guests were out near the pool, and Harry wandered out there to see how the outdoor speakers sounded. He stopped short, seeing the wire that ran from a second-story window directly over the pool to a tree on the other side.

"What's that?" he asked Selma. "I told you that was dangerous. What if there was a wind and the wire fell into the pool? Someone could be electrocuted."

"We won't go swimming when it's windy," she replied, walking past him with two tall drinks for her guests. He stared after her, uncertain of what to do. Then he looked back up at the wire, and at the placid surface of the swimming pool. It was true that George rarely swam in it. Whatever half-formed fears Harry had were obviously groundless.

He walked over to the door of the dining room in time to hear George speaking. "I suppose you've all heard about the time Selma tried to kill me when we were ten years old." He was beginning again on his favorite story, like a record stuck in an unpleasant groove. Harry turned and walked back to the pool.

A bit of a breeze came up, and the wire above the water swayed, ever so gently. Anniversary gift. Anniversary. Why did you marry him, Selma?

He stared up at the wire. It was only to the speaker, after all, not the main power wire. Could it really do that much damage? He would have to ask somebody at the office tomorrow. Somebody would know.

But how would he put the question? Can a speaker cord from a hi-fi set electrocute a person if it falls into a swimming pool with him?

"And then she tipped over the boat! Tipped it right over, and when I tried to grab hold, she kept pushing me away, trying to drown me!" The voice droned on, repeating the old litany.

Finally Harry could listen no more. He sought out the friend he'd

brought and told her it was time to leave. If a wire were to fall into the pool and cause an accident, it was really none of his concern.

The call came Tuesday morning, waking him at six-thirty from a restless sleep. It was a neighbor of the Krestons', whom he knew slightly. "Terrible accident at George's place. You'd better come over."

"Yes," Harry said, not even surprised at the words.

He drove through the misty dawn, trying to think of what he would say to Selma and the police and his friends. It was important at a time like this to say the right thing.

The house, when he reached it, was silent and forbidding. There were two police cars out front, plus the neighbors' car. A patrolman opened the door for him and he walked into the living room, trying to keep his eyes from the pool beyond the patio.

George Kreston came in from the kitchen. "Hello, Harry. Glad you could come."

"George? I thought . . . What happened?"

"Selma's dead. The brakes failed on her new sports car, and she smashed into a tree at the bottom of the hill. Didn't you see the broken guard rail?"

"I . . . didn't notice."

"A terrible thing, Harry. I think I'll need your support to get me through the day. The funeral arrangements and all."

"Anything I can do," Harry told him, in a voice that reached his ears like a stranger's.

"We'll have a look at the car," the patrolman said. "Try to figure out what happened to those brakes."

"It was an anniversary gift," George said. "I only gave it to her on Friday."

Harry was starting at him, trying to read something behind the mask of his features. But there was nothing to read, nothing to go on. Only the memory of a day long ago when George and Selma were both ten years old.

Whether money is the root of evil or of happiness could depend on your circumstances . . .

UNDIVIDED PROFITS

by **Mac Lean O' Spelin**

"Never touch cash, Tom, my boy," Josiah P. Adams would intone as he sat comfortably enthroned in the rich leather chair he merited as President of Greendale Mutual Savings Bank.

"Shrewd advice, J.P.," I'd respond. "As you always say, credit, not cash, greases the axle the world turns on."

"Absolutely, Tom. And never forget that no one serves his community with greater devotion than the Full Service Banker."

I'd heard him use those same words a thousand times during my rise from assistant teller to First Vice-President. But I always smiled and promised not to forget. And I never did.

Not even when disaster struck the Guaranty Fund.

For, even if J.P.'s endless repetitions were tiresome, his philosophy was rock solid, like our bank itself. Greendale Mutual Savings was no city-style shell built of glass and marblecrete. GMS was built of granite. Built to last. A staunch country bank. A Full Service Bank.

In fact, J.P. often claimed it had been the staunch sound of my name, not my fine academic record, that had caused him to hire me. "Thomas S. Hamilton, a name you can trust," he said time and again. "Like Josiah P. Adams, a fit name for a banker."

True. Our names *were* fitting for men who chaired countless civic and church committees, who spurred community development, who gave speeches favoring free enterprise. As my wife often said with justifiable pride, "Hamilton. Adams. They sound so—so historical. So substantial."

True, yes. But annoying. It wasn't my name that made me a skillful banker. It was my lifelong dedication to the magic of money. I began life on a farm upstate and as early as I can remember money enthralled me. And mystified me by its absence. My parents worked hard and were happy together, but I learned early that happiness did not buy money.

Neither did hard work. Money existed somewhere, I could tell, because my father was always either borrowing it or paying it back. Always. Never once did he get his hands on any to keep.

Once I asked him where in the world all the money was. He shrugged wryly and said damned if he knew for sure, but the banks figured to have a lot.

He was right. Eventually I escaped the farm for university in the city and I solved the mystery. The money *was* in the banks. Mountains of it.

And the more I learned, the more I burned to be where the money was, to put its magic to good use.

I learned that cities were huge ponds where even bankers were only medium-sized frogs. While in small towns they could be kings of all the lily pads.

I also learned that commercial banks catered to corporations. Much

too impersonal. But mutual savings banks catered to the average man, the little fellow.

Wonderful! What nobler ambition for me, an ex-farm boy, than to serve the little fellow?

I set about scouring the state. I found Greendale. A pretty town. The county seat. Hub of a flourishing farm community. Best of all, its largest bank was the Greendale Mutual Savings Bank. Perfect.

So, eighteen years ago, I went where the money was and, in seven, I rose to Assistant Vice-President. It was on the day of that promotion that J.P. first voiced his hope that I'd someday succeed him at the helm of GMS and told me that, as the first step in that direction, I was to be formally introduced to the Board of Trustees. Then, with a fatherly smile, he added, "Sarah will be mighty pleased, Tom, my boy."

I got his point. The Board included the bank's top officers, several successful business and professional men, and a farmer or two as—well—window dressing. Pillars of the community. Family men.

So, that warm evening—in June, I think—I walked up the hill to where the Adams house stood, solid and foursquare, watching over Greendale. And there, on the cool verandah, I proposed to J.P.'s daughter, Sarah. And there, in the soft shadows, looking almost pretty, she said yes.

But if I had my romantic side, I was also a realist. And, as I'd calculated, on Board-meeting night the trustees were delighted to hear I was soon to be married. As Arlen Meadows, a newly appointed trustee, said, "Nothing gives a man roots faster than marriage." He paused for effect. "Unless it's the grave."

Arlen saw himself as a humorist. Incorrectly. But he was, and is, a long-headed and prosperous businessman. I laughed respectfully.

Not long after the honeymoon, J.P. called me into his oak-paneled office. "Son," he said, "it's high time you learned creative banking."

Creative banking. You've seen a version of it in TV commercials. The actors who play the friendly bankers look like Full Service Bankers would like to look. They smile paternally as they grant loans for that little house with the picket fence, that sporty compact car, that sturdily rebuilt hay stacker. Creative banking. For the benefit of the little fellow.

Now bankers do try to be friendly. But miss a payment on your loan

and your banker's homespun smile will sadden. Miss another and it turns grim. In most communities, that is. Not in Greendale. Delinquent borrowers never bothered J.P., and they never bothered me.

"Give them time, Tom," counseled J.P. "They'll pay when they can."

A gentle philosophy.

Which pays. Our bank makes money. So much money that our knottiest problem is deciding what to do with it all.

Mutual banks have no stockholders. Thus no dividends to pay from profits. The profits just pile up. Some we tuck into an account called Undivided Profits. The rest we stack up in the Guaranty Fund.

The clean-cut beauty of a mutual bank is that its depositors are its legal owners. Most depositors don't grasp this. Ours didn't. Which was fine because, until he all but retired two years ago, J.P. ran GMS in their best interests. Since then, as Acting President, I've been at the helm and I've done the same.

In theory, the depositor-owner shares in the profits of a mutual bank. Legally, all he can receive is interest on his deposits at a fixed—and modest—rate. So, as I said, the profits just pile up.

I learned all that years ago, of course. But it wasn't until I became J.P.'s son-in-law that he unveiled his personal style of creative banking. "Simple, accurate arithmetic," he said solemnly, leaning back in his big chair. "Lightning calculation. Put nothing unnecessary on paper. And, Tom . . ."

"Yes, father?"

"Tom, never touch cash. Never." Then he smiled almost roguishly. "Pinch the cash and you'll be pinched."

Those are the basics. Keep everything in your head. And keep your hands off the cash. It's the cash that everyone frets about. And constantly counts.

Naturally no vault labeled Undivided Profits exists with, inside it, an ever-swelling heap of greenbacks. It is a ledger account, a bookkeeping device. Not cash. But real money nevertheless, even though no one pays it much attention. Except Thomas S. Hamilton, First Vice-President.

By unspoken agreement with J.P., Undivided Profits became my preserve. His was the Guaranty Fund. We kept out of each other's preserve.

But we divided those undivided profits.

Not between the two of us. Certainly not. Our depositors owned those profits. We used them solely in the service of the bank's clients.

Absolute wonders can be done for the little fellow by granting him loans on little or no collateral, at rock-bottom interest rates. And by shoring up his temporarily weak loans. All done via adroit mental bookkeeping. Plus discreet use of Undivided Profits and the Guaranty Fund.

But providing that kind of service takes a prodigious memory. It takes years of study. It takes a deft, steady hand.

Obviously, then, J.P. and I changed appropriate fees for our expertise.

To keep the bank's books uncluttered, I funneled my fees to a Hong Kong bank account. J.P. preferred a confidential account in Zurich.

A comfortable arrangement. Which was not disrupted when, about two years ago, J.P. began to suffer shooting pains and to puff noisily going upstairs—his heart. But nothing critical, according to Wilfred Harley, the best doctor in town and a long-time Trustee. Wilf's practical, down-home prescription was: mild medication, avoid cigars and stairs, rest at home much of the time. Wilf's no big-city exercise-your-heart theorist.

Taking on J.P.'s normal duties was no problem for me. But, per our tacit agreement, I continued to leave the Guaranty Fund to him and occasionally he spent a few hours in his office keeping it tidy and up to date.

So when last month I got word of an upcoming audit, it was mere routine to alert J.P. and to begin tidying up my own mental accounts—and Undivided Profits. Then, just two days before the audit, as I was flicking into place a neat series of interlocking compensating balances, I ran head on into a thicket of discrepancies that led directly to the Guaranty Fund.

Disaster!

I blamed myself. I should have noticed that J.P. had slipped mentally as well as physically. But blame was irrelevant. Unless J.P. could shake the fog from his brain and get his mental accounts reflected accurately in the bank's accounts, his days out of jail were numbered—to about two.

I'd need at least a week to thread my way through the tangle he'd created in the books. Clearheaded, he could tidy it up in a morning. Addled, as he obviously was now, who knew? Probably never.

Immediately I called an emergency meeting of the three-man Planning Committee of the Board of Trustees. I was chairman; Arlen Meadows and Wilf Harley, M.D., were the other members. Practical men, all of us. Realists.

When they arrived in my office, I swore them to secrecy. Making no mention of Undivided Profits, I outlined the extent of J.P.'s malfeasance.

Shock froze their faces as I listed the consequences: ruin for J.P. and I, as Acting President, charged with criminal negligence for not having realized what J.P. was up to. They, as trustees, tarred with the same nasty brush. The confidence and trust of the community irretrievably lost, its wholesome fiber ripped to shreds.

"We can't let this happen." My voice was harsh, urgent. "Can we, Arlen? Can we, Wilf?"

A long, dead moment of silence. Then, as I'd known he would, Arlen Meadows pulled himself together. "Wilf, it's up to you. Pump old J.P. full of hypos. Get him moving. Get his brain working."

Wilf's eyes were still glazed. "It'd take a monster dose. Be risky, downright risky. Might push him over the brink."

"Wilf," said Arlen, softly insistent. "The risk is to the community."

I backed him up. "You've got to try, Wilf. Try your damndest." I turned to Arlen. "We can count on you all the way, I know."

"Right down to the ground." He smiled his faintly macabre smile.

Then, as I'd calculated he would, Wilf rallied to the cause. "Can't let the community down, can I, boys?"

"Attababy!" Arlen had completely recovered his composure. "Use your biggest needle. Hell, man, gamble! If you lose—well, Doc, I've buried your mistakes before."

As it turned out, the dose *was* too strong. Or the needle too big. Or both. So Arlen Meadows buried Doctor Wilfred Harley's mistake.

With all the merciful yet still dignified speed that was the hallmark of Meadows Funeral Home, Greendale's finest.

The community mourned its lost leader. But the loss was not in vain. Out of respect for Greendale's bereavement, the auditors post-

poned their visit for ten days.

It took me just seven of those days to patch up the holes J.P. had left in the Guaranty Fund.

Catastrophe averted. The grand old name of Josiah P. Adams forever stainless. My bank saved.

The community, the average men, the little fellows J.P. had served so devotedly—all of them secure once again.

Service. The cornerstone of J.P.'s philosophy. As he'd said time and time again, and as I'd never forgotten: "No one serves his community with greater devotion than the Full Service Banker."

Often, as I lean back comfortably in my rich leather chair in my oak-paneled office, I think how fortunate it was that I, Josiah P. Adams' most apt pupil, was at the bank's helm in Greendale's dark hour of need.

