ALFRED

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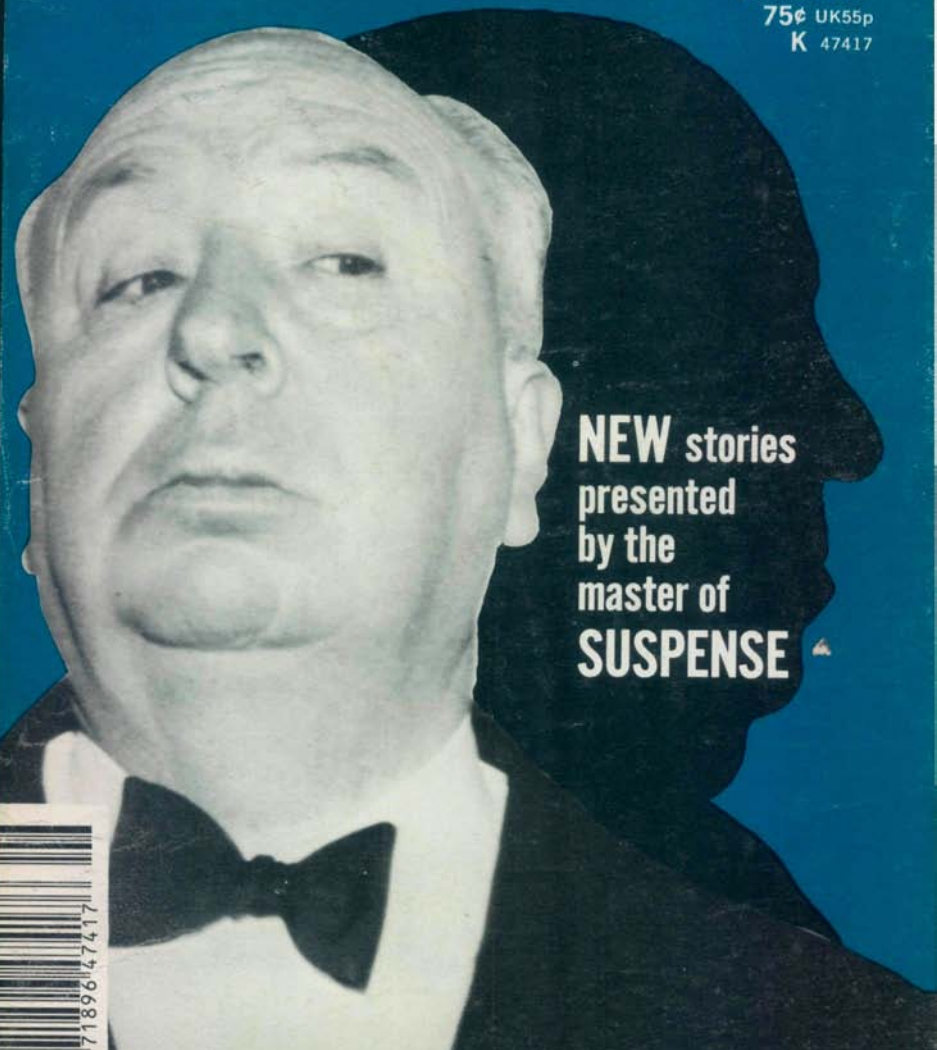

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I think you'll find much to savor in this issue—a balmy night ride, a transatlantic cruise, a few days' shore leave; a touch of the psychological, a smidgen of the supernatural; plus a look into a possible counterblow to zero population growth. Withal, as usual, you will observe some intriguing interactions between a number of captivating people—some of them literally so.

Take it all in stride. As Julia Harris *May* said, "Slower, sweet June."

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SHORT STORIES

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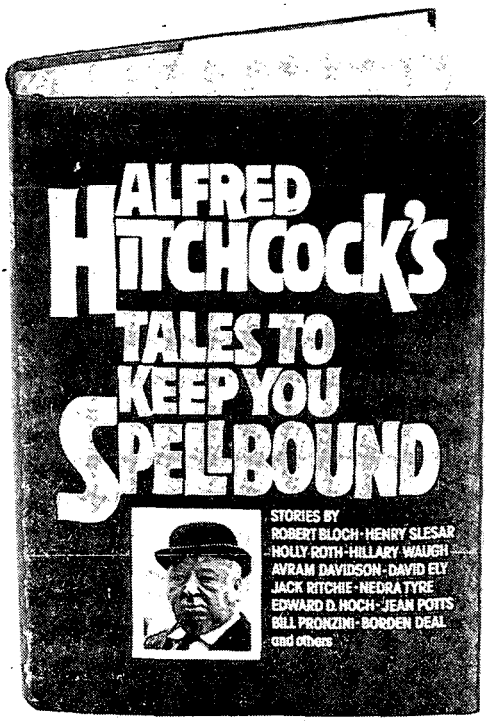

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Who was chasing him in the car behind? . . .

NIGHT RIDER

by **Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg**

It was raining—a slow steady drizzle—when I came out of the house and walked up the dark driveway to my Cadillac Fleetwood. I started the engine and let it warm up for three minutes. I did not have to look at my watch to tell when the three minutes were up, or to verify the fact that it was approximately eleven P.M. I have performed this ritual for so long that everything connected with it—time, action, direction—has become instinctual and perfectly coordinated.

I am, you see, a night rider.

The term is one I discovered some time ago in a magazine article, and pertains to individuals who habitually go for long solitary drives after dark. According to the article, such individuals are attempting to use their cars as escape vehicles from tensions and pressures and difficult domestic situations. By insulating themselves inside their automobiles, the article said, they create an illusion of sanctity; and while in full control of their cars, they are able to imagine that they exercise the same full control over their lives and destinies. In this manner they work out in a socially acceptable manner the conflicts that plague them.

Perhaps this is true. But I prefer to believe my own night rides are nothing more than pleasure trips that help me to relax. I have always enjoyed driving, and I have always been able to relax while doing so.

I backed the Fleetwood out of the driveway and headed it toward Route 4. The car is a 1968 model—not the commercial chassis, just the upgraded passenger type with all the power extras and a stereophonic radio. There are 77,000 miles on the odometer, which is substantial mileage, and because of that and of its age the Fleetwood has a number of quirks. A yaw in the power steering, a fair amount of lifter noise, a shaky transmission—axle whine, holding in first gear—all of which indicate more serious problems to come.

Still, it's the best car I've ever owned, and I take considerable pride in it. I've always wanted a Cadillac, and when this one came along last year at only $900, I felt I was entitled to it. Ever since, driving the Fleetwood has given me a certain feeling of dignity and peace.

Edna, of course, has never been able to understand my relationship with the Cadillac. She dislikes driving and has no conception of automobiles; she is, all told, a completely unimaginative woman who considers my purchase of the Fleetwood to be a "pretentious extravagance." In addition to being unimaginative, Edna is also unyielding. Once she forms an opinion, it remains forever unchangeable; there is absolutely no capacity in her for negotiation of any kind. To this day she resents the Cadillac, and my night rides in it as well.

Even so, I do not resent *her* for her attitudes and her failings. In most ways she is a good wife, and our marriage has been tolerable if more or less drab and prosaic. Which is as much my fault as hers, for admittedly I have my own negative traits—primarily those of reticence

and melancholia, both of which were born as a result of absences in my life. The absence of a successful job, the absence of interest in sports or hobbies or other common passions, the absence of excitement and fulfillment. In point of sad fact, my only true pleasures are these night rides and the Fleetwood itself, and Edna shares neither of them. Hollow pleasures, then? I wonder.

I took the car onto Route 4 and accelerated to a steady 45 miles per hour, pointing toward the Route 80 interchange. The route of my night rides is also ritualized: seven miles east on Route 4 to Route 80, then twenty miles straight out on 80 to the county road that runs through the New Jersey swamplands, then eight miles through to another county road that leads me back to 80 and eventually home.

Home. There were times when I was driving on Route 80 that I fantasized going right on by the county-road exit and staying on the interstate clear out to San Francisco, three thousand miles of wide solid road to a new place and a new way of life. But of course I would never actually do that. The farthest I have ever gone is the Watching Interchange, fifty miles west, near the Pennsylvania border. That time I became frightened, for a reason I still do not quite understand, and immediately and rapidly drove back to Edna.

The rain began to come down harder as I swung onto Route 80. There was very little traffic, as is almost always the case at this time of night. Just a few cars, widely spaced—some of which, I have often thought, must contain night riders like myself—and the occasional high bright lights of produce trucks on their way to the Bronx markets.

I opened the Fleetwood up to 65 and then into a cruising speed of 68. Above that speed a rattle begins to come into the drive shaft, and above 70 the rattle spreads through the chassis so that the whole car rocks and trembles—somewhat like Edna when she sees her spotless ashtrays filled with dottle from my pipe, or an article of clothing I have forgotten to hang in the closet, or a small stain on one of her table linens from coffee accidentally spilled. Such a stolid fussy woman, Edna. Things must be done her way or not at all; I had to change in every way to suit her from the beginning. No compromises in *our* marriage, and no small triumphs for me. Except for the Fleetwood and the night rides. On those, at least, I did not and will never yield—

I grew aware, suddenly, of headlights behind me.

When I looked into the rear-vision mirror, I saw them reflected there clearly. The rain had hazed the rear window, reducing all previous light behind me to a blur, but these headlights were so bright and sharply defined it could only mean that the car was following close, pacing me no more than fifteen yards distant.

Odd. And dangerous. Unless, of course, it was a highway patrolman. I began to feel vaguely discomfited. Patrol officers have been known to pace speeders this way just before putting on their flasher lights and pulling them over. If that was it, it would not be the first time I had been stopped for exceeding the legal speed limit.

I eased up slightly on the accelerator, watching the speedometer needle slide back to 65 and then to 60. The lights held their position behind me, although no red flasher appeared there yet. *I'm sorry, officer,* I would say to this policeman, as I had said to all the others. *I have quite a few things on my mind—domestic difficulties, you know.* In my wallet, clipped to the registration, was a twenty-dollar bill. *License and registration, yes sir, officer, here they are.* If he took the money, fine; if he did not, I would explain that it was merely emergency cash kept in a special place, I certainly had no intention toward bribery. Sometimes the ploy works, sometimes it doesn't. I've gotten two speeding tickets in the past eighteen months, but avoided three others.

I kept looking into the mirror, and the lights kept with me. Perhaps it wasn't a policeman after all. But I still felt discomfited. Tailgating headlights bother me as much as policemen—and I remembered again a statement in the magazine article to the effect that it is the nature of the night rider to move in isolation, to be totally sealed off from the world as he drives. Anything intruding on that isolation is disconcerting.

Defensively I flipped the mirror out of position so that I could no longer see the lights. An old trick, one which I have found to be effective. After a time I imagined the lights to be gone and forgot about them.

When I reached Lodi I was settled fully into the heavy rhythm of the night ride. The sounds made by the car and by the rain were comforting; the lights from occasional passing cars and trucks appeared and disappeared beyond the windshield like distant spokes of fire, not at all distracting. Music played softly on the radio's FM band, soothing clas-

sical compositions by Brahms and Mozart and Suppé.

I have always liked quiet classical music. Edna, however, does not care for music of any kind. Her passion is television. She puts her portable set on in the morning even before I leave for my accounting office. When I come home at night I find it playing still, and it continues to play even after I go to sleep in my narrow twin bed. If it were not for the night rides, I don't think I could stand the constant babbling voice of the television.

And yet I realize that the TV is for Edna what the night rides are for me. She, too, has no outside interests to sustain her, and so she has sought escape and relaxation in the flickering images and the melodramatic mouthings of actors portraying lives far more interesting and exciting than her own. I do not begrudge her the television. But because she does not have even my limited capacity for psychological insight, she would never understand the truth about herself, and so I have never tried to explain it to her. Nor have I tried to explain to her about the night rides—

Abruptly, close behind me, a horn blared.

And kept on blaring, a long shrill unbroken sound in the rain-swept darkness.

It startled me, made me shift on the seat and twist my head to look over my shoulder. And the headlights were still there, even nearer now, like bright wild eyes peering through the misty rear window.

A coldness settled on my neck. I turned my head back and then reached up and adjusted the rearview mirror again so that I could see the lights reflected there. They appeared to be just beyond the Fleetwood's rear bumper. The horn continued to blare the same steady discordant note, as shrill and frightening as a scream in the night.

The palms of my hands grew damp and I gripped the wheel more tightly. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. Once in a while a foolish adolescent, or an elderly person with highway hypnosis, would lock tight to my pace, but never for long and never this close; once in a while someone's horn would short out, but when that happened they invariably slowed down and either pulled over to the side of the road or took the nearest exit.

These lights and this horn were different. There was something menacing about them.

I had always been aware of vague hazards involved in night riding

above and beyond those of a blowout or a mechanical malfunction. Every now and then there would be a newspaper account of a driver forced off an expressway late at night and then robbed, even murdered, or of a person going berserk and using his car as an instrument of destruction against another driver. These hazards had been real enough to be mildly titillating, and yet remote enough to be discounted as an actual threat.

Until now. Now they seemed terrifyingly proximate. It *could* happen to me. It might be happening to me this very moment.

I felt the thin cutting edge of panic, and my reaction to it was both instinctive and typical. I have never been a brave man, nor a willful one; in every crisis in my life and my marriage, without exception, I have followed the path of least resistance—capitulation, withdrawal, flight.

I pushed the accelerator pedal to the floorboards.

The Fleetwood surged ahead, tires spinning up thin plumes of spray from the pavement, the broken white lane markers becoming a solid blur beneath my headlights. The sound of the horn faded and was lost in the roar of the engine, and when my eyes sought the mirror again I saw the other car's lights fall back and become indistinct blurs through the rain-haze on the window.

With the increasing speed the Fleetwood began to tremble, differential and chassis and lifters all complaining in a series of sharp chattering noises. When I looked down at the speedometer I saw in amazement that the needle was frozen at 95. Faster than I had ever driven before, recklessly fast on a night such as this—

But not fast enough.

The lights seemed to hurtle into the rear-vision mirror again, the wild staring circles hovering just off the Cadillac's bumper. Once more I heard the scream of the horn.

Perspiration stung the corners of my eyes, but I did not dare take a hand from the wheel to wipe it away. I knew I could coax no more speed from the Fleetwood's laboring engine; if I tried, the risk of blowing a valve or some other vital mechanism and then losing control of the car would be too great. My fear of that was just as acute as my fear of the unknown driver who pursued me.