At the helm. Ready and able and skillful enough to steer J.P. toward his last, his fullest service.

He trained me to be a Full Service Banker. And, as President of Greendale Mutual Savings Bank, I will continue to be.

I'll see to it that the Guaranty Fund stays tidy. I'll divide those Undivided Profits. For the benefit of the little fellows.

For an appropriate fee, of course. That's the way J.P. handled it and, rest his soul, he was, after all, my guide, my philosopher, and—well, my father-in-law.

Age cannot wither their infinite curiosity . . .

THE DAY OF THE FLOWER LADY

by **Stephen Wasylyk**

Although it was only eight in the morning, the sun was already warm and Morley and Bakov were in their deck chairs on the shady patio of the Golden Age Retirement Center, Inc.

Morley, content after his usual hearty breakfast, sat erect, his thin body straight, his colorful sport shirt hanging loosely from his bony shoulders, his seemingly electrified hair a halo of iron grey around his seamed face.

Bakov, not as well fed due to dietary restrictions, slumped in his chair, his hands clasped over his rotund, unsatisfied stomach, his bald head gleaming and his round face reflecting a sorrowful hunger.

Both had powerful field glasses hanging from straps around their necks, but only Morley was interested in the daily ritual of observing the activities of the people in the bustling world on the other side of the wide boulevard.

Morley focused his glasses. "The Indian is on time this morning," he announced, referring to the tall, black-maned young attendant in charge of the parking lot across the street that not only served the public but also the tenants of the sedate apartment building next to it. "He is eating something with one hand and steering the cars with the other as he parks them. Someone should tell him that it is not a good idea. He will either get ketchup on the person's seat or he will scrape a fender." He glanced at his watch and smiled. "It is soon time for the Flower Lady."

Very faintly, the sound of crunching metal was borne their way by the early morning breeze.

"Ah," said Morley sorrowfully. "I think the owners of those cars would rather have ketchup on the seat."

"I wonder if the Gangster will come today," said Bakov.

The Gangster was a swarthy individual with long black sideburns, slicked-down hair and a fondness for expensive, well fitted but extremely loud sport coats. He drove a chrome-laden purple Continental which Morley had decided could belong only to a man with such monumental poor taste he not only would defy convention but also the law.

"I do not know," said Morley. "It is very strange that the Gangster should drive up in his big limousine and pay the Indian money behind one of the parked cars as if they do not wish anyone to know. Three times already he has done this."

"Better he should have given it to me," said Bakov, massaging his stomach.

"The money?"

"No. The Indian. Whatever he was eating."

"It would not be good for your seventy-five-year-old stomach, Bakov. He is young. To him the calories and the saturated fat and the cholesterol do not matter."

"I do not understand those words," said Bakov. "Before they discovered food was bad for you, people lived and ate and died with no difficulty. Now they live and eat carefully but still die, so what is the purpose?"

"It is simple, Bakov," said Morley. "Do you not realize there are many more people in the country today? They must have something to do, so they invented those things to make jobs. Think of it, Bakov. There are the chemical men and the diet persons and the doctors and the food nutritionists and the advertising people and the actors on the television, all telling you that you must eat this or that if you do not wish to have a heart attack or something as bad. Would you put all these people out of work? You must listen to what they say or you will hurt their feelings. What is a little hunger to a man like you?"

"Painful," said Bakov.

Morley fidgeted impatiently. "Where can the Flower Lady be?"

The Flower Lady was a particular favorite of Morley's. Mature and attractive, tall and graceful, with a still-trim figure, her long hair always pulled back and fastened with a jeweled clip, she lived on the fourteenth floor of the venerable but fashionable apartment building across the street. They had often seen her enjoying the cool evening breeze on her balcony and looked forward to watching her pick up her car in the parking lot at exactly eight-fifteen each morning, bound for where they did not know. She always returned promptly at five-fifteen and turned her car over to the Indian. As she walked to the apartment building, their field glasses would bring her face close enough so that they could see her expression and determine whether she had had a good day or a bad one. Lately her face had been tired and set in sad resignation when she returned home, and Morley hoped each day that things would improve. He called her the Flower Lady because she always wore stylish dresses of floral print fabrics; a different flower for each day of the week, roses for Monday, violets for Tuesday, and so on.

Worry showed in Morley's voice. "It is the first time she has been so late."

"She has overslept," said Bakov. "She is entitled. Did we not see her go out with the Official last night?"

Tall and silver-haired, dignified, lean and handsome in a tuxedo, the Official sometimes came to take the Flower Lady out for the evening in his Rolls-Royce.

"I think we should investigate," said Morley. "It is not like her to be so late."

"No," said Bakov. "We will investigate nothing. How do you know she did not go away in the night with the Official? Women have been known to do such things."

"Not the Flower Lady," said Morley firmly, rising to his feet. "Come, Bakov. It will do no harm to ask."

"And who is there to ask?"

"The General. Who else?"

The General was the fat doorman in the bright-red, gold-braided uniform who guarded the front entrance to the building.

"The General is not a pleasant man except to the people who live there," said Bakov. "He will not answer your questions."

"We shall see, Bakov. Come."

"I will watch," said Bakov. "I do not wish to be yelled at on an empty stomach."

Morley sighed. "If that is what you wish." He left his field glasses behind and walked down the long path and through the gate in the wrought-iron fence, crossing the boulevard by simply stepping out into traffic with one hand raised imperiously, causing several near rear-end collisions and a great deal of tire-screeching and horn-blowing.

Bakov shook his head with sad tolerance, watching him through the glasses. Morley disappeared inside the building, to reappear after a few minutes and wave frantically at him.

Bakov dropped his glasses and rumbled anxiously across the street.

"What is wrong?" he asked, breathless.

"She does not answer her phone," said Morley.

"It is as I said. She did not come home."

"The General says he would know if she did not. He is trying again."

They entered the lobby to see the General hang up the small house phone.

"I think we should investigate," said Morley. "The poor lady might need help. Let us go upstairs."

"I don't think . . ." began the General.

Morley looked at him pityingly. "It is not necessary to think. It is only necessary to knock on the door. Did you not tell me that for their own protection, tenants are to notify you when they will not be home? What good is this protection if you do nothing?"

"I'll call the manager," said the General. He dialed the house phone, spoke for a few moments, and hung up.

"He'll be right out."

The manager was a slight, middle-aged man with thick-lensed spectacles and a mouth so thin he appeared to have no upper lip at all. It gave him a perpetually displeased expression.

He looked at Morley haughtily. "What is the trouble?"

"The Flower Lady is late," said Morley. "The Flower Lady is never late."

"He means Mrs. Rolfe," said the General. "He's right. She's never late."

"We try to respect our tenants' privacy," said the manager. "It's only . . ."

Morley cut him short. "Respect after you find out if she is all right. Your respect is of no use if she needs help. She may be sick. It can happen to anyone."

The manager sighed. "I'll look into it if you insist."

"Of course I insist," said Morley. "Why do you think we are here?"

Morley and Bakov piled into the elevator after the manager, ignoring his annoyance. On the fourteenth floor, the manager stopped before a door and rang the bell. They waited. He tapped on the door discreetly. They waited again.

"Why are you wasting time?" asked Morley. "Open the door."

The manager drew himself up. "We respect . . ."

"Respect, respect," said Morley impatiently. "If she is not at home, she cannot know you have looked." He pointed at the door. "So look."

The manager inserted a key into the lock and pushed the door open six inches. "Suppose she is at home?"

"If she is at home, why did she not answer the phone or the doorbell? Call her name."

"Mrs. Rolfe!" the manager called timidly.

Morley pushed him aside, placed his face next to the opening and yelled: "Mrs. Rolfe!"

Nothing happened.

"It is as I thought," said Morley firmly. "She needs help. Why else would she not answer?"

He pushed the door wide and stepped inside before the manager could object. Beyond the small foyer was a sunken living room, luxuri-

ously furnished, and in the center of the floor, near the small coffee table, lay the Flower Lady, dressed in a gayly printed dressing gown.

"Good heavens!" said the manager.

Morley scuttled forward and felt for a pulse, then lifted his head. "She is hurt," he said. "Someone has hit her on the head with this heavy statue. Who would want to do such a terrible thing?"

The manager darted toward the phone. "I'll call the police."

"Yes," said Morley. "Call the police. The Flower Lady is not only hurt, she is dead."

While they waited, Morley wandered around the apartment, upset and distracted. Bakov tagged along, his face sympathetic, saying nothing, knowing that Morley had always liked the Flower Lady far more than the other people they watched each day.

Morley stopped at the balcony door and looked down across the street at the Retirement Center.

"Think of it, Bakov," he said. "While we slept last night such a short distance away, someone entered here and killed the poor Flower Lady. He had no right. We must find whoever performed this horrible crime."

"What can we do?" asked Bakov. "We are not real detectives. Lieutenant Hook, the Homicide person, was very angry with us the last time. Let the police . . ."

"The police," said Morley angrily. "What do they know? They will come and ask questions and go away. You will see, Bakov, they will not care. They are busy. Is this the only murder in the city this morning?"

The police came, Lieutenant Hook among them, and for a time the apartment was a busy place. Then Hook came over to them and said, "I didn't think I'd ever see you two again. As a matter of fact, I was *hoping* I'd never see you again. But the manager says that if it hadn't been for you the murder wouldn't have been discovered so quickly. I hate to admit it, but you've done something right for a change."

"Do not speak to us as if we are idiots," snapped Morley. "Just go about your business and find the murderer."

Hook's face grew pink. "We'll find him."

"How? Do you know yet how he got in or how he left? Did the manager tell you the door was locked and it is the kind of lock that

must be turned with a key? And this is the fourteenth floor so no one could enter through the window."

"He told us and we'll work it out," said Hook. He pointed a finger at Morley. "Without your help."

"Help," said Morley. "You will need much help, so do not be so proud. Someday you will be old and you will realize how stupid you were when you were young. What time was the Flower Lady killed?"

Hook's eyes widened. "The Flower. . . ?"

"He means the woman, Mrs. Rolfe," said Bakov. "We have names for people because we do not know their real names when we watch with the field glasses."

"What field glasses?" asked Hook.

Morley sighed. "It is of no importance. What time was she killed?"

"I suppose you've earned the answer. About two this morning."

"Then the Official must have been the last to see her," said Morley. "Perhaps he can help."

"Who is the Official?"

"A man who comes and takes her out for a good time," said Bakov. "His picture is on the desk. We saw them enter his silver limousine last night. The Flower Lady was very beautiful."

Hook snapped his fingers at a detective. "Take that picture and find out who the man is. The doorman will probably know."

The detective disappeared.

"We will go," said Morley. "Come, Bakov."

"Listen," said Hook. "I don't like to play the heavy, but stay out of this."

"We will call you when we find the murderer," said Morley. "Like before."

They left Hook a deep shade of purple and pushed by the knot of tenants outside who were discussing the possibilities of being found dead now that the Flower Lady had established the precedent.

"I'm moving out," said a portly man. "For the rent we pay, you would think we would have more protection. First there were those three robberies and now this."

"But no one knows who did it," said a tall woman. "It may not have been a burglar. It could have been one of her friends."

The portly man drew himself up. "Tenants in *this* building do not have the kind of friends who would be so inconsiderate. Of course it

was an intruder. I have met most of Mrs. Rolfe's friends and I can assure you they are simply not that sort."

Morley placed a hand on his arm. "Do you know a tall, silver-haired gentleman?"

"Of course," said the man. "That would be Bartley Briarthorne, the attorney."

"And what is this about burglaries?"

"It is common knowledge. There have been three so far, committed when the tenants were away for a few days."

"Tell the Lieutenant inside about the silver-haired lawyer with the strange name," said Morley. "He would like to know."

As Morley and Bakov continued down the hall, a tall young man with curly blond hair caught up to them.

"Listen," he said. "I understand you found the body."

"Who are you?" asked Morley.

"My name is Simon Hentwhistle," said the young man. "I'm a stringer for Channel 12."

"You tie string for a television station?" asked Bakov.

"Not a string tier, a stringer," said Hentwhistle. "I try to find news stories and phone them in. If they're good enough, I get paid. I have a scanner to monitor police calls and when I heard this one I ran over. I'm here first, so if I can get a story in I can make a few dollars. Will you help me?"

Morley sighed. "If we can."

He told Hentwhistle about the Flower Lady. Hentwhistle scribbled furiously, his face alive. "This is a great story," he said when Morley finished. "All I need now is a phone."

A young woman, drawn by the excitement in the hallway, was leaning, her arms folded, in the open doorway of an apartment only a few doors from the Flower Lady's. "How about mine?" she asked.

"Would you mind?" asked Hentwhistle.

"No," she said. "But what's in it for me?"

Hentwhistle looked at her approvingly. She was very shapely, wearing an expensive pants suit, her hair short and curly, her face not pretty but attractive enough to be memorable.

Hentwhistle grinned. "How about dinner tonight?"

She smiled. "Come in. Are you really a reporter?"

"No," said Hentwhistle. "Actually I'm an unemployed journalism

major, but if I turn up something good maybe I can talk my way into a job."

She pointed. "There's the phone. Talk your heart out. By dinner time I expect to be very hungry."

"What's your name?" asked Morley.

"Tansy Ragwort," she said. She made a face. "That's a hell of a name, isn't it?"