Escape seemed unlikely now—but pulling over to face the person behind me was unthinkable. My only hope was to overtake another

car, slow down to pace it, and signal to the driver for help. I hunched forward, looking desperately past the arcing windshield wipers. But no red taillights appeared through the slanted curtain of rain. The highway here was dark and deserted, not only in the direction in which I was traveling but eastbound as well.

Where were the highway patrol cars? On most nights I couldn't travel more than four or five miles without encountering one. *There's never a policeman around when you need one.* The old cliché repeated itself in my mind, stark and bitter, as the emptiness ahead remained unbroken.

The steady wail of the horn seemed to grow shriller, and filtered through the rain-streaked window the relentless headlights filled the Fleetwood's interior with macabre shifting patterns of light and shadow.

I felt a sense of mounting unreality. It was as if the familiar surroundings of the car had taken on a strange instability, like something about to fragment into meaningless shards. The illusion was unsettling, so much so that the feeling of unreality was joined by one of loss and violation.

The psychological meaning in all of this did not elude me. Always before I had been safe and inviolate within the confines of the Fleetwood; always before I had managed to keep terror and disillusionment and unhappiness from penetrating its sealed spaces. The night ride had been my salvation for a long while—but now it had been turned into a trap far more intolerable than the one in which I lived with Edna.

A highway sign loomed mistily out of the rain. It was one I knew well because it announced, a quarter of a mile distant, the exit to the county road which led through the swamps. My hands trembled on the steering wheel. Should I take that exit tonight? Would the other car follow if I did? Or should I stay on Route 80 and hope to find a highway patrolman or help from another motorist?

The sign flashed past, to be replaced seconds later by another marking the exit itself just ahead. Without consciously making a decision, I took my foot off the accelerator. The speedometer needle fell back to 80, 75. . . In the mirror I saw the lights hold their position as the other driver slackened speed with me.

When the needle wavered between 60 and 65 and the exit ramp was less than a hundred yards away, I tapped the brakes lightly and swung

the wheel toward the ramp. The Fleetwood shimmied, tires hydroplaning on the slick pavement for an instant, engine protesting. Then I was onto the ramp and sliding down it toward the stop sign at the bottom.

The lights were still there in the mirror.

I was going too fast to attempt a full stop. Instead, battling a fresh surge of panic, I braked as hard as I dared and swerved to the right, onto the county road. The Fleetwood slid around at a widening angle, slowly, as though on a surface of ice, and for one long second it seemed that the rear end would fishtail beyond control. But then the tires found traction, held it, and the car straightened. I bore down on the accelerator again, looking up into the mirror because the sound of the horn was abruptly gone.

But the lights were not. The other driver had successfully negotiated the turn, and even as I watched the lights grew wide and glaring again as he caught up with me.

The county road, narrow and predominantly straight, was as empty of traffic as Route 80 had been. On both sides swampland stretched away, spotted with the rain-distorted shapes of trees and wild shrubs and grassy hummocks. Lonely, desolate. A desolation which I had been too panicked to consider before leaving 80, but which now added another dimension to my fear. I had made a grievous error, I knew that now. The other car was much more powerful than the Cadillac, the driver could overtake me with ease along this road, force me off of it into the swamp, and then—

Then *what?*

What did he want? Who was he? Hoodlum? Maniac? Thrillseeker? And why had he selected me as the object of his torment?

The horn began to shriek again.

It had to have been a random choice, I thought. Perhaps the Cadillac was what had attracted him. People who drive Cadillacs are symbolic of a certain affluent way of life; targets for thieves, for angry adolescents, for more than one type of unstable personality. And what a terrible irony in that, if true. I am not well-to-do, I am not a member of the Establishment, I am merely an average citizen to whom the Cadillac represented not status but the most basic kind of security. But instead of security it might be inviting tragedy.

The horn, the lights.

Who was he? What did he want of me?

Ahead the road dipped into a long but fairly tight curve, and I realized I was traveling at too rapid a speed to negotiate it safely. In reflex I shifted my foot to the brake pedal, pressed it harder than I would have in different circumstances—and was struck in that same instant by a belated awareness of just how close I was being followed, of the danger of being rammed by the other car.

As the Fleetwood slowed, rocking, just outside the curve, I braced myself on the seat. The muscles in my neck bunched with tension, and I gripped the wheel so hard pain ran through the straining knuckles on both hands.

But nothing happened.

There was no impact.

Like a magnet, the mirror drew my eyes again. The reflected lights still hovered the same distance behind. The other driver was skillful, there was no doubt of that; he had braked with me, anticipating my reactions, with just enough pressure to maintain his position. But his horn no longer wailed a single note. It echoed now in a series of sharp stabbing howls, as if he were becoming agitated, impatient.

Which meant what? Would he try to swing out now and draw abreast of me and attempt to drive the Fleetwood off the road? Or was his intention only to harass me until I admitted defeat by pulling over and stopping, or he grew tired enough to abandon his game of cat-and-mouse?

I knew I couldn't stand much more of the dreadful uncertainty. I have never reacted well in stress situations, and my nerves were precariously close to the breaking point. I tried to blank my mind, to concentrate only on the wet road unfolding beneath my headlights, but the questions and speculations continued to flash through. He *had* to be some sort of maniac. Someone bent on robbery would have acted long ago. A stranger prowling in the night—

A new and alarming possibility came to me: suppose he *wasn't* a stranger? Suppose he was someone who knew me, who was after *me*—someone who harbored a personal hatred and was taking a warped revenge?

But that was absurd. I had no enemies. I did not even have friends in the usual sense of the word. I lived a solitary existence, seldom going out, seldom entertaining, never becoming involved in anything that required a commitment, much less in anything controversial.

There was no one in my life but Edna.

Edna.

Edna?

The connection was so vivid that I felt myself jerk in reaction to it, a chill ripple between my shoulder blades; and yet it was also so incredible that I had to choke back a burst of laughter. Edna? Stolid, unimaginative Edna, who hated to drive and to my knowledge had not driven in more than two years, sitting hunched over the wheel of a borrowed or rented car and pursuing me at high speed through a rainy winter night? The image was utterly grotesque.

Still, what if her resentment of the Fleetwood and of my night rides had gradually generated such paranoid hatred that her mind had snapped and lost control and determined to attack me? From her point of view, then, there would be no more fitting weapon than a car, no more fitting time or place than on one of my night rides.

Absurd, absurd. But—

I did not notice the onrushing curve this time until I was already into it. Until it was too late.

My awareness had been turned so intently inward for the moment that I had lost perception of externals. The road, the curve, seemed to leap against my eyes. Then I felt the Fleetwood begin to slide, and my headlights were sweeping over swamp grass and stunted trees. Frantically I wrenched the wheel, but the rear end continued to drift around. I jabbed the brake pedal, and as soon as I did the car bucked and tilted and I knew that it was going to roll over, it was going to crash.

The last thing I saw was the staring headlights on the pursuing car. Then the night began to spin crazily. I threw my hands in front of my face as the sound of rending metal rose to a crescendo.

I don't remember regaining my senses. I was merely awake again, half-sitting, half-lying across the front seat. The Fleetwood had come to rest in an upright position, and above me I could see that the windshield had been shattered into an opaque mosaic, that part of the roof was mangled in on itself, pushed very close to my head.