"It is a pretty name," said Bakov. "You are a pretty young woman. Do you live here?"

"Only because I have a rich father," she said. "My salary isn't enough to keep me in pantyhose."

Bakov's face turned pink. "Do you have a boy friend?"

"You want to apply, Pop?"

"I would not mind," said Bakov gallantly.

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "That's really nice of you, but I had someone younger in mind."

"I am only seventy-five," said Bakov in an injured tone.

"No offense, Pop, but I'd like someone who can dance for hours at my wedding and still be in shape for some action, if you know what I mean."

Even Morley's scalp turned red.

"Did you know the Flower Lady?" he asked.

She smiled. "Flower Lady. That's a very good name for her, wearing those hokey flower-print dresses all the time. Someone should have told her they went out of style. But I guess the public did do that by not buying her fashions, even when she brought out the matching scarf bit."

"She was a dressmaker?" asked Morley.

"Not just a dressmaker, a top fashion designer. But her stuff hasn't caught on lately—she was in trouble unless she came up with something new."

"You knew her well?"

"Only to say hello. She was a little out of my league."

Simon Hentwhistle joined them, smiling broadly. "The editor likes the story. He said they'll follow through with a camera crew. He wants me to get the human interest angle."

"What is this human interest angle?" asked Bakov.

"You know—the way you and Mr. Morley decided Mrs. Rolfe was in

trouble when she didn't appear this morning. In this city no one usually bothers. He wants me to do a story on you two."

"We do not have time," said Morley. "It is necessary to catch the murderer of the Flower Lady."

"If you don't mind, I'll tag along."

Morley shrugged. "I do not mind."

"I'll pick you up for dinner," Hentwhistle said to Tansy.

"I'll be here," she said. "Good hunting."

In the hall, Morley stood indecisively, looking one way, then the other. A uniformed policeman stood guard at the Flower Lady's door, watching them suspiciously.

"Let us go back to the Center, Morley," said Bakov. "It is time for the midmorning tea."

"Forget your stomach, Bakov, and think. How is it possible for the murderer to get into the Flower Lady's apartment with the door locked?"

"Perhaps she let him in."

"Then how did he get out and lock it behind him?"

Bakov sighed. "I tell you, Morley, I cannot think on an empty stomach."

"That's true," said Hentwhistle. "My father says you can't think when you are hungry."

"Your father is a wise man," said Bakov. "Come, Morley, let us go across the street before the old people eat all the good things and leave for us only the crumbs. We will sit and think and we will find an answer. Who knows? Did you not realize something was wrong simply by sitting in your deck chair? It is possible the answer will come to you there."

"May I join you?" asked Hentwhistle.

"Of course," said Bakov. "You will be our guest. Does not the director always say our friends are welcome, even though he knows that at our age we have few friends left?" He nudged Hentwhistle. "And when the diet person gives you the two tea cookies, it should not be necessary for you to eat them because you are young and strong."

"Then what shall I do with them?"

"Give them to me. What else? Do I not need the nourishment?"

An hour later, they were back in the deck chairs. This time it was

Bakov sitting up, talking to Simon Hentwhistle who was making notes in his little book, while Morley slumped in his chair, silent and brooding.

Occasionally he would lift his field glasses and study the apartment house as if the nooks and crannies of the elaborate brownstone façade hid the answer for which he was looking.

Bakov said to Hentwhistle: "You see, with these glasses we can watch all that goes on. We can watch the people and the bright young girls and the crazy Indian who parks the cars. He is not really an Indian, of course," he said apologetically. He handed the glasses to Hentwhistle. "There he goes now into the apartment building."

Morley straightened. "The Indian goes there often, Bakov."

"That is true," said Bakov.

Morley leaped to his feet. "That is it!"

"What is it?"

"I have found the murderer!"

"It is the Indian?"

"You will see. Come, let us go."

"I do not understand."

"It is simple, Bakov. It required only the careful thought of a skillful mind. Follow me."

"If you have something, you should call the police," said Hentwhistle. "Let them handle it. Murderers can be dangerous."

"Do not worry," said Morley. "Bakov and I will protect you."

"So who will protect us?" asked Bakov.

"You waste time talking," said Morley. "I do not want him to escape."

He led them across the street to the apartment house where he confronted the General.

"The robberies," he said. "When did they take place?"

"The first one was two weeks ago, the other two last week."

"Aha!" said Morley triumphantly. "Did not the Indian just enter?"

"The *who*?"

"The Indian," said Bakov. "The young man who parks the cars."

The General nodded. "He often comes here to talk to the manager."

"Of course," said Morley smugly. "It is as I thought. They are in the office now?"

"Where else would they be?"

"Ha," said Morley. "That is a good question."

He strode quickly to the manager's small office and threw open the door. The Indian was seated alongside the manager's desk in a wooden chair. They both looked up, startled. The manager leaped to his feet.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Confess!" said Morley loudly.

The manager's face whitened. "Confess to what?"

"To the murder of the poor Flower Lady."

"You're crazy!"

"We shall see who is crazy," said Morley. He pointed at the manager dramatically. "Do you not have a key for every apartment in the building? If a tenant has a special lock installed so that he may feel safe, is he not forced to give you a key?"

"Of course," said the manager. "That's only sensible."

"It is also sensible to say that you with your keys are the only person who can enter an apartment after the tenant locks the door. That is how the apartments were robbed. Who would suspect the manager? You and your friend here work together to steal from the poor tenants."

"Leave me out of it," said the Indian. "All I do is park cars. I don't know anything about any robberies. If this old dude is ripping off the place, he's doing it alone or with someone else. But robbery isn't murder."

"That's so," said Hentwhistle. "You have accused the man of murder. What does that have to do with robbery?"

"It is the lock on the Flower Lady's door," said Morley. "The murderer could lock the door when he left only if he had a key, and the manager has such a key. Also, when I said the Flower Lady was hurt, he said he would call the police. Not an ambulance or a doctor—the police. Because he already knew the poor lady was dead. He could not know that unless he himself killed her."

"Nonsense!" roared the manager. "Why should I want to kill her?"

"Because you and your friend wished to rob the apartment like you did the others and you did not know she had already returned when you entered."

"That's ridiculous," snapped the manager. "Wouldn't I have enough sense to check? What right do you have to come in here and make wild accusations, you senile old goat?"

"You and your friend are responsible," said Morley. "I have considered it and my mind tells me it is so according to the evidence."

"What evidence? You have no evidence!"

"As far as I'm concerned, Pop, you can forget it," said the Indian. "Maybe this dude did what you say—I wouldn't put it past the penny-pincher—but I wasn't in it with him."

"You cannot weasel out," said Morley. "Bakov and I have seen the Gangster come to visit you in the parking lot and we have seen the Gangster give you money when you hide behind the cars. The people in the street cannot see, but our field glasses make it possible. And it always was the day after the building was robbed although we did not know that until today. The police will be very interested in this information."

The Indian's face turned dark, his eyes mean. "Listen," he said. "I'm leaving. Don't try to stop me."

"You are not leaving," said Morley. "We will not permit it."

"I'll deck the first man who lays a hand on me," said the Indian, moving toward the door.

Hentwhistle blocked his path. "If Mr. Morley says you're not to leave, then you don't leave."

"We'll see," said the Indian. He leaped.

For a moment the two men locked and strained and then suddenly the Indian rose into the air and crashed to the floor, Hentwhistle astride his back, locking his arm between his shoulderblades.

Hentwhistle looked up and smiled. "I didn't spend all my time at the university wrestling with books. I was the intramural champion."

"Excellent," said the manager, starting for the door. "Obviously he's done something wrong to try to escape like that. Hold onto him while I go for the police."

"Why should you go anywhere?" demanded Morley. "Do you not have a phone on your desk? You do not trick us. You wish to escape and we will not permit it." He stepped forward.

The manager's hand came out of his suit jacket holding a small black automatic. "Keep back, if you please."

Morley said, "Do you think that death would frighten a seventy-five-year-old man? Put away the nasty little gun before you hurt yourself."

The manager pointed the gun. "I'll shoot."

Someone knocked at the door and his eyes shifted.

Bakov kicked at the chair in which the Indian had been sitting, propelling it across the floor and into the manager's middle, doubling him up and causing him to drop the gun.

Lieutenant Hook opened the door and surveyed the scene. "What the hell is going on here?"

Bakov, his bulk quivering, hopped around on one foot, the other drawn up in pain. "I have broken my toe!" he cried.

Late that afternoon Morley and Bakov sat in their accustomed places on the patio. Bakov was well back in his chair, one leg projecting straight out, his toe in a splint.

Morley made a sympathetic noise. "It is too bad about your toe, Bakov, but it made it possible to capture the manager before he hurt someone."

"Lieutenant Hook showed no sympathy," said Bakov morosely. "To him the broken toe was nothing. He even threatened to arrest us until the officer with him explained we had done nothing wrong. I do not think Lieutenant Hook knows the law too well for a Homicide person."

"The law he knows," said Morley. "But he does not know people. He runs around with his nose to the ground looking for the details. He was very angry because I said the manager was responsible for the robberies in addition to the murder of the poor Flower Lady. You are wrong, said Hook, it was the Indian all by himself. In the parking lot, the Indian would talk to the people in a pleasant manner and they did not fear to tell him when they would be away from their apartments. So he would steal the key from the board in the manager's office and rob the apartment and give the loot to the Gangster who would pay him the money. So what difference? Did I not solve two crimes instead of one? I do not see that a little mixup about who committed the robberies is important. What is important is that the manager *did* kill the Flower Lady, like I said. Only the reason was different."

"The young doctor who repaired my toe was a loud talker," said Bakov. "I did not hear Lieutenant Hook explain."

"The Flower Lady owned the apartment building," said Morley. "It was one of her investments. The Official told Hook because the Official was the Flower Lady's lawyer. Her dressmaking business was bad and like many old buildings the apartment building was losing money so

she wished to sell it to a company that would tear it down. The Official took her out last night to talk about it. The manager did not like this because he knew he would lose his job, so when the Flower Lady came home he went up to argue with her. That is understandable—he has been the manager for twenty years and he is no longer young. Where else was he to get a job? But he lost his temper when she told him she would not change her mind and he struck her with the statue, which was a terrible thing to do, even if he was going to lose his job. Then he ran away, locking the door behind him." Morley waved his hands. "Details. They do not matter. Did I not say he was the murderer because of the keys? Lieutenant Hook did not think of *that* detail."

Bakov nodded. "You were right, Morley." He brightened. "It was also good about Simon Pigwhistle. He not only captured the Indian and is a big hero, but the editor liked his story so much he gave him a job immediately so Simon will not have to tie string for the TV station any longer. Tansy Ragwort is very pleased. And we are also heroes with our pictures on the TV news tonight."

"I think that Simon will not stay with the TV station very long," said Morley. "Did not Tansy Ragwort say her father was wealthy? Surely he will make his future son-in-law a vice-president, perhaps of the public relations. Once I knew a man who was a public relations person. He drank coffee all morning and played golf all afternoon, which is an excellent job for a son-in-law."

Bakov massaged his foot. "My toe hurts."

"Forget your toe, Bakov," said Morley sadly. Then: "Well, the Flower Lady is gone. She is to be buried on Monday. The Official said he will see to it that there are many roses."

"The Official is a sensitive person," said Bakov.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"The others are gone too," said Bakov finally. "The Indian. The Gangster. And soon the General and all the people in the apartment building." He sat up suddenly, horrified. "Morley, do you realize that when they tear down the building, the bikini lady who suns herself on the balcony each day will be gone also?"

"Do not worry, Bakov. They will build a bright new building filled with many interesting new people and many bright young girls."

Bakov snorted. "I will starve to death before that time."

Morley stood up, walked slowly to the flower bed, plucked a rose and threaded the stem carefully into the buttonhole of his shirt. Then, straightening his shoulders as if to shrug off what had gone before and to be ready for whatever might come next, he said, "I will keep the rose in my room to remember the day of the Flower Lady. And you, Bakov?"

"Do I need a rose when I have a broken toe? That is enough."

A bell sounded inside.

"Come, Bakov," said Morley. "It is time for dinner. The diet person tells me we are to have roast beef."

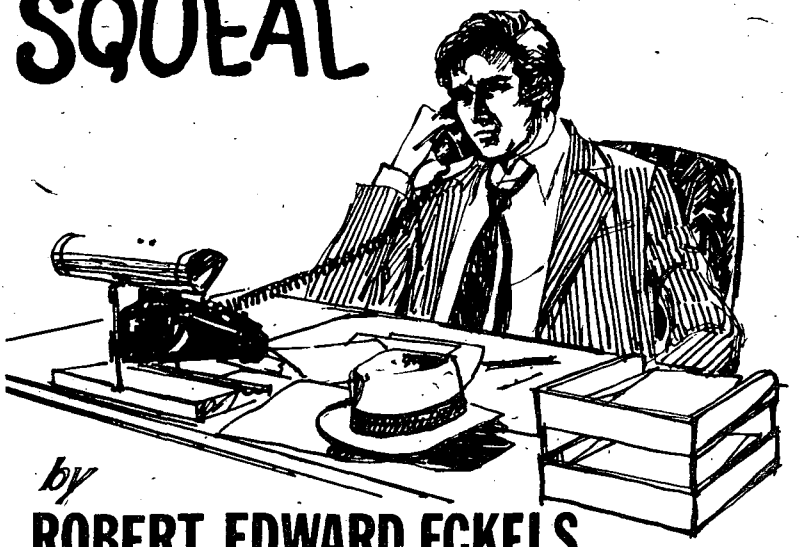
"Roast beef!" The joy in Bakov's voice was unmistakable.