Light reflected into the car through the broken side windows. The night was quiet now except for the drumming of rain. I tried to move, and pain surged through me in half a dozen places, so intense in my

chest that I nearly blacked out again. Something warm flowed on my face, on one arm—blood?

The need to get out of the car was acute. Despite the pain, I managed to drag myself across the seat to the door. The latch had been sprung. I struggled against it, clamping my teeth to keep from crying out, and finally it gave out and I sprawled free onto wet grass and boggy earth.

I lay there for a moment, gathering strength, as the wind and rain beat coldly at my skin. Then I reached back to find purchase on the car and pulled myself erect, leaning against the rear door for support. Only then did I look over at the other car.

It was parked at the edge of the road, shrouded by rain and angled so that its glaring headlights prevented me from determining the make and model. At first there seemed to be no sign of the driver; then I discerned movement by the door and a dark silhouette stepped forward just outside the glow of lights. I could make out none of the features, but it was a tall shape, a man-shape.

Not Edna, then; of course not.

The man stopped moving, stood immobile. I wanted to shout at him, to demand who he was and what he wanted, but I couldn't make any sound.

He raised an arm and pointed at me.

No, not at me but at something near me: the rear of the Fleetwood.

I didn't understand. Slowly, painfully, on legs that were weak and tremulous, I pushed along the door to the rear fender. The impact of the crash had snapped the trunk lock so that the lid stood partially open. I caught it and pulled it up.

Edna was lying inside.

She was dead, her skull crushed. And beside her, its glass broken and dark-stained, was her unceasing television set.

I cried out, with the shock of it and the memory that flooded my mind. I knew the truth now. Not only the terrible truth I had sealed off from myself when I began my night ride, but all the truths about Edna and myself that I'd allowed to become twisted and hidden while I traveled the dark night roads.

It was not Edna's resentment of my night rides that had generated a paranoid hatred, it was *my* resentment of the television whose com-

pany she preferred to mine. It was not Edna's mind that had snapped, it was mine. It was not Edna who had lost control tonight, it was I. I had picked up the portable TV set in a fit of blind rage and brought it down on her head, then put her body and the murder weapon into the Fleetwood's trunk.

But the driver of the other car—*how had he known?*

I looked toward him.

He was no longer standing by the headlights—in fact, I could not see him at all. I could see the outline of the car, however, and it was a Cadillac, a 1968 Fleetwood just like mine. My eyes sought the license plate, found it, read the number—

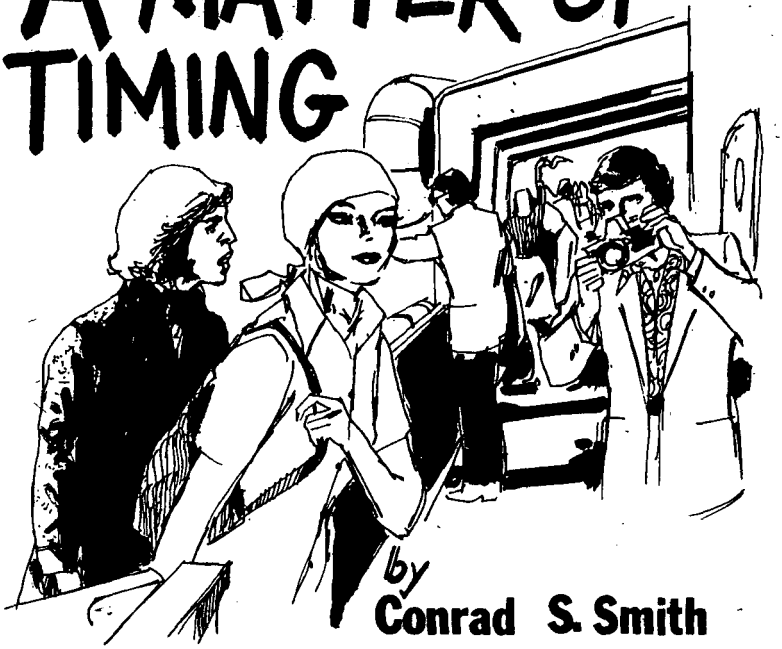
It was my license plate.

When that revelation joined the others in my head, the headlights winked out and the car vanished like a specter.

Lying alone in the rain and the wet grass, I closed my eyes and waited.

Meet several people who know the meaning of carpe diem . . .

A MATTER of TIMING



by **Conrad S. Smith**

Since the dead can't defend themselves, you may think it unsporting of me to level this accusation against the late Alicia Scofield. Yet despite her suicide last night, I feel no compunction whatever in doing so. Why should I, considering that unforgivable note she scrawled to the press just before gulping her pills? In those few vengeful words, she destroyed me utterly—by exposing me as her blackmailer of twenty years. (Though neglecting, naturally, to explain *why*.)

So I can hardly feel more justified in revealing the long-suppressed photo now. In this 8 x 10 enlargement, we are privileged to observe the wealthy widow Scofield in 1956, in her somewhat less affluent days as Mrs. Ralph Randall, aboard an ocean liner—

Committing a murder.

And a nearly perfect one, regardless of its hastily improvised *modus operandi*. Her timing was admirable. The one flaw, actually, was my chancing to photograph it.

The newspapers have headlined the not-so-merry widow's demise with maudlin emotion. "MILLIONAIRESS RECLUSE BIDS MYSTERIOUS FAREWELL" and similar rot. Along with a 1957 photograph of her marriage to Texas oilman Byron Scofield, a bittersweet reminder of Alicia as a youthful-looking bride. Smooth golden-honey skin, that superb body she'd achieved at such a price, the glowing almond-shaped jade eyes. A shattering contrast indeed to the haggard and flabby old woman I confronted yesterday with my renewed demands.

True, I'd already seen Alicia lose much of her resilience some time back, at Scofield's passing. Aside from his wealth, she'd genuinely adored him. But what really drove her into that reclusive shell, of course, was the steady erosion of her beauty.

And that, I can't deny, stemmed directly from two decades of my special brand of induced tension.

In my own defense, however, until yesterday I assure you I'd abided by our ground rules. Alicia negotiated the armistice three years ago by offering an unusually large payment, so large it was her hope that I'd never need to solicit her again. And I *wouldn't* have if it weren't for my recent twin disasters, the stock market collapse and a wretchedly ill-advised land investment. (As a third disaster I might include turning fifty, with my only other asset—my so-called Italianesque good looks—little more than a memory.) In sum, a desolate preview of my declining years. What choice did I have but to renew the old acquaintance with my former shipmate?

Unfortunately, however, Alicia's attempted escape from tension had come too late to revive her belief in life. So I should have foreseen the fatal "last straw" impact of my reappearance on her bleak horizon. But instead, approaching her with my 8 x 10 envelope, I sensed only the obvious in her horrified flash of recognition. A memory had engulfed her, of our first encounter all those years ago, and its dread climax.

The two women, Mrs. Randall and her late husband's sister, did not board the ship until it paused briefly at Cannes. But I had already embarked the night before in Genoa where the trans-Atlantic voyage began.

In those days Genoa was my home. I am Luigi Cannelli, and I was then the twenty-nine-year-old proprietor of a modestly thriving camera shop in the tourist section of the Piazza Acquaverde. Thanks to a largely English-speaking clientele, my command of the language, even then, was more than adequate. And as that knowledge grew, so did my restless yearning to seek a more abundant life in America. But on that particular morning in late July when Paulo Leone dashed frantically into my shop, my remotest fantasy was sailing within hours on a round-trip voyage to New York.

Paulo, a junior executive in the shipping company across the plaza, embraced photography as one of his passions and so we often shared chatty lunches in a neighboring trattoria. But that day, with anxiety marring his sleek, olive features, it was a far more bizarre proposal than lunch that he poured forth in a dramatic style worthy of La Scala.

The company's largest and most luxurious liner was to sail at midnight, gasped Paulo, but just an hour ago the ship's photographer had been stricken with a heart attack. *The photographer!* he moaned. In the passengers' eyes, the photographer was a crucial member of the ship's staff. It was he who filled their albums with cherished candid shots of their moments aboard—shuffleboard, Ping-Pong tournaments, the Captain's dinner. To contemplate the star liner sailing without one, cried Paulo, was unthinkable.

Hence his suggestion that I grab my Leica, tack a "vacation" sign on the door, and sail that night. By the time I returned on the eastbound crossing, he argued, they'd have a replacement, but for now could I possibly—?

Could I!

Within minutes I was heaving clothes into a suitcase while Paulo hurried off to deal with the red tape. Having no time to obtain a passport, I was faced with remaining aboard ship when it arrived in New York—but otherwise the prospect was a dream come true!

By the time we'd dropped anchor in Cannes the next morning, I was still under the spell of that seductive excitement which courses through a luxury liner in her hour of sailing. The barely perceptible tilt of her

decks, the crisply starched officers smiling their welcome, the hum of generators and the whir of winches, flowers and exotic fruits filling the staterooms, champagne corks popping, the scent of costly perfume . . . I vowed that someday such luxurious trappings would be my way of life. How, I hadn't the faintest notion, but I swore that middle-class existence would no longer be tolerable to me.

But in the meantime I took up my position in the reception foyer on the main deck. There I began to focus my Leica on the passengers embarking as the purser directed them at the top of the gangway to their cabins.

Halfway through that session, my camera froze in position and a lump blocked my throat. Pure beauty is rare—and I was pointing my lens at it!

The young woman's face glowed with an almost waxlike perfection—a serene, pale oval devoid of lines, dominated by slanting green eyes that gave no clue to what lay behind them. Her only cosmetic touch appeared to be the vibrant crimson shaping her exquisite lips. And although one of those classic turbans of the period concealed her hair, I envisioned it as the same flaxen blonde as her lightly traced brows.

Bellissima!

But in my awe, I had wasted the camera's precious moment. Turning from the purser, she and the ungainly woman at her elbow were moving on. Yet even that receding view of her deliciously curved figure offered its rewards.

Not that what I experienced was even remotely *amore*—at first sight or otherwise. Nor was it simply the earthy lust one might expect of a young Italian in his prime. It was simply wholehearted admiration for one of man's perfect creations.

My next assignment was the dining salon as the passengers stopped by to arrange their table reservations. There, I consoled myself, I'd surely have a second chance at the Golden Lady. To my disappointment, however, it was only her companion who appeared—though at least I did manage to overhear their names. Did I say overhear? I was fairly deafened by the woman's bray.

"Mrs. Ralph Randall and Miss Ernestine Randall," she boomed, poring officiously over the seating chart. "See that you put us at a nice

table of women. No men. My sister-in-law was recently widowed and we want none of that shipboard nonsense one hears about."

The amount of shipboard nonsense likely to come Ernestine Randall's way seemed minimal. Exceedingly unattractive, about fifty or so, she was doomed to misery in the shadow of such a dazzling traveling companion. (And that young lady, I reflected skeptically, had scarcely appeared to be in deep mourning, despite the old grey mare's dampening proclamation.)

Remembering my duties, I leveled my camera at Miss Randall, but with a derisive snort she averted her face. "Don't waste your film, young man!" she neighed, and trotted off to her paddock.

Life at sea soon revealed itself to be a microcosm in which human relationships were greatly speeded up, rather like time-lapse photography. Cliques quickly formed, petty animosities smoldered, and travel-brochure romances budded. But it was yet another characteristic of all tightly knit communities that proved most dominant—gossip. From morning consommé through afternoon tea and far into the late-night buffets, the ship's horde of inquisitive matrons engaged tirelessly in it.

Anyone as glamorous and mysterious as Alicia Randall could hardly escape becoming their prime target of fascination. Where was she from? What had her husband done? How did he die? Yet from the first, she maintained her air of detached charm—invariably polite when spoken to, but remaining always behind her invisible barrier. A curious notion flitted across my mind: rather than aloofness, was this shyness? But then, why would such an alluring young creature be lacking in self-confidence?

The questions swirling in her wake remained unanswered all too briefly, thanks to Ernestine. For this virago soon turned out to be as voluble as Alicia was reticent. Moving among the tables as I did every evening at dinner, I could hear her overpowering all other conversation, and the music as well. "Three Coins in the Fountain" was no match for that voice! It even carried for remarkable distances on the windswept decks.

Unpleasantly enough, Ernestine regarded no family detail as too personal for exposure. "Ship bore" was far too innocent a label to attach to Ernestine. Her tactless revelations were no mere idle slips; behind

them lay an evil purpose. But from them I managed to piece together much of their background, and to become alarmed by the increasing hatred between the two women. Their story was basically this:

For some years following their parents' death, Ernestine and her older brother had been running an antique shop left to him in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. But in 1940, the confirmed bachelor of forty-seven startled his sister by falling in love with an actress in the local summer-stock company—Alicia, a woman in search of peace from an unrewarding, sometimes brutal career in the theater.

One might question the degree of tranquillity she found in a household shared with the resentful Ernestine—whether in their upstairs living quarters in the old homestead or in the downstairs shop. But ironically, the two antagonists were soon forced to unite in a common cause—the nursing of Ralph, who was bedded with a chronic respiratory ailment shortly after the wedding.

For some fifteen years he lingered, oppressed at the plight of his loyal young wife withering under Ernestine's strident dominance. But in his will he made an effort to atone. Realizing that equal partnership in the business would be intolerable for both women, he bequeathed it entirely to Alicia—with the proviso that Ernestine should receive fifty percent of all the proceeds. This arrangement, he reasoned, would free Alicia to sell the property if she wished a new life, but Ernestine would be provided for with her half-share—of either the operating profits or the sale, whichever Alicia decided.

"When my dear misguided brother took pity on the poor thing and married her," Ernestine snapped one afternoon from her deckchair backing on the library where I had gone for research, "Alicia had been knocking around in the theater for ten years. She was *twenty-nine.*"

A stunned silence ensued, with the inescapable addition bouncing from one pair of incredulous ears to another. Timing it masterfully, Ernestine rode the crest of the shock wave and then swept on acidly:

"It's amazing what these Swiss rejuvenation clinics can do—if one has the money. And poor Ralph was scarcely cold in his grave before Alicia solved *that* vexing problem." On cue, her voice broke emotionally. "But can you picture the heartbreak for me this past year? Watching our family assets of three generations going down the drain for one weird operation after another, all in a frantic desire to turn back one person's clock!"

"You mean she's had her face lifted?" I recognized the voice of a pitiful widow from New York.