"And mashed potatoes!"

"Mashed potatoes!" Bakov rolled his eyes in ecstatic anticipation, then hobbled quickly toward the dining room, the pain of his broken toe forgotten.

It's the little things that will trip you every time. . .

BUCHANAN'S SQUEAL



by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Buchanan was already on the phone talking to his wife when the squeal came in. It was something of a one-sided conversation, because Frances was up in the air about a 45¢ interest charge that had been added—incorrectly, she figured—to one of their credit-card accounts. Buchanan knew from experience not to try to reason with her when she was in this kind of a mood, and when the second call came in it seemed like an easy way to slide out from under so, signaling Castel-

lano at the other desk that he'd take it, he muttered a quick "Got to go, business" to Frances and punched over to the other extension.

As it turned out, though, he bought a little more than he anticipated, because this particular squeal was from the manager of the Woodlawn branch of the First National Bank. A little earlier one of the bank's depositors had come in to draw out the money in his account—all $30,000 of it. Ordinarily, that wouldn't be anything to call the police about, but this particular customer claimed he needed the money to pay his wife's kidnap ransom.

The call had come in at exactly 1:45, so it was after two and the bank was closed by the time Buchanan got there. But a guard opened up for him when Buchanan showed him his badge through the door. Inside, a dapper little man with a thin sharp-featured face came out from one of the glassed-in offices to greet him. His name was Nordstrom, he said, and he was the bank manager who'd put through the call. "Mr. Murdick—the man I spoke to you about—is waiting in my office. I'll take you back to him."

"In a minute," Buchanan said, still half hoping it was going to turn out to be some kind of a crank call. "First I'd like to get it straight in my mind how this happened. You say he just walked in off the street and said he wanted to draw out all his money because his wife had been kidnapped?"

Nordstrom smiled tightly. "Not quite. All he said was that he wanted to make a withdrawal. But it's unusual for anyone to take out that much cash. Most people will ask for a bank draft or a letter of credit or another safe form of conveyance. So the teller handling the transaction asked if he'd mind telling her why he wanted it.

"Actually, that's bank policy—to forestall confidence tricksters working the 'pigeon drop' or something similar. In any case, the question upset Mr. Murdick terribly, which only confirmed the teller's suspicion that something was wrong. She called me and under further questioning he broke down and the whole story came out."

Buchanan sighed. "I guess I'd better talk to him then," he said and followed Nordstrom back to his office, which was a square metal-and-glass cubicle with just enough room for a desk, a couple of chairs, and a bookcase filled with banking manuals. Murdick sat at the end of the desk. He was a thin-shouldered man in his fifties, with a pale school-

teacherish face and a fuzz of grey hair through which his scalp gleamed pinkly.

Buchanan sat down opposite him while Nordstrom hovered in the background. Buchanan didn't particularly like that, but he didn't see what he could do about it without making a scene. "My name's Buchanan," he said. "I'm a police officer."

"I know," Murdick said. He didn't look up. "I'm sorry. I know I should have called you right at the start. But—well, frankly, I don't care whether anybody's caught or not. My only concern is my wife's safety." His eyes came up to meet Buchanan's. "Please," he said, "it's my money. Let me do what they say."

"Sure," Buchanan said, "if that's what you want."

"You won't stop me?"

Buchanan shook his head. "As far as the department's concerned," he said, "it's up to you whether you pay the ransom or not. We're concerned too, and nobody's going to do anything that might interfere with your wife's safe return. But kidnappers are an unreliable lot, so it usually pays to have all the help you can get."

Murdick sighed and nodded. "I suppose that does make sense. But what else can I do?"

"For a start," Buchanan said, "you might tell me when you discovered your wife was missing."

"This morning," Murdick said. "Actually I last saw her about five-thirty yesterday evening when she left the house to go visit her aunt. The old lady lives on the other side of town and Marian—my wife—frequently doesn't get home until well after midnight and I don't wait up for her. But when I awoke this morning, her side of the bed hadn't been slept in. At first I thought she'd simply slept downstairs so as not to disturb me. But when she wasn't there either, I began to be alarmed."

"Did you get in touch with her aunt?"

"First thing," Murdick said. "But all she could tell me was that Marian had left at the usual time. Frankly, by then I was at my wit's end. All I could think was that she'd been in some kind of an accident and I was calling around to the hospitals when this came in the morning's mail." He took a folded sheet of paper from his inside breast pocket and passed it over to Buchanan.

There wasn't much chance of any usable fingerprints remaining after

Murdick had had his hands all over it, but Buchanan wasn't going to have any lab man accuse him of ruining evidence so he opened it gingerly by its edges and let it lie flat on the desk while he read it. It was about what he'd expected—a piece of standard tablet bond on which words and letters clipped from a newspaper had been pasted to form the message.

WE HAVE YOUR WIFE. IF YOU WANT HER BACK PUT THIRTY THOUSAND DOLLARS IN ONE OF THE LOCKERS AT THE PENN STATION BY FOUR THURSDAY. LEAVE THE KEY IN A PHONE BOOTH AND GO HOME. DO AS YOU ARE TOLD AND YOUR WIFE WILL BE RETURNED. DON'T AND YOU WILL NEVER SEE HER ALIVE.

"Today's Thursday," Murdick said when Buchanan had finished reading, "and the mail was late. I didn't have any time. I just dropped everything and rushed down here to get the money. You know the rest."

"Yeah," Buchanan said. He folded the note as gingerly as he had opened it. "Do you have a picture of your wife? Something we could use for identification?"

"Yes," Murdick said. He took out his wallet and extracted a three-by-five photo. "Will this do? It was taken at the time of our wedding a little over a year ago."

The picture was a print of what was apparently Marian Murdick's wedding portrait. Unlike most brides, she hadn't smiled—just stared soberly out at the camera. It was a pose that suited her, though, because she was a strikingly handsome woman. She was also a good twenty or twenty-five years younger than her husband. Buchanan set the photo down beside the folded note. Then, using Nordstrom's phone, he called in to headquarters.

"If it's a blind drop," Lieutenant Stacton said, "they'll have somebody watching and we'll have to move in easy. I take it the money's available."

"Nordstrom says it is," Buchanan said.

"Make sure you get a record of at least some of the serial numbers. Then stick with Murdick until he makes the drop. This is almost too good to be true and I don't want anything happening on the way to change it."

"Sure," Buchanan said. He hung up and went over it all again with Murdick to be sure he understood. . .

The clock on the far wall had just moved its hands past 3:30 when he followed Murdick into the railway station. It wasn't particularly crowded this early and he had no difficulty picking out a couple of detectives he knew among the scattering of people. He made sure they'd seen him too, then casually asked Murdick for a light. It wasn't particularly original, but it was effective. After that, there really wasn't anything for him to do. He wasn't part of the stakeout; now that he was identified, somebody else would pick up Murdick after he made the drop. But having come this far, he was damned if he was just going to drop off without seeing how it went down. So, puffing on his cigar, he drifted over to the lunch counter where he could watch and still be out of the way. He ordered coffee and settled back to drink it slowly.

Even so, he was working on his second refill before anything happened. Then a short stout woman in a dress maybe three shades brighter purple than her hair scurried past him over to the phone booth where Murdick had dropped the key. Buchanan forgot about his coffee. He could see her going through the motions of dialing and talking. When she came back out again, Murdick's locker key dangled conspicuously from one hand. Buchanan swiveled around as she marched back past him—and almost fell over when he realized that she was headed straight toward Lost and Found.

"All right," Stacton said. "Maybe it was a test. Maybe it was a fluke. Either way we play it strictly by the book." Buchanan was back in his office, his jacket off and his tie loosened. He felt angry and harassed. "Where's Murdick now?" Stacton asked.

"Home," Buchanan said. "Castellano's with him."

"Good. By all odds the kidnappers should contact him with new instructions. In the meantime, I want you to check out the aunt."

"Murdick already talked to her," Buchanan said. "She couldn't tell him anything."

"So?"

Buchanan sighed and reached for his hat. "So I'll talk to her too," he said.

The old woman sat forlornly in her chair beside the smooth aluminum walker. "All I can do," she said, "is tell you what I told Norman when he called this morning. Marian got here about seven last

night and left about nine and I haven't seen or heard from her since."

"Did you notice anything different when she left? Anything strange or out of the ordinary?"

The old woman shook her head. "No," she said. "But I wouldn't be likely to then anyway. You can't see the street from here and—" she glanced at the walker "—I don't get around well enough any more to take her to the door."

"I'm sorry," Buchanan said and rose. It had gone just about as he had expected.

"There was one thing," the old woman said. "Some woman called about half an hour after she left and asked for her. *That* never happened before, but I don't know that it means anything."

"Did you get her name?"

"No. All I could tell her was that Marian should be home soon. Only she wasn't." The old woman's self-control started to crack.

"Don't worry," Buchanan said. "We'll find her." Privately, though, he wasn't so sure any more.

"It doesn't add up," Buchanan said. "Murdick said the aunt told him his wife left at her usual time, but she told me Marian left at nine."

"So," Stacton said, "nine was her usual time."

"Except," Buchanan said, "she usually didn't get home until after midnight, and it's not that long a drive—not if she got there at seven after leaving her house at five-thirty. Then there's the ransom. Thirty thousand's an odd amount, and it's just a little too pat that it's exactly the amount in Murdick's account."

Stacton looked thoughtful. "What are you thinking?" he said.

"That it's possible Marian had a boyfriend she'd visit after she left the aunt's and instead of kidnapping what we've got is a ripoff."

"Clean out the old man's account and head for sunnier climes?"

"It wouldn't be the first time," Buchanan said.

"Nor the last," Stacton said. "Was it a joint account?"

"I'd have to check on that."

"Better. Because if it is, your theory won't hold up."

"And if it isn't?"

"Find the boyfriend."

If he had had any sense Buchanan would have quit then and gone

home, but when he stopped by his desk for a minute the minute stretched out to five, then ten—which was what made him a good cop and maybe not such a good husband. It was also why he happened to be there when the call came in from Taylor at the lab.

"Not you too?" Buchanan complained.

"Don't blame me," Taylor said. "Your friend the lieutenant said he wanted a report on the note as soon as possible and you're the only one left."

"All right," Buchanan said, "what have you got?"

"Not much. No fingerprints you can use, and you can buy the paper anywhere. About the only thing we can say for sure is that the letters came from the bulldog edition of this morning's *Sun*."

Buchanan frowned. The bulldog always bore the day's date but came out about ten-thirty the night before. "How do you know that?" he said.

"Type face. It's different on the *News-American*. Also, some of the words were cut from headlines that were pushed out of later editions."

"Thanks," Buchanan said. He hung up and this time when he reached for his hat he put it on.

Davis, who had replaced Castellano as Murdick's babysitter, opened the door and looked out at Buchanan. "What are you doing here?" he said.

"I'm dedicated," Buchanan said. "Where's Murdick?"

"In his den."

"Sedated?"

Davis shook his head. "No, he's taken it pretty calmly all in all."

"Good," Buchanan said. "Let's go talk to him then."

Murdick's face was composed, if a little paler and more drawn than when Buchanan had seen him earlier. He rose as the two detectives entered the room. "You've found her?" he said, stumbling slightly over the words.

Buchanan shook his head. "Not yet. But we have leads and we're following them up. I stopped by to see if I couldn't have a look at the envelope the ransom note came in."

Murdick looked at him blankly. "I gave you that at the bank, didn't I?"

Buchanan shook his head again. "No, you just had the note loose in

your pocket. The state you were in you wouldn't have taken time to throw it away, so it's probably here somewhere. Maybe in your wastebasket."

"Yes," Murdick said. He started to turn, then shook his head vigorously. "No," he said. "No, not in the wastebasket."

"Let's look anyway," Buchanan said, and there was no room for compromise in his voice or on his face.

They didn't find any envelope, of course, but they did find strips of newsprint from which letters and words had been cut. "You really should have taken the time to burn them," he said.

Murdick just stood, looking sick.

"You killed her, didn't you?" Buchanan said.

Murdick nodded. "It wouldn't have happened if that woman hadn't called. Something about rides for a tennis-club outing and she had to have Marian's decision that night. I gave her Marian's aunt's number. Then she called back to tell me Marian had already left and would I have her call when she came in."

"Only she didn't come in until after midnight again," Buchanan said.

Murdick finally sat. "I faced her as she came up to bed. I asked her where she'd been so long after leaving her aunt. And she just laughed. She laughed and I hit her and she fell. Down the steps." He put his face in his hands. "Oh, God! I couldn't think. I couldn't face the scandal."

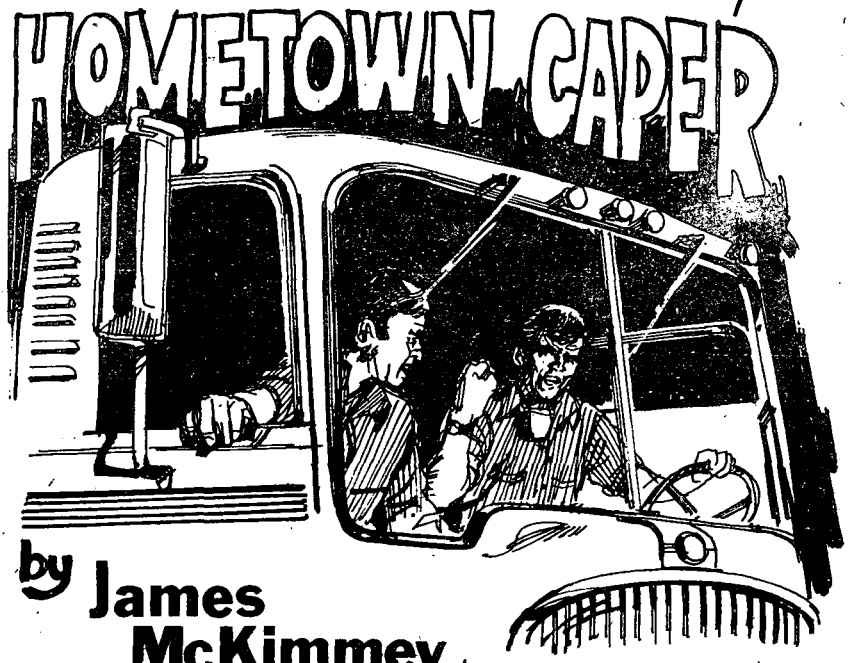
"You almost made it too," Buchanan said. "I had it half figured for a con job, and even if we'd found the body we'd probably have figured the kidnappers had panicked. The only problem was you received the ransom note too fast. I called the post office and they said for you to have gotten it when you said you did it would have had to have been picked up out of a box before noon the day before. But the paper it came from didn't come out until after ten that night. So if you didn't get it in the mail they way you said, I had to wonder how you did get it."

"Dear God!" Murdick said. His shoulders began to shake uncontrollably. "A little thing like that."

"It's the little things that trip you up every time," Buchanan said. Then, remembering a little thing that might trip him up if he wasn't careful, he pulled out his card and began to read Murdick his rights.

Joe and Thad were not the first twin brothers to be at odds . . .

HOMETOWN CAPER



by James McKimmey

Thad and Joe Gambel had left Southern California after appropriating something short of $9,000, using their usual routine, then driven east to Las Vegas in an old but well-tuned pick-up with a stolen camper mounted over the flatbed. There Joe had insisted he could double the take at a craptable, and in two days lost all but a hundred of it.

Now, on this autumn day, with Joe at the wheel, they drove north toward a new destination: their hometown of Coontzville, Nevada.

Thad Gambel, disgruntled, sat on the passenger side and examined his brother. Joe was a large man in his mid-thirties; his muscles under the bleached blue of his denim jacket and jeans were firm. His hands gripping the steering wheel appeared as toughened as his Western-style roughout boots. His face had the same look, beneath a thatch of shaggy black hair. His cheekbones were broadly spaced apart and his pale-grey eyes, unlike the rest of his outward hardness, gave the deceptive impression of a child's. His nose, on the other hand, singled him out as a man who had been in more fights than memory could compute. And Thad had contributed to its condition.

"No, sir," Thad said. He was dressed exactly like his brother. He was the same size, had the same leather skin, the same childlike eyes, the same often-fractured nose—to which Joe had made *his* contribution. They were identical twins in appearance, but that was where the sameness ended.

"What the hell do you mean, 'No, sir?' " Joe asked in a voice that sounded as though it was projected through a large metal drum.

"Damned thing's dumb."

"Hell it is!"

"Going back home, trying for some of Henry Coontz's bread. They *know* us there!"

"So *what*?"

"But that's what's been working for us! Hitting this place and that with nobody knowing we're twins!"

"I'm homesick," Joe said, grinning sardonically.

Thad uttered an expletive and hunched further down in his seat. He was right. And Joe was wrong. Why rock the ship, heading for Coontzville this way where every damn mother's child born before they'd left four years ago knew they were identical twins? They'd worked out a foolproof system of taking it off the public at large. Why not keep it that way?

They had the truck. Both knew how to keep it in first-class condition. They were carrying special jacks that could lift any other camper. All they had to do was follow the established routine, which amounted simply to one of them setting himself up in a bar or cafe in whatever town they happened to have ridden into—some sort of establishment where there would be people to remember one had been there, and when—then the other brother, using a disguise, held up a grocery, a

service station, a store, a shop, or a bank.

That last job, for instance.

They'd come in, the truck painted red, carrying an 11-foot self-contained camper, the same sort they had right now. Thad had gotten into that camper twenty miles out of town with Joe behind the steering wheel, and stayed there until they'd reached their destination. There, Joe had cased the single bank and figured its slowest business was about thirty minutes after the noon hour.

At noon the next day, Joe had walked into a saloon two blocks from the bank. There were a half-dozen drinkers and he started nursing beers. A half hour later, Thad, wearing a wide-brimmed Western hat, took the alleys and made his way to the bank. Behind it, he tied a large black handkerchief over his face leaving only his eyes exposed, then went around front and into the bank with a gun in his hand. He ordered two customers to the floor, then demanded all he could get from the single teller.

Unfortunately, his handkerchief fell off in the middle of the robbery. But he ran for it, with the money in a paper sack, and made it alone to the grove of trees just outside town where he and Joe had agreed to meet.

While he waited, the bank people gave the local sheriff a description of Thad. It didn't take them more than twenty minutes to tie Joe—sitting in that bar—to the description. It took less time for the patrons there to agree that Joe had come in maybe an hour before the robbery had been committed and that he couldn't have been the man who did it.

A bewildered sheriff had to let Joe go on his way. And Joe got into the camper truck, drove out to the grove, and he and Thad were on their way again.

They dumped the camper on a bleak stretch of road and, that same night, two hundred miles away, found another sitting on a drive in another town. (Men who used their trucks for business often left their campers dismounted until they needed them for fishing or hunting trips.) Another three hundred miles beyond, in an auto paint shop, they'd had the truck's color changed from red to green, then switched license plates from a huge stolen collection, and moved on.

It was a perfect system and they'd been born for it, Thad thought. But now Joe wanted to fool around with perfection by heading home

and trying to milk some money out of Henry Coontz—he was crazy.

"You're so damned stupid," Thad said now to his brother, "you'd win prizes if they gave 'em out for it."

"I'll explain it to you one more time," Joe said. "Then I don't want to hear any more out of you."

Thad lit a cigarette and sat silently, looking grim.

"Some miles out of Coontzville," Joe said, "we stop and I get back in the camper, shades pulled. That's where I stay till we're ready to do some business. Meantime, you drive in and get out and say you and me wanted to see the old hometown again—only me, I got the droops, the Asian flu, something, I don't care, and I'm stuck to being inside the camper. You got that?"

"I'm listening," Thad said.

"Then you sally around and say hello. This here person, that. When it's dark, you go into the Silver Bar and Cafe."

"It might be gone," Thad said. "Blown to Reno in a good wind. Who knows?"

"It'll be there," Joe said positively. "And so'll Binny."

"You know everything, don't you?" Thad said sarcastically.

"Binny's been a part of the Silver Bar and Cafe ever since she found out what you and me and any other man in this world wants. So you'll start spending money on her. It's what she understands, ain't it?"

"I can't argue with that."

"O.K. You set there with Binny. And there'll be other people to see you're in there, right?"

Thad was silent.

"Now we come to the business end of it."

"We ought to go to Idaho. Utah. Anywhere but Coontzville."

"We're going to Coontzville. Because when you get set up in the Silver Bar and Cafe, I'm getting out of the camper and heading for old Henry Coontz's place, right next to that there Silver Bar and Cafe. I'm busting in and taking as much as I can off that old man."

"Henry Coontz might be dead by now. How old would he be anyway? Eighty-five? Six? You live in a dream, don't you?"

"Man's too mean and selfish to die. Just like his pa who started up the town. 'Cept he ain't got any of his old man's pepper and guts. Yellow old weakling is what he is. Only he don't believe in any kind of institution he don't own, any more than his daddy did. There's no bank

in town so he ain't going over and use somebody else's. That means what cash he's got he's stuck away in that big old house of his—we always knew that. And I'm taking a good part of it off him."

"What if he won't let you?"

"Me? Joe Gambel? With a gun on me? Used to be he'd see me coming in his direction, he'd cross the street."

Thad shook his head, looking pained. He gazed out the right window at the mountains in the distance, a misty blue because of an atmospheric mirage. The area between the mountains and the truck was dry valley land, supporting mostly sage and manzanita and dwarfs of wind-warped trees. Thad could see a herd of cattle beyond, eating hay that had been dropped from the air by helicopters, the only way they could be properly fed in this arid expanse. "You going there unmasked, just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Damn you, Joe," Thad said angrily, "I keep telling you—everybody in town except young kids knows we're twins. And that includes Oscar Beam, if he's still sheriff. So—you rob old Coontz, and he'll call the sheriff. The sheriff'll find out I've been in the Silver Bar and Cafe, that I've got an alibi, then he'll head straight for the camper looking for you."

"Don't you remember *noth*ing?" Joe said with disgust. "After I leave old Coontz's house, I'll stick the money behind the bricks in the back wall of the Silver Bar and Cafe, that place we found when we were kids, then disappear on foot. You and the sheriff'll find the camper empty. So you'll tell him it sure enough had to be me took the money. He'll let you loose. Then you'll head off in the camper truck and pick me up in that willow grove a mile out of town. I'll take over the driving then. This here truck's a four-wheel-drive, dummy! And I know at least three trails in that territory, without ever coming close to a highway. We'll be *gone*, man. And that much richer!"

"How do you know that hole behind them bricks is still there?"

"It'll be there," Joe said.

"You ought to at least put a handkerchief on your face."

"I know what I'm doing."

"Stubborn's what you are."

"I'll tell you this. When we was born we may have been handed out the same face and body, but brains was left out of *your* head, brother."

"Yeah? Then how come I just happen to figure maybe you won't put old Henry Coontz's money in that hole in the back of the Silver Bar and Cafe? And instead you'll just keep traveling with it and take off in this here truck and leave me behind? You want to answer me that?"

"We got a *meal* ticket, you and me looking the same as the other. So if I leave you behind for just one single haul off Henry Coontz, I lose the meal ticket, right? Or is that too heavy for those brains you don't have, dummy?"

"Don't call me dummy, dummy!" Thad said, and he drove a fist into his brother's right biceps.

The truck wobbled as Joe responded by cracking the back of his hand across Thad's cheek, then went temporarily out of control as they began beating on each other. Then Joe braked, killed the engine, and sent the vehicle off the road onto the grade leading from the sage to macadam. The brothers went flying out of the cab, wrestling and punching, rolling over and over.

They were almost through the small Nevada town when Thad saw the girl, perhaps nineteen or twenty, dressed in faded, tightly fitting jeans and a red plaid shirt, a small pack on her back. When she saw the truck approaching, she put her thumb in the air. She was a lovely-faced girl with a healthy body. Her long black hair glistened in the sunlight. She smiled and Joe nearly turned the truck over pulling to a grinding stop.

"Dang me!" Joe said.

"Lord Almighty!" Thad managed.

"Tell her to get herself in here!" Joe said.

Thad rolled the window down and called, "Want to hop in?"

"Does a fish want to swim?" Her voice was low and husky, and Thad, feeling his heart beating, opened the door. He jumped down and motioned her to climb in between them.

She got in, followed by Thad, and Joe started the truck moving again. "This is real sweet of you," the girl said. "The man driving me before lived back there. Had to let me out. But it wasn't thirty seconds before you guys came along. It must be my lucky day."

"Where you going, honey?" Joe asked.

"Sweetpool. That's my home. You know Sweetpool?"

"We know all this here country," Joe said. "Brought up in it. Born

in—"

"Joe," Thad said, his brain beginning to work sensibly again, "it don't make any difference to this here pretty one where we was born. All that makes any difference is that she gets to Sweetpool.

"Listen," he added, "we can take a turn about twenty miles on and use that old cottonwood road to take this nice little girl right home, true?"

"Shorter if we keep going the way we are, then—"

"Now listen," Thad said quietly but with authority, "we want to do right by our passenger here. And I think we ought to do what I say and *then* go on our way." He stared at his brother until, finally, he saw by Joe's expression that he was beginning to understand. They had to get the girl to where she wanted to go and drop her off before they could carry out the plan, no matter how idiotic it was.

"All right then," Joe said. "We turn off on that old cottonwood road and take this lady straight home."

"Now you boys don't go out of your way," the girl said. Then she said, "You two, you're sure enough twins, huh?"

"True enough," Joe said. "What's your name, honey?"

"Mary Ann."

"You're a pretty thing, Mary Ann."

"Now ain't that nice to hear!"

"Like to travel this way?"

"Sure do—meet some awfully nice fellows. What're *your* names?"

"I'm Joe. And that there's Thad."

Joe *would* use real names, Thad thought angrily.

They proceeded down the highway, made the proposed turn, and ran through dry valley land until they saw another town ahead. It would be a place called Higgins, Thad remembered, population maybe three hundred. Nothing but houses, a tiny business district, and a service station.

"Lucky we got here when we did," Joe said, grinning. "Dang near out of gas."

"That's fine with me," the girl said. "Because I got to get out for a minute."