"Hah!" shrilled Ernestine. "How else do you think she got her skin as taut as a rubber glove? And those drawn-up eyes? They used to be round as pennies." She grunted scornfully. "But face-lifting was the very *least* of it . . ."

There was a scraping sound as the deck chairs came closer together.

I listened until I'd had enough and had to escape the woman's voice and words. But as I turned from the deck to leave I saw to my intense embarrassment that I was not alone.

Alicia, shrunken back in an armchair, stared at the wall through which her sister-in-law's voice reached us. Her lovely face, no longer an impervious mask, was twisted with unutterable agony.

I hesitated for only a confused moment, then left her to suffer her mortification alone.

But within an hour, I learned that she had recovered her power of speech. While I was making prints in the darkroom next to Ernestine's cabin, I could hear her berating the old vixen in a tone of voice bordering on hysteria.

"I should have known," she cried, "when you came all the way over to Europe just to look me up in Geneva. Pleading loneliness, wanting to bury the hatchet! Pretending such interest and compassion for what I was undergoing—"

Her voice twisted with sarcasm.

"Even changing your ship reservation to return with me! '*A helping hand to cling to, dear.*' you said, '*until you're really sure of yourself!*' But instead, all along you've been plotting this—this vindictive—"

"Don't make such ugly faces, Alicia," Ernestine said. "You'll ruin your investment."

"My God, I gave you and Ralph fifteen years! Wasn't that enough? How can you begrudge me wanting to make up for the life I lost?"

"Have you ever asked yourself what *I've* lost?" Ernestine exploded. "My entire reason for existence sold on the auction block! Flung away on your vain, capricious—"

"I gave you your full share—you're secure for the rest of your days!"

"But *where*?" Ernestine snarled. "In a rented cottage across from our old place, forced to stare at the Randall heritage turned into '*Mother*

Hubbard's Kozy Kupboard!' I'll never forgive you for that! With your selfish vanity, you've destroyed my life!"

"So now you want to destroy mine? Well, I won't let you!"

Ernestine's laugh was chilling. "I doubt you'll have much control over it."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's see now . . ." (From her tone, I gathered Ernestine to be making an elaborate pretense of ruminating.) "When we reach New York on the 26th, you'll be flying directly to Dallas, won't you? To start that glamorous new life of yours, perhaps to find a husband? The cousin you'll be staying with, who hasn't laid eyes on you since your tacky theater days, will marvel, I'm sure, at how lightly the years have touched you."

"I can only hope so. But thank heaven, I'll be two thousand miles away from your vicious tongue!"

"I wouldn't count on that, my dear. It really is such a small world, you know. And oddly enough, I've always had a compelling desire to see Texas. Dallas particularly."

A gasp. "You wouldn't—"

"Oh, wouldn't I? I've already booked my room at the Hotel Adolphus. And they were kind enough to send me the city map I requested. Amazingly enough, I find that I'll be only minutes away from your cousin's place."

Alicia uttered a strangled exclamation that ended in ragged sobs. A moment later, I heard the slamming of the door connecting their cabins. And then a throaty little chuckle.

For a breathless moment longer, I remained transfixed, the red bulb overhead glowing down on me eerily.

Until almost the very end of the voyage, Alicia never again left her cabin.

On the night before we were due in New York, an air of activity took over the ship. The passageways were jammed with trunks and hand luggage in preparation for the early-morning docking, and last-minute packers and celebrants had to thread a precarious path through the pandemonium of porters and their carts.

I was spared the chore of packing, since I had to stay aboard for the return crossing. But after processing and delivering the last of my

prints, I returned to my cabin feeling at loose ends. Staring glumly at the disorder, I decided to head for the more cheering atmosphere of the lounge on the sun deck.

When I reached the lounge, a glance at my watch showed 11:15. But no one seemed to have the slightest inclination yet for sleep. Over farewell champagne cocktails, new "old friends" were exchanging addresses and hollow promises to keep in touch. The orchestra's sentimental strains, the hum of conversation, and the clink of glasses wafted out onto the misty decks where late strollers were enjoying a last breath of sea air.

I was still hunched over my first drink when I sat upright with a jolt. My camera—my only possession of value—was in my unlocked cabin. I made a mad dash back down to B Deck.

The Leica was there, thank the Lord, though not quite as I'd left it; the ship had tumbled it from my bed. Fortunately, it had landed on a soft pile of clothing at the foot. Taking it with me, I stepped back into the corridor to head once more for the upper deck.

I've detailed this relatively trivial aspect of the night's events only to note the fortuitous circumstance of my being outside Ernestine Randall's cabin—with camera in hand—at that particular moment. For now another rolling swell tilted the ship, and her door—off its catch—swung inward.

I stared at the wild disarray inside, the chaos of her cabin making mine seem as nothing. Clothing and luggage were tossed everywhere in a jumble. Evidently she'd been in the climactic stages of her packing and now she was bending over an open suitcase on the bed, pawing through it in search—I presume—of some mislaid or packed item.

But what chilled my blood was the sight of Alicia creeping up behind her, a large heavy-based bronze lamp clutched high over her head.

It was the briefest yet most horrifying of tableaux. I reacted entirely by instinct. At the precise instant that she brought the lamp crashing down on Ernestine's skull, I raised my Leica and captured the deathly act on film.

The flash of light from my strobe unit caused Alicia to stiffen for a terrified split-second, then whirl around. But that instant was all I needed to make a rush for the stairs.

When I referred earlier to Alicia's crime as a nearly perfect one, I

was thinking primarily of her instinct for timing: committing a murder at a time when the violence was least likely to be noticed, a time of total absorption for everyone else aboard, passengers and crew alike. But as she later confirmed, my speculations were correct. She hadn't been waiting around for a suitable time to commit the act; rather, the advantageous time itself was what lit the fuse.

Still, you may wonder, what is so "perfect" about killing someone aboard a ship, from which there can be no escape? With the body's discovery—if not that night, then surely before disembarkation in the morning—wasn't Alicia detained for investigation? Wasn't her motive obvious? Weren't her fingerprints found on the lamp? Or traces of blood on her dressing gown or under her fingernails?

No.

You see, in the crime's moment of conception, Alicia had envisioned the only two alternatives. Either she must vanish (which was clearly impossible) or the *body* must disappear in the fathomless black sea surrounding them.

As you can imagine, it was with great frustration that I had to sail back across the Atlantic several days later, wondering how and when I would be able to challenge Alicia with my damning shot. I was nagged also by the thought of her extravagant clinic costs and expensive Paris gowns, fearing that precious little of her nest egg would be left to come my way.

So you can imagine my almost speechless elation when, nearly a year later in Genoa, I happened to glance through a copy of the European edition of the *Herald-Tribune* and spied a picture of the beauteous Alicia following her marriage to multimillionaire Scofield—ironically enough, the identical picture that is in today's obituary. The caption said that the couple were planning a honeymoon in Rome.

A few days later, the ashen-faced bride and I shared a brief but meaningful stroll in the Borghese Gardens, accompanied by the omnipresent 8 x 10 envelope—the first of our many rendezvous throughout the years.