Thad opened the door when they reached the station, climbing down so the girl could leave when the attendant came out of the office. She

moved toward the rest room and Thad rounded the truck to Joe's window.

"Miles longer this way," Joe protested. "We could of gone onto Coontzville and through, delivered the girl to Sweetpool, then come on back."

"You ain't got a feather's worth of sense, have you?" Thad said accusingly. "She lives in Sweetpool—that's how far from Coontzville? She already seen there ain't anything healthwise wrong with you. She could ruin the whole thing, if what we're planning to do ever gets to her later on. You don't tell her one solitary item more about us, you understand? You already blundered out our names. So don't even *mention* Coontzville! See if you can use what little sense you got and keep away from stuff like that!"

Thad returned around the front of the truck as the girl came up beside the camper, smiling alluringly. "Ready if you are," she said.

"We're ready, honey," Joe said happily, paying the attendant.

They'd traveled nearly five more miles when they could see the curve of a river glistening in the sun. It ran down from the mountains through a heavy growth of trees. And the girl said, "Oh, now that's old Wild Trout River, ain't it? Let's take a run down there, huh? I'd *love* to see that old stream up close again!"

"Sure enough," Joe said, turning the vehicle to the right onto a dust-covered trail that ran steeply down to the grove and water below. He parked in the trees and the girl sat looking at the river bubbling over rocks. "*Ain't* that pretty?" she said.

"You bet," Joe agreed.

"You in a real big hurry, boys?" the girl asked.

"We got all the time there is," Joe replied, looking at the girl with speculation.

"Nice camper you got in back there," she said.

"Real nice," Thad said. "Got just about every damned thing you need. Pumps fresh water. Kitchen. Eating space. Bathroom, with a *shower*—would you believe that? Bunks too."

"I'll be darned," the girl said, looking pleased. "Mind if I go back there?"

"Do we *mind*?" Joe roared loudly. "Hell, damn, no!"

"Well, then," she said, "Could you give me about ten minutes—I

didn't take time to freshen up at the station—and maybe you got something we could drink—know what I mean?"

Thad felt his throat tightening. "Got a whole 'frigerator full of beer."

"Wow!" the girl said with enthusiasm.

Thad fumbled the door of the cab open and let the girl out around him. "Door ain't locked back there," he said.

The girl winked and disappeared to the rear.

Thad looked at his brother, who was grinning foolishly. Thad's own mouth was turning up at the corners. "Ten minutes," he repeated, a little breathlessly.

Joe began chuckling, a snuffling kind of sound. Thad punched his brother's arm lightly. Joe punched back in the same fashion. Then they both laughed, trying to keep the volume down, but laughing just the same, gasping, tears beginning to run down their weathered faces.

And then finally Joe said, "Ten minutes are up."

They went back to the camper, opened the door, and stepped into the interior. Thad could see in one sweeping examination that the girl was not in the main section. He addressed the bathroom door. "Mary Ann?" There was no answer. He rapped on the door. Still there was no response. He paused, then turned the knob. She was not there.

"Gone!" Joe shouted. "What the hell *for*?"

"You figure it out, huh? Puts her thumb in the air to hitch a ride with us? Gets in? Directs us down here? Makes it seem like you know what? And now she's gone!" They hurried outside.

"Well, she can't be too far away!" Joe said. "So we'll just find out what she's up to, right? You go that way, I'll go this. One of us's got to catch up with her."

"Joe, what's the use? She could—"

Then they saw a sheriff's car rolling down toward them from the highway, leaving a spray of dust behind it.

"What the hell!" Joe said.

The car skidded to a stop behind the camper. A deputy, wearing the traditional uniform of a Nevada sheriff's officer, got out. He was holding a gun in his right hand. He said in a penetrating voice, "Turn toward the camper and put your hands up against it so you're leaning on it, then spread your legs."

"We haven't—" Joe began.

"Do it!" the officer said briskly, motioning with his gun.

Thad and Joe followed instructions. Thad felt the officer going over him and he said, "What's this all for, anyhow?"

The officer frisked Joe and said, "You carrying any weapons in this rig?"

"None whatsoever," Joe said, straining the capacity of his vocabulary.

They *were* carrying, in compartments inside the camper, Thad knew well enough, a small arsenal: everything from rifles and shotguns to handguns.

"Know soon enough," the officer said as the radio of his car sounded loudly behind the camper with the voice of the nearest dispatcher. "Called for assistance," the deputy said, "soon's I saw those wide tire tracks your truck made coming in here through the dust."

"But *why*?" Joe asked in frustration.

"Three thousand, two hundred and fifty-one dollars," the officer said.

"We ain't got over fifty bucks on each of us!" Joe said.

"Where's the girl?" the officer demanded. "In the camper?"

"We just picked her up at the last town!" Joe said indignantly. "We don't know her! Besides, she took off, we don't know where."

"Keep your hands up," the officer said, "and get in the camper—both of you."

They did as they were ordered, Joe protesting, "Ain't no *use*. She ain't *in* here!"

The officer followed, looked the interior over quickly, then swung open the door of the empty bathroom. "Dropped her off somewhere, huh?"

"We didn't drop her off!" Joe said. "She *took* off!"

"With the money?"

"*What* money?"

"The service station where you gassed up—the owner had his week's take in a canvas bag inside the office. His wife was due to pick it up and put it in the bank. Only while he was checking your oil and all that, the little girl you had along headed off like she was going for the rest room. Only she must have seen the bag and quick got it into this rig—here in the camper, I'd guess."

Then Thad understood everything, and from the way Joe was swearing he knew Joe did too. The girl *had* picked up that bag and got it into the camper. Natural thief that she was, she left it there, got up

front with them, directed them here to the river, gave them all those ideas about why she was going back to the camper, then grabbed the bag and took off.

"Damn!" Joe said furiously.

At the same time his left hand chopped sideways on the deputy's gun hand, sending the weapon flying to the floor. Then Joe's giant right hand swung so that his scarred knuckles caught the tip of the officer's jaw. The law man's eyes glazed as he slumped to the floor. Joe grabbed his gun, shoved it in a pocket, and said, "Let's go!"

They lifted the deputy's limp body and got it out of the camper onto the ground. Joe said, "Fix his car and radio while I turn the truck around!"

They were going in the direction of Sweetpool, following along the river with its thick borders of greenery. They crossed a bridge where the river ran under it, so that now the water was on their left; then, half a mile beyond, with the river twisting away from the road, Thad saw, to the left, in the direction of the stream, a collection of shale.

When they reached it, Joe braked so hard that Thad was nearly thrown into the windshield, then he turned directly off the road and ran the jouncing truck down across it.

"What the hell you doing?" Thad asked.

"That deputy had help coming, didn't he? So we can't run away from them on the road in this rig, right? Well, they won't find no tire marks on this here shale. So—they'll fly right on by, huh?"

He was picking up speed, hitting rocks, the edges of boulders, tipping this way and that on the slanting surface of the shale.

"You're going to get us killed!" Thad objected.

"Ain't nobody going to stick me in jail for something I didn't do!"

They went over a rocky rise and Joe sent the truck bouncing down toward the river. Thad could feel his side of the camper swiping against tough branches. They went at the water and Joe drove directly into the fast rapids and began crossing the stream. "Low this time of year—we can make it!" he said.

"You hit a deep pool," Thad said, "we're finished!"

"Shut your mouth and hang on!"

Thad rode out the jarring crossing. Then Joe was going up the opposite bank, threading his way until he found an isolated clearing where

he stopped. He sat motionless for a time, some color gone from his face. When the color returned, he looked at Thad. "Did a nice job there, didn't I?"

"Reckon," Thad said grudgingly.

"Let's check the damage."

The right rear tire was flat. The left side of the camper looked as though huge fingernails had been drawn across it.

"We're in good shape," Joe said brightly.

"Oh, sure!" Thad responded sarcastically.

"They ain't going to have an idea where we went."

"Yeah, but we can't stay here forever!" Thad said.

"Don't aim to. Just the night. Then we slide off the camper and put on the spare for the busted tire. New plates. Leave the camper here and head on back to the road. Them law people'll never give us a second look then. They'll be checking for a camper on a truck and the wrong license number. They don't see them things, we drive right on."

"I like those rose-colored glasses of yours."

"We go on to Reno then. Buy new paint for the truck, get an extra tire, find us a new camper."

"You forgetting about going to Coontzville?" Thad asked hopefully.

"You crazy? Plans stay just like they was."

"I'm not the one who's crazy. *You* are!"

"I got us out of that last mess, didn't I?" Joe grinned widely. "Come on. I'm thirsty for a beer!"

Early morning sunlight came down through the trees as Thad and Joe cranked their jacks until the camper was lifted above the truck's bed. They unplugged the electrical connection to the truck's battery, then Joe ran the truck back and away from the jacked-up camper. After working the jacks down again to leave the camper resting on the ground, they replaced the flat tire with the spare and changed the license plates.

"Simple as that," Joe said.

Thad stood beside his brother near the truck, feeling grim and defeated.

"Now," Joe said, "all we do is head back to the river, cross it, and drive on!"

"Just like that," Thad said.

"Hell, yes. We're back in business!"

"What if we bust a tire going back over that river—no spare this time."

"I pick my way careful, that's all."

Thad stood silent for a time, then he said, "You got the brains of a tadpole."

Joe's expression changed as he glared at his brother. "You watch your lip."

"We'd be in good shape right now if it wasn't for you. Your whole idea of coming up from Vegas to take some money off old Henry Coontz. Thousand other things we could of done, only you get a thing like that in your pickled brain. Hadn't been for that, we wouldn't have seen that damned girl and picked her up. And none of this would of happened."

"I ain't going to give you much more room, Thad."

"You're so damned dumb it proves you ain't even sane. They ought to have you tied up in a loony jacket."

Joe sent Thad tumbling backward a dozen yards, where he sat down heavily. He stared at his brother through slitted eyes, then he got up and ran back at him full speed to tackle him at the hips. They went to the rocky ground together and began rolling, wrestling.

Joe got his teeth into the lobe of Thad's left ear. And Thad, putting a boot into his brother's soft underbelly, shoved him loose. Joe jumped to his feet and tried to kick Thad in the face. Thad rolled out of range. Joe followed, then tripped, falling over a rock six inches in diameter.

"Damn you!" Thad raged, getting a hand around the rock. "Damn you for *everything*!"

Joe looked glazed, tried to roll away. But Thad crawled after him with the rock in his hand. "You always thought you was so much better than me!" He got to his knees and drove the rock into Joe's head. He stood up, his legs spraddled, and dropped the rock. "Damn you!" he said, waiting for Joe to get to his feet and start fighting again.

But Joe just lay there, his eyes still glazed. Thad was suddenly frightened. "Joe?" He bent down beside his brother and shook him roughly. "Come on now, Joe!"

But Joe did not respond.

Thad wagged his head. "Joe!" he implored. Then, slowly, he stood up. "I didn't mean to do *that*!" he cried. "You can't be dead! What are

we going to do if we ain't together no more? We can't operate alone, Joe."

Joe lay still and bleeding.

"God*dang* it!" Thad said, tears beginning to track down his rough cheeks. "We got into fracases before. Never turned out *this* way! Joe, get up and we'll get moving, all right?"

But Joe did not get up. And so Thad turned away and walked slowly in the direction of the dismounted camper. He went inside and got a still-cold can of beer from the refrigerator.

He stepped outside again and sat down on the camper's bumper. A shaft of sunlight shone on his bruised face. He drank the beer swiftly, trying to get his mind working so that he could figure out what to do.

He shook his head and threw the empty beer can away from him. He got up, got another beer, the last, returned outside, and drank that.

It wasn't that he missed losing Joe as a brother. It wasn't that he regretted killing Joe. It was what it would do to their operation.

He wagged his head, figuring out what to do. There were fingerprints all over the camper, but he could go over it and wipe them off. He'd even clean off the two beer cans he'd emptied, along with those he and Joe had finished the night before. Everything else too, including the rock that had destroyed Joe.

They were isolated here. No one was likely to come to this spot for a long time, just whatever animals lived in the area. Coyotes. Mountain cats. All like that. They'd be the only ones interested in Joe.

"All right then, Joe," he said to the quiet of the wilderness. "You thought I couldn't handle things my own self, *didn't* you?"

The next morning's sun rose and warmed the rugged land as Thad, cleaned up, worked over the camper with an old towel, wiping away prints. He transferred the few toiletries he and Joe had used to the glove compartment of the truck, then their change of clothes to the flatbed along with the camper jacks and burlap-wrapped license plates.

The original owner of the stolen camper had had in a compartment an Army surplus shovel with which Thad dug a hole a good distance from the camper. In it he put Joe's wallet and ID cards—everything but what was left of Joe's share of the hundred dollars they'd split in

Vegas and Joe's key to the truck. With reluctance, he added their wiped-clean firearms, including the deputy's gun, saving one small handgun for himself. Then he filled in the hole with dirt.

Miles beyond, detouring well around Coontzville, he rolled onto Interstate 80. A Sweetpool turn would be ahead now, he knew. He would like to make that turn, just to check on the girl who'd gotten him into this position—she'd had eyes for *him*, not Joe, he was certain of that—but he kept on the highway. His next stop had to be Reno, where he would get the truck painted another color and find another camper. After that, he would travel back in this direction, to Coontzville.

He'd figured out how to handle that now. He wasn't fighting the idea any more, as he had with Joe. He was ready, and he knew he was going to get away with it, with old Henry Coontz, alone.