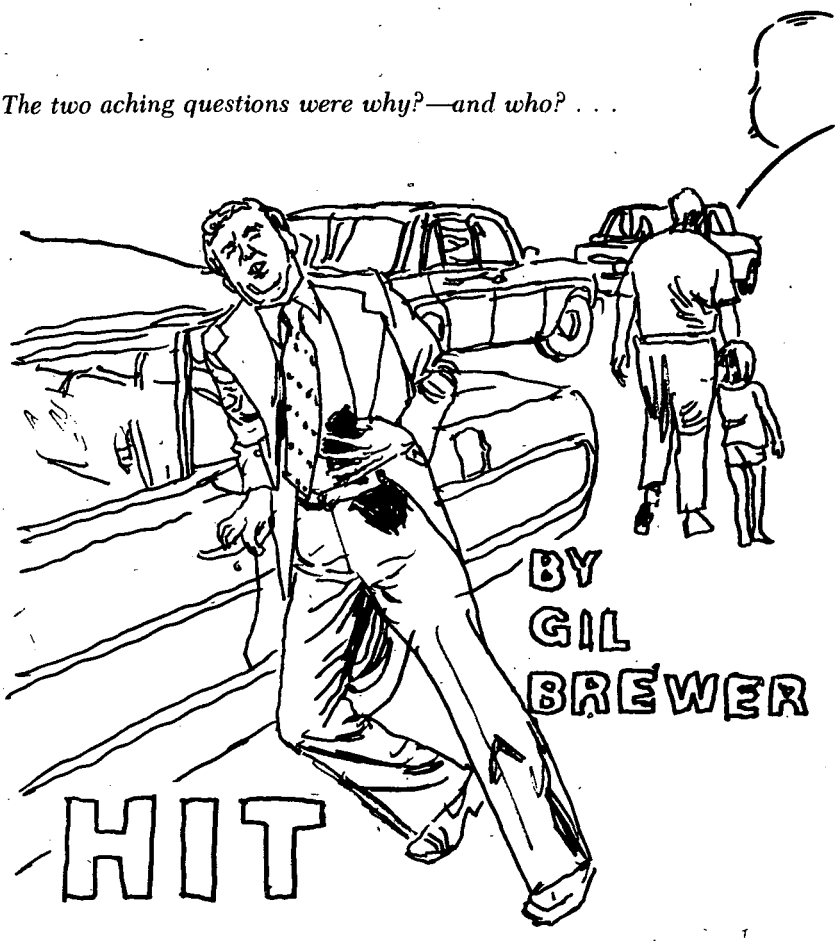
A thought occurs to me regarding my mention of the disposal of Ernestine's body. I hope I didn't mislead you into assuming that slender little Alicia heaved it into the sea?

Hardly. Ernestine was far too massive for such athletics.

No, Alicia had no need to resort to such an impossible maneuver. For shortly after 11:15 that evening—at exactly 11:22 with a monstrous roar of grinding steel, the bow of a passing ship penetrated thirty feet deep into the starboard underside of our vessel, barely missing Ernestine's cabin but making a shambles of it, as I noted—throwing the entire ship into a state of frenzy with that "jolt" I mentioned experiencing in the Belvedere Lounge.

In the fogbound waters south of the Nantucket Lightship, we were beginning our desperate struggle to escape from the *Andrea Doria.* 1,650 of us did survive, including, of course, Alicia and myself—and the precious camera which I'd risked my life to save.

The two aching questions were why?—and who? . . .



Something tugged at his left side and there was an immediate pang of the flesh. At the same moment he heard a backfire out on the street, and a car that had moved slowly in by the curb now sped off. For a second, he just stood on the sidewalk, puzzled, as people moved past. Then he began to feel the pain and a sense of reeling vertigo.

He pressed his hand against his side and looked down. His jacket had flapped open and his shirt was already stained with blood.

A man walking by noticed the blood, quickly averted his gaze, and hurried on.

He reeled again and tried to regain his balance, but sat down heavily on the pavement. He rolled to his knees and shook his head like a wounded animal, still befuddled, not knowing what had happened, frightened about the blood, and came to his feet.

It was only now he realized he'd been shot. Somebody in that passing car had shot him.

For a moment, the knowledge was worse than the rising, throbbing pain, the terrible consciousness of the warm slick blood seeping down his side. Who had it been? That question struck him like a hammerblow. Why?

The pain was spreading and he could feel the throb of blood pulsing from the wound. He stared down at it. It was bad to look at, worsening every moment. The dizziness in his head was worse too, and there was a black outline around his eyes, channeling his sight.

He momentarily lost his sense of direction and looked wildly about for his car—then he spotted it and ran toward it, across the street against the traffic.

Horns blared and brakes squealed as he stumbled heedlessly forward, spilling red stains on the blacktop.

All he could think was that he must get home to Janie. He'd come downtown to pick up her wristwatch at the repair shop. It was in front of the shop that it had happened.

Reaching the car, he flung open the door, beginning to cry. But he quit that— He needed all his strength to get home.

He thought about going to a hospital, but he was afraid he wouldn't make it. He was dizzy and sick and bleeding worse than before. His entire left side was soaked, and the sticky stuff was pouring down his leg and into his shoe.

He thought that he should be reporting it to the police. But what could he report? It was all ludicrous.

"Why me? Why me?" he asked aloud. He got the engine going, jammed the lever into Drive, and slammed away from the curb. Again he chanced oncoming traffic, sweeping in a shrieking U-turn, and pressing the accelerator to the floor.

He thought crazily of the old program on TV about the gangster era back in the '30s. He'd watched it a lot. Things like this happened back

then. But not now.

Only it had happened . . .

But why?

Who had it been?

His side throbbed sharply now and he hunched hard against the wheel for solace.

It's broken some bones, he thought—what must his insides be like? Would he bleed to death before he got home—before he saw Janie?

They'd only been married four months! Was it going to end like this—before it had even begun? His life *had* just begun, he'd had no real life before Janie.

The windshield seemed to be fogging over—then he knew it wasn't the windshield, it was his eyes. Everything was going bad.

He careened down the street, narrowly missed a truck, and caromed off the side of a parked VW.

He fought with the wheel, straightened the car out, and kept his foot on the accelerator, thinking only of Janie now.

Then he heard the siren.

He should pull over.

A gleam of red light flashed in his rearview mirror.

He couldn't pull over. He should. He should tell the cops what had happened. But they might drag him off to the hospital, or the police station.

But he'd be dead before that. He knew he would.

He had to reach Janie, be with her. It might be his last chance to be with her.

The police car kept on his tail, then it tried to come in at the side. The siren cut off sharply and he heard a brusque voice, amplified:

"Pull over! Pull over, you!"

He didn't pull over. He made a skidding right turn onto his own street. It was steep, downhill, and he was ahead of the police car again.

Then he lost control altogether. The car turned wildly. He saw blindingly that it was his yard. The car leaped the curb and slammed against a tree, ricocheted off and dug up the front yard all the way to the porch, where it smashed into the steps.

The siren screamed, cut off. The police car drew along beside him as the front door of the house opened.

He pushed the car door open and fell out, struggling to rise to his feet, pain lancing every part of him now.

"Janie!" he cried.

He was on his knees. But she was there, her hands touching his head, his face.

"Ron—what happened? My God!"

He saw a uniform, a pair of policeman's boots.

"Is this your husband?"

"Yes, yes! Ron!"

He passed out.

He came to, fighting against a frightened whirl. He was in a hospital bed. A nurse stood by. Janie was at his side, along with a man in a blue suit and a uniformed cop.