He arrived in Reno early in the afternoon and drove slowly through the narrow downtown section until he found an inexpensive motel. In the motel office, he used a fictitious name, saying jovially, "Just come in to pick me up a camper. Private party selling. If she looks as good as the owner says, I got me a good buy." He grinned at the manager, a small pinched-faced man with the bored and disinterested manner of someone who'd seen too many transients. He got no response, but he'd set it up for his pick-up carrying a camper by morning.

As soon as he moved his belongings to his room, he fell across the bed and slept soundly. It was dark outside by the time he awoke. He left the motel and found a small counter restaurant down the road. Knowing he really couldn't afford it, he ordered the most expensive steak and devoured it. Returning to the truck, he drove around, looking for a camper, estimating sizes and conditions until at last he saw one that looked just right set on wooden blocks in the drive of a tract house where there were no lights inside. The only illumination on the slanting street was a lamp far down the block and the fragment moon in the sky.

He found his heart speeding although he'd done this a million times with Joe—each of them using a jack on either side of the camper, elevating it high enough to back the truck under it, lowering it onto the flatbed, and driving away. But now he was alone. He would have to work both jacks himself, running from side to side to keep the eleva-

tion of the camper even. Then, without help, he would have to work the truck into the exact center of the front of the camper . . .

He took a deep breath and drove past the house, up the street, and killed the headlights and the engine. Then, letting the truck coast backward, he silently swung the flatbed end into the drive up near the camper, trying to center it exactly.

He got out, quivering inside, and took the jacks from the flatbed, glancing at the front door of the house, expecting it to open and someone to start yelling at him. But nothing happened. He swiftly positioned the jacks and began working the camper up from the blocks. He determined when it was high enough to get the truck bed under it and then moved the blocks aside. He opened the driver's side of the truck, released the emergency brake, and hustled forward to push the truck back toward the camper. Feeling the bump, he came back, relocked the emergency brake, and found he had pushed the flatbed successfully under the camper. He cranked the jacks as silently as he could until the camper came to rest on the flatbed. Then, returning the jacks to the floor of the cab, he engaged the electrical connection with the truck, started the truck's engine, and roared away.

He crisscrossed his way through the city, then in an abandoned area near its western limits, he got out and fixed the holding chains that would help secure the camper to the truck. The next day he would find a place to have both truck and camper painted a new color. Joe had never bothered to have a camper painted. They carried no identification, he'd insisted—no license, no serial number that couldn't be pried off, *if* there was one on a tag somewhere—so why waste the money? But where was Joe with all his smarts now? Thad thought. Out with them coyotes and cats, huh? Out there, deader'n last year!

He drank a couple of beers at the bar of a small casino, then decided to invest a few dollars at the craptable. He didn't know the game nearly as well as Joe had, but within an hour he was more than five-hundred dollars richer than he'd been when he'd come in.

As soon as he started winning, a cocktail waitress asked if he wanted a free drink. He switched to straight shots, and his tips kept her coming back.

As the night deepened, his wallet thickened. Finally, when he knew he was drunk, he quit and left the place, four thousand dollars' richer.

In the motel, he spread the money across the bureau. Luck was truly with him now. And so why, he decided, did he need to go to Coontzville? There was a craptable down the street that was a hell of a lot easier to get money from than Henry Coontz. And it involved no illegal risk either.

He grinned. He laughed. Then he yelled, at full volume, "*Yahoo*!"

He spent three more days and nights working the craptable. Meantime, he had both truck and camper painted a light blue. He bought a new spare tire and had a key made for the camper door.

He continued to win with the dice. And he decided that when he'd gone over fifteen thousand, he would quit and go back down to Northern Mexico. There should be nice weather there right now. He could lie on a beach and drink, find girls and not worry about a thing.

But then the table started going wrong, and he began losing with a sickening steadiness. He drank more and increased his wagers, but he simply lost more, and faster, so that in a single night he dropped everything but a fifty-dollar bill.

He staggered out of the casino and somehow made it to his motel, where he fell into bed. When he got up at sunrise, he knew that he would have to revive the plans he'd made for Coontzville.

Nothing, he saw, had changed. The town was one of the oldest in the state. A cemetery over a hundred years old was on the edge of it. His parents were buried there. But Thad did not stop to view their headstones. The folks had always favored Joe, and made no secret of it. He felt no more loss for them than he did for Joe.

The old fort, further into town, was crumbling now. And in the center of town there were maybe two dozen houses still occupied by people stubborn enough to remain in the rundown town. One of them, he remembered, was a rooming house run by a woman named Molly Anderson. There was the courthouse and the jail. There was the one general store that survived mostly on profits from its slot machines. The Silver Bar and Cafe still functioned, Thad saw as he drove past. And next to it, no further than a dozen feet, was the three-storied white-frame house built as the first home in the community. It would still be occupied by old Henry Coontz, Thad was sure, *if* he was still alive.

Thad parked the truck on the town's far limits, got out, and went around to the camper. It was a good rig, well taken care of, as self-contained as the one he'd deserted with his brother in the wilderness. He'd pumped this one full of water in Reno so that all the spigots were working. He'd filled the propane tanks and started the refrigerator, which ran on gas. He'd stocked up with cold beer and put in a supply of food.

He opened a beer now, built a thick sandwich, and sat down. He'd pulled all the shades but he could see past the side of one of them. The old home town, he thought wryly. He and Joe had grown up here. And now Joe was dead, killed by his hand, and he, Thad, was back alone. And he didn't feel a thing. All he wanted now was to take that money off Henry Coontz, if he still existed, and get out of here.

He finished the sandwich and beer and stepped out of the camper, locking the door behind him.

He started down the main street, bucking the familiar strong wind of the valley, and saw, coming out of the general store, a thin but muscular figure wearing a Western hat, leather vest, and cowboy boots. Silver hair showed beneath the hat. Silver mustache beneath his strong eyes and nose. Even without noting the badge pinned to his vest, Thad recognized Sheriff Oscar Beam.

The sheriff touched the brim of his hat and said, "Joe?"

"Thad," Thad said, shaking hands with the older man.

"Well—never could tell the difference on sight. Been a time."

" 'Bout four years."

"That anyhow. Where's Joe? He's all right, isn't he?"

Thad jerked a thumb backward. "In the camper back there. Got a bug of some sort. That's Joe—any little thing goes wrong, he near comes apart." He laughed lightly. "I tell him, 'Joe, we're home again! In Coontzville!' But he pulls the shades and dives in a bunk, puts his head under the covers and says, 'You don't bother me no more till I feel like getting bothered!' "

"Sounds like Joe all right," the sheriff said, smiling. "Always one to want his own way and run things. Never could figure it out, you and him looking so much alike you couldn't say which was which—until you got to talking to one another. Then you knew which was Joe all right. You boys're the same outside but all different in."

"Guess so," Thad said agreeably.

"Seems like you been in some kind of hard tussle, Thad. I know you been in plenty of fights all your life, but this one must have been good and decent, looks of your face."

Thad grinned, attempting to look sheepish. "Had it with Joe, before the bug hit him."

"Now that sounds about right too. You and him was always into it. Yet one couldn't do without the other, true?"

Thad went on grinning, but he was thinking: no, that was no longer true. Joe was gone, and good riddance. And he, Thad, was going to get along just fine without him.

"What in hell you and him been doing all these years anyway, Thad?" the sheriff asked.

"Roaming around. Here, there, this job, that one. Then move on. Decided we'd like to see the old hometown when we got as close as Reno. So—here we are again."

"Well, welcome home, Thad. Sorry Joe's stuck in the camper, but maybe he'll feel up to getting out and looking around and saying hello before you move on."

"I sure hope so, Sheriff. How're things been going with you?"

"Same as usual."

"Anything happened since me and Joe been gone?"

"Not one thing," the sheriff said.

"Well . . . I see the general store's still standing up."

"Barely."

"Silver Bar and Cafe too."

"Institution, by now."

Thad felt himself tensing, but he was careful not to reveal it. "Binny Wallfarth still hang around there?"

"Soon's the sun goes down."

"Nobody died?"

"Not a soul."

"Not even old Henry Coontz?"

"Not even old Henry. Well, Thad, got to check on the jail."

"Nice to see you again, Sheriff."

He moved slowly about the community that afternoon, chatting briefly with everyone he met. Then he went back to the camper, locked himself in, and drank beer, waiting for the sun to go down.

When it was dark, he left the camper, locking it again, and walked down the main street. He wore a sherpa-collared jacket against the cold that came with the fall Nevada evening; the jacket covered his small pistol, now tucked under his belt.

As he proceeded toward the Silver Bar and Cafe, he looked at old Henry Coontz's house again. Every year on Henry's father's birthdate, Henry had opened that old place and let the public walk through its three stories. The gesture was to honor Henry's father's memory. And Thad and Joe had been through the house a good dozen times, both wondering, as they'd grown older, where Henry hid the money everyone said he kept.

Thad saw that a single window showed light behind a shade of the house now. It was the library on the first floor, he knew. And old Henry would be reading one of a million books he'd collected on the shelves in there.

Well, Thad thought, you just sit still, Henry. Right in that room. And you and me, we'll have a meeting before long . . .

The boards of the front porch of the Silver Bar and Cafe creaked as Thad walked to the front door, listening to a jukebox inside playing Country and Western. Then he opened the door and looked at the familiar interior.

An ancient mahogany bar ran the distance on one side, backed by mirrors edged in worn and chipped gilt. There were mothbitten deerheads mounted above the mirrors. Round tables old enough to be antiques occupied the rest of the space. They were uncovered, so the history of the place was marked on the surface of every one of them. If anyone had eaten dinner at any of the tables this evening, they'd finished and were gone now. There was one picture in the room: a large, crude painting of Henry Coontz's father, founder of the town and of this bar and restaurant, done by a Paiute Indian more years ago than Thad had been alive.

There were three men at the bar, all of whom Thad recognized. The recognition was returned as they smiled and nodded in his direction. Behind the bar, Bart the bartender, his deeply lined face a contrast to the stark-black hair and mustache he obviously dyed, saw Thad enter and said, "Well, now, heard you was in town. And damned if I didn't think you wasn't ever coming in to say howdy."

"Wouldn't miss that, would I, Bart?" Thad said, reaching over the bar and shaking hands.

Then, at the other end of the room, coming out of the ladies' room, appeared a plump woman rapidly going to fat. She wore a frizzled blonde wig, too much makeup, a body-hugging blue dress that plunged low enough at the neckline to reveal a great deal of freckled bosom, and extremely high-heeled shoes on her tiny feet. Seeing Thad, she hooted in a shrill, penetrating voice, "Well, hell, it's Joe Gambel! *Joe!*"

She ran across the room to Thad, put her arms around his neck, and gave him a lipstick-tasting kiss, then stood back, looking at him with admiration and excitement in her mascara-rimmed blue eyes.

"Thad," he corrected.

She blinked, and some of the admiration and excitement he'd detected disappeared. It was simply surprise, he told himself—her surprise that either he or Joe would be back in town. As a result, her emotions were mixed. It might be true that Binny had demonstrated interest in every male she'd ever gotten close enough to see, but when he and Joe had lived here, she had demonstrated her interest mainly to him and Joe. And, he'd decided years ago, the scales had always been tipped in his direction, not Joe's.

"Where's Joe?" she asked.

"We got us a camper truck parked down to the other end of town. Joe's laid up there with some kind of bug."

"Well, shoot!" she said. "Ain't seen Joe in how many years?"

"Near four," Thad said peevishly. "Ain't seen *me* in that long either."

"Well, hell, no!" she said. "And I'm just as glad to see *you*, Thad. How you been anyway? *Where* you been? What you been *do*ing?"

"How about I ask Bart there for a bottle and a couple of glasses and we go on over to a table and I'll tell you all about it?"

But now a new man was walking into the room, someone Thad had never seen before, a lean man with neat casual clothes and a handsome face, maybe thirty years old. Binny was watching him with interest.

"Binny?" Thad said.

"Oh, sure!" Binny said, still looking at the new man as he moved to the bar. "That'd be great!"

"Good," Thad said as Bart slid a bottle and two glasses his way.

They sat at a table and Thad uncapped the bottle and poured, his

mind as well as Binny's on the stranger now. Shortly, Thad would have to examine the men's room to make sure his plan could work, and he couldn't afford, while he was doing that, to lose Binny to the stranger. "Binny," he said, "I got to wash these hands. Mind?"

"Hell, no," Binny said, eyeing the newcomer.

Thad hurried to the rest room, knowing it should be unoccupied because of the head count he'd made outside. It was. The room was small and reeking, with a stained sink where water dripped from a faucet. The toilet was enclosed in a tiny stall and had a battered wooden door. Thad looked at the lock on the door, then shut it. He reached an arm over the top and found that he could secure the door from the outside. Unlocking it again, he turned his attention to the dirty window, which was open less than an inch at the bottom. He put his large hands under the lower part and lifted upward. Nothing happened. He increased his pressure, muscles hardening, and the window suddenly shot up, revealing the old Coontz house next door. The single room was still lit.

Thad could hear boots approaching outside, and he pulled the window nearly shut and turned, grinning in acknowledgment as one of the men at the bar entered.

"How you been, Thad?"

"Good as gold." He thumped the man on the back and stepped out, looking toward his table. Binny was still there. But she was looking at the stranger.

"Well, now," Thad said, sitting down. "That didn't take too long, did it?"

"Didn't hardly know you was gone."

Thad nodded, examining the newcomer himself now. Something was beginning to work at the back edges of his mind.

"Know who he is?" Binny asked. "Fellow just came in?"

"Nope."

"Didn't think you would, being gone so long. But somebody comes into Coontzville and I don't know who he is, it always bothers me."

"Well," Thad said, "I can fix that." He went to the bar and said softly to the bartender, "Who's that fellow up there, Bart?"

"New chopper pilot," Bart said. "Dumps feed to the cattle."

"Oh," Thad said. He returned to the table and said to Binny, "Flies a feed helicopter."

"An honest-to-God pilot?" Binny said.

The thought in the back of Thad's mind took form. "Want to meet him?"

Binny looked at Thad in surprise. "How's that?"

But then the front door was opening again, and Sheriff Oscar Beam stepped inside, making his usual early-evening inspection. He moved down the bar, nodding to everyone, then he was gone.

"We were talking about that there chopper pilot," Thad said. "Now I could ask him to bring his drink over and chat a bit with us."

Binny shook her head. "You'd ask some other guy over here?"

"Why not?"

"I must be losing my charm. You and Joe used to get into a heat every time I ever went and looked at some other guy."

"Binny," Thad said gently, "I just feel so good about being here with you again, I want to do anything that'll make you happy. I ain't worried about that fellow. Want me to go fetch him?"

"Well, shoot . . . yes."

Thad got up and moved over to the stranger. "My name's Thad Gambel," he said, smiling. "I hear you're a chopper pilot."

"That's true," the man said.

"Well, now, I always had a bunch of admiration for a man who could fly something."

The man looked at Thad suspiciously.

"Wanted to do some flying myself," Thad said, "but somehow never found a chance. I'd like to hear about it though. You're invited to join me and the lady over there."

The pilot looked across the room at Binny.

"Course I wouldn't push it none," Thad said. "Man gets finished with the kind of work you do you maybe want to relax by yourself. But Binny—that's the lady there—she'd like to meet you."

"Well," the stranger said, picking up his glass, "I think I'll accept your invitation."

Thad led him to the table, saying, "I didn't get your name."

"Rod Avon."

"Binny," Thad said, "this here's Rod Avon. Rod, this here's Binny Wallfarth. Prettiest, nicest girl in this town, Rod."

"Now you cut that out, Thad," Binny said, giggling, looking at the newcomer with unconcealed attraction as he and Thad sat down.

"You're a pilot, huh?"

"What I am," the man said, beginning to bask in the newly bestowed attention.

"Now ain't that something!" Binny said, concentrating entirely on the stranger now. "Come on—tell us how all that works."

The man was a talker, Thad discovered with satisfaction. And he was directing it all at Binny, starting with the construction of a helicopter, bolt by nut, from tail to nose. Binny pretended to listen with such intensity that it was almost believable. As the pilot talked, and as soon as Thad knew the men's room was empty again, he said very quietly, "Well, damn—excuse me again." Neither Binny nor the pilot paid any attention.

Once he was in the rest room, Thad moved fast. He closed the door protecting the toilet and reached over to lock it. He then opened the window and climbed out, shutting it behind him to an inch above the sill. He got out his pistol from under his jacket as he ran to the back of Henry Coontz's house next door, noting a familiar bank of stones to the rear. If that old secret hole no longer existed behind the bricks in the back wall of the Silver Bar and Cafe, he would simply put what money he might extract tonight, along with the gun, under some of those stones.

He went up the rear porch steps silently, opened the screen door, and estimated where the inside bolt was. Henry might have changed that to something more solid, but Thad doubted he would have gone to the expense. He thrust a muscular shoulder against the door and it flew open.

He went directly to the library at the end of the hallway, where old Henry, blinking his old eyes, struggled to get up from his chair.

"That's right," Thad said, pointing the pistol at him, "get up, Henry, and get the money."

Henry Coontz shook his head. "One of you Gambel boys! What do you think you're doing?"

"Looking for a pile of cash, old man," Thad said fiercely. "Get it, or this here night's your last one on earth."

Trembling, the old man stumbled to a bookcase, knocked out several books, and grabbed a thick pack of bills held together by a wide rubber band. As simple as that, Thad thought—he just stuck some of his damned money behind some books!

Thad riffled through the bills swiftly, seeing that they were worth a hundred each. The total should amount to thousands.

"Sit down," Thad ordered. "Hurry up!"

The old man fell back into his reading chair and stared at Thad, fear keeping his eyes wide and alert.

"Stay there," Thad said. "Hear?"

He ran back through the house, and out. He went to the back wall of the bar and cafe, tested for the loose bricks, found them, got them out, shoved the money inside along with the pistol, and replaced the bricks. Then he returned to the window of the men's room, and looked through the slit. No one was visible inside. He lifted the window all the way, crawled inside, and closed it behind him. He put an arm over the top of the toilet door and unlocked it before returning to the bar.

When he sat down at the table, he was absolutely positive that nobody in that room, including Binny or the pilot, had noted his brief departure.

Minutes later, Thad heard tires skidding to a halt outside. Sheriff Oscar Beam came in the front door, heading quickly for Thad's table.

"Well, Sheriff," Thad said pleasantly. "What's up?"

"I don't know for sure, Thad." Beam smiled, but there was a tightness to the smile, and no humor. "Binny," he said, acknowledging her.

"This here's Rod Avon, Sheriff," Binny said, nodding at the pilot. "Flies helicopters for the cattle."

"I've met Mr. Avon," the sheriff said.

The pilot looked at the silver-haired man quizzically. "Anything wrong?"

The sheriff rubbed his chin with a thumb, staring at Thad. "Been here since I looked in earlier, Thad?"

"I sure have—just me and Binny and Rod, jabbering away at each other. What's happening anyway?"

"I'd kind of like to know that, Thad. Mind coming outside with me in a minute or two?"

"Anything you say, Sheriff."

The sheriff walked to the bar and spoke to the men there in a low voice that couldn't be heard at Thad's table. Everyone there turned around and looked at Thad. They all nodded. The sheriff returned and said, "Thad?"

They walked outside and stood in the cool air. "Henry Coontz called me," the sheriff said.

"He did?" Thad forced himself to sound puzzled.

"Said a Gambel brother busted in and took several thousand dollars off him. At gun point."

"Well, now, I don't believe that, Sheriff!" Thad said with indignation. with indignation.

"Wasn't you?" the sheriff asked, looking at him sharply.

"*Me*? Hell, no! I mean *how*? I been in that bar all evening. You *know* that, Sheriff."

The sheriff nodded gravely. "Yeah, and it doesn't sound like anything you'd do either. But a Gambel brother, Henry said. He couldn't have made a mistake about that, could he?"

Thad started blinking, shaking his head. "No," he said, "he couldn't, could he?" His eyes widened. "*Joe?*"

"Looks like."

"But he's *sick!* In the camper!"

"Well, now, I always figured," the sheriff said calmly, "that if either of you ever got into real trouble, it'd be Joe. Got it in him, somehow."

"We got to take a look for him!" Thad said, pretending excitement.

"No real use," the sheriff said. "Because I figure he's probably good and well on his way by now—with Henry's money."

"Goddarn him anyway!" Thad said. "Think you could trust your own damned brother, wouldn't you?"

"Let's take a check anyway," the sheriff said with resignation. "Hop in my car there."

Thad did, and they sped down the street to the edge of town.

Where, to Thad's astonishment, they found the camper was gone.

"Yeah," the sheriff said, sighing. "Joe, all right. Looks like he fooled you on having the bug, waited until you was inside the Silver Bar and Cafe, then busted into Henry's house, got the money, and come back here to take off in the rig."

Thad's head was wagging.

"So," the sheriff said, "you give me the license number on the truck, all that. But I figure we ain't ever going to see that brother of yours again. He knows about every way there is to get away."

Thad told the sheriff what he wanted to know. But his brain was

spinning. *No,* he told himself—Joe's bones were back there in the wilderness, picked clean by the predators now. It had to have been somebody else!

"Well," the sheriff said sadly, "Molly Anderson still rents out a room or two. Reckon you could lay over there tonight."

"Reckon," Thad said dismally.

"Want to head over there?"

"Could use another drink first, I think."

"Don't blame you," the sheriff agreed.

Thad paused outside the entrance of the Silver Bar and Cafe after the sheriff had let him out and driven off. Then he hurried around to the back. The bricks from the wall that had covered the currency he'd taken from Henry Coontz were now on the ground—and the hole was empty. No, he thought again—not Joe! But who else had known about that hole? Who else would have known he'd planned to use it in the fashion he had?

Defeated and confused, he went inside the bar and ordered a shot of bourbon. He ignored the fact that Binny and the pilot remained at the table, failing entirely to notice his return.

"What was that with the sheriff, Thad?" Bart asked.

When Thad failed to reply, the bartender moved away. And Thad drank and asked himself over and over again who had taken the money from behind the bricks and then stolen the truck? A transient, he decided finally, possibly someone escaped from the state prison in Carson City. They'd come through here before. And, hiding, this one had seen Thad come out of Henry Coontz's house and place the money and the gun behind the bricks. He'd been around long enough to know the camper truck was Thad's. And so he'd gotten the engine started somehow—cons knew how to do things like that—and took off.

Thad had a few more drinks, then spent a sleepless night on one of Molly Anderson's sagging mattresses, trying to figure out his next move.

By the next morning, he knew what it was.

With only the money he had left, there was only one route for him to take: to Sweetpool and Mary Ann, who had lifted that money from the service station and disappeared with it near the river. She should

have money enough left for him to make a deal for a new truck. Then he could find himself another camper somewhere.

He had breakfast in the Silver Bar and Cafe, promising himself that it would be the last meal he would ever eat in this town, then he started out of town on foot in the general direction of Sweetpool.

He had no change of clothes now, nothing—everything had been in the rig. But he would buy what he needed when he hit Sweetpool, then go hunting for that cute Mary Ann, who made Binny Wallfarth look exactly like what she was—a two-bit, over-the-hill hustler.

A half mile out of town, one of Coontzville's locals, a fat man driving a Jeep, picked Thad up. "I heard all about it, Thad. Joe went and robbed old Henry and then took off in your rig, right?"

"Right," Thad said dully, thinking: let them have it that way—it was his protection, their thinking it was Joe.

"Where you heading now?" the man asked.

"Sweetpool."

"Ain't a whole lot in Sweetpool."

"Girl," Thad said abruptly.

"Well, now, sometimes that's a good enough reason for a lot of things."

On the Interstate, at the turn to Sweetpool, the man stopped the Jeep. Thad looked at the narrow road leading into town; it wasn't even covered with gravel.

"Good luck, Thad."

"Thanks for the ride."

He trudged along, hoping for some kind of traffic, but he walked three miles before he saw a vehicle. And it was coming from the wrong direction—*from* Sweetpool; a camper truck, yellow, with a light-blue camper mounted on the back.

Thad stopped beside a boulder and watched the approach of the rig. The truck may have been yellow, he thought, but that camper was exactly the shade of blue he'd had the one he'd stolen in Reno painted. Then he saw that the grill of the truck, the way it was designed and constructed, was identical too.

When it was close enough for him to see the front license plate, he saw, throat constricting, that it was Joe behind the wheel.

Wearing a wide-brimmed Western hat, tipped back to expose a bandage wrapped around his head, Joe was grinning at him, then laughing,

and holding his hand up in salute. But he didn't stop, didn't even slow down. And Thad, feeling ill, saw, sitting beside Joe in the passenger seat, Mary Ann. She smiled sweetly at Thad as they went by, and Joe, roaring now with laughter, put his hand on the horn.

"Damn you, Joe!" Thad yelled.

But they had passed him and were gone, disappearing in a cover of dust. And Thad, mouth open, still could not believe it. How had Joe survived that blow to the head, that night of unconsciousness? How had he gotten himself up and moving in that wilderness? How had he hiked back through the trees and crossed the river?

Just as confusingly, how had he known that Thad would return to Coontzville, after all, and do what he did? And how had he been there exactly when it was done, so that he could take the money from behind the bricks and run off in the rig?

But somehow, some way, he'd done all of those things! Hadn't he?

Thad sat down on the boulder. There was only one single thing he could truly figure out, something he'd forgotten until now: He'd taken Joe's ignition key for the truck out there in the wilderness. But Joe, months ago, had ordered an extra made and he'd fixed it under the truck with one of those magnetic things. So he could have used that key ~~to~~ get the truck started. But the rest . . .

Thad shook his head bewilderedly. There *was* no answer, unless it was that Joe was indestructible, not even human.

Yet Thad had just seen him, human enough, in their truck, with the girl, hooting with laughter, honking the horn in triumph, moving on, leaving him, his brother, his twin, behind.

No, Thad thought, *no!*

He grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled, fighting a rising panic. But maybe he *hadn't* seen Joe. Maybe that had been something just in his own mind: Joe, the camper, the truck, the girl, all going by. Maybe he was going crazy—maybe he'd turned into a wild-headed jaybird who didn't even know what he was seeing any more.

Was it only something in his head, that might follow him, in some form, in some way, for the rest of his life, no matter where he went?

He didn't know. And he crouched on the rock, his head down, his hands pulling at his hair, and cried.

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