"You can only stay a minute," the nurse said to the others. She turned to him. "How do you feel, Mr. Stewart?"

He mumbled something, fighting the fear. Janie squeezed his hand and he gripped hers back, realizing he had very little pain now, only fear. They must have given him morphine.

"Janie," he said.

"You'll be all right, Ron darling." She was trying not to cry. She leaned over and kissed him. He wanted to hold her tightly, but he had no strength.

"Mr. Stewart," the man in the blue suit said. He had a large jaw and squinty eyes and his face was very red. "If you'll just tell us what happened."

The nurse was quick. "You'll have to wait. Mr. Stewart is in no condition to talk."

He broke in fast. "I'm O.K.," he said, fighting down the dread, and haltingly he told them what happened. "But why?" he finished. "It's driving me crazy just to know why."

The uniformed cop cleared his throat, but said nothing.

The beefy man in the blue suit said, "Must of been some kids."

"It wasn't kids! I saw the car! I would've known if it'd been kids—"

"You can't tell," the cop said.

The nurse said, "I'm sorry, but you *have* to go now."

"But—" Stewart strained desperately in the bed, beginning to hurt again. Janie kissed him again. "I'll be in the waiting room."

He forced a smile as she blew him a third kiss from the door.

The nurse gave him another shot. "This will put you to sleep again for a little while. Try not to worry so much."

He shut his eyes and lay there, fighting sleep, going over and over what had happened, looking for a reason. But there was no reason—unless it had been a mistake.

That had to be it. They had mistaken him for someone else! My God, think of it! It had been a hit—he looked like somebody else, somebody they wanted dead. He fought the encroaching fog, opened his eyes.

He saw the door open, and a man stood there—middle-aged, a dark suit, a stethoscope hanging around his neck, glinting.

"I'm Doctor Randall," the man said gently.

"Doctor! I've got to see that cop, the one who was just in here."

"No—that can wait. You've got to sleep now."

"Oh, please—"

Then he saw the gun and recognized the attachment on the barrel. It was a silencer. The gun was close to his head.

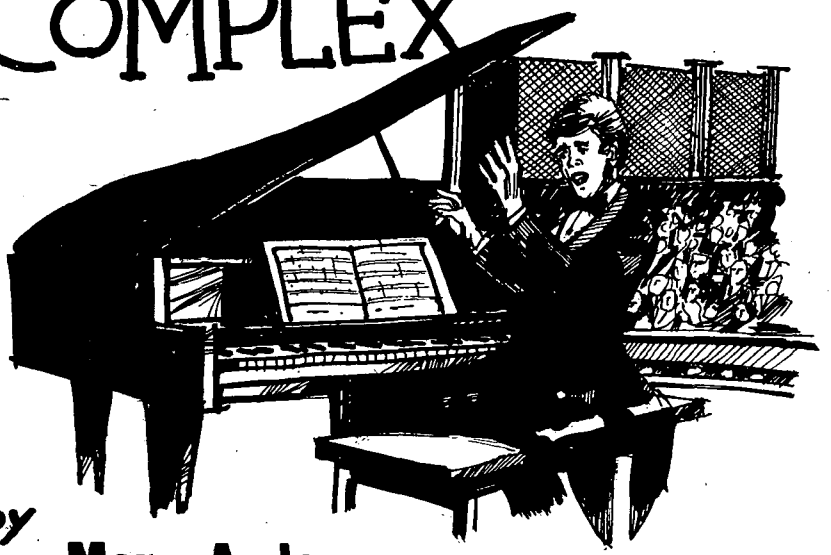
"O.K., Westbrook," Dr. Randall said. "We missed you out on the street, but I've got you dead to rights this time."

Stewart didn't get a chance to tell him he wasn't Westbrook.

And the man with the stethoscope left the room as silently as he had entered.

Not only musicians, but psychiatrists listen with a third ear . . .

THE GUILT COMPLEX



by **Mary Amlaw**

I am the most brilliant psychiatrist in the world. Otherwise Frederic Hollister would never have come to me for help. No hint of my excitement at having snared such a prize showed on my face, but my palms stuck damply to each other.

Hollister, a tall, slender man of thirty already an internationally famous pianist, leaned back casually in the leather chair beside my desk. A defense, of course, that too-poised manner, and no less transparent to

trained eyes than nervous twittering or hostile silence.

"I know your methods are unorthodox and your fees exorbitant," Hollister said with false nonchalance. "But I'm convinced you're the only one who can cure me. I want to be cured, Jeffers. I must be cured."

His fingers inched closer to each other on the chair's arms. He sank back, apparently at ease, but his right heel betrayed him by drumming. *I don't want to be here,* it tapped insistently. *Let's get out of here!*

"I will cure you," I assured him. A little rash to make such a promise, but I had known only success, and Hollister meant much to me. The artist is a rare and fascinating study. A dozen years' research had so far yielded me sufficient scope to formulate original theories; but my work was based on flawed material, self-styled artists who produced little and had no audience but themselves. Now I could test my theses with an appropriate subject—Hollister, an acclaimed concert artist. My palms sweated with anticipation.

His heel stopped beating. For a moment his eyes met mine. "If you're so sure of curing me," he said, "you must know what made me come."

I couldn't suppress a smile of triumph. "The Paris fiasco. Naturally."

He stared.

"No, Mr. Hollister, I'm not a mind reader. But when a famous pianist who has known nothing but success rushes from the stage in midperformance twice—and shortly thereafter turns up at a psychiatrist's office—" I shrugged.

"I've canceled three months' bookings," he said bitterly. "My agent will announce that I'm vacationing in Switzerland for my health." He shifted his feet restlessly. "I don't like being here, Jeffers, and three months is all the time I can take. Either you can cure me in that time, or I'll give it up as a bad job. Quit concertizing. Lose my mind if I must."

"There's another possibility to consider," I warned him. "You may lose your talent."

His eyes started in the classic startle reaction.

"Analysis might increase your talent on the one hand," I informed him, "by freeing repressed psychic energy for redirection. On the other hand, exposing the tensions that cause you to seek artistic ex-

pression could result in erasing the need for such expression. If that happens, your talent dies."

Hollister's breath rushed out in a noisy sigh. Anxiety symptom, that.

"The risk might be less with a more conventional therapist," I said candidly.

He chewed at his lip. "You're the best, aren't you?"

"I believe so."

Again the sigh as he spread his hands. For a full minute he studied them. "I can't perform the way things are," he said with a tight smile. "What have I got to lose?"

And so we began.

In our first three sessions we waded through the usual childhood complexes, the love-hate ambivalences, and other routine matters that most of my colleagues need a year or more to untangle. I noted that parental influence, though it molded the man, had little to do with the artist; and I soon realized that Hollister, who talked so freely about old hurts that no longer mattered, held out every time we approached the trauma that had sent him to me.

"You're wasting your time and mine," I chided as we began our second month of interviews. "We've unraveled your early traumatic experiences. Let's get to the immediate problem."

His fingers dug into the arms of his chair. He bent his head, studying those fingers as if realizing how their desperate grip betrayed him. I waited, emanating sympathetic understanding.

"I'm being haunted," he blurted.

I could hardly hide my delight. The artist is related to the psychotic in that both retreat into a world of their own making. But the artist can leave his world at will. The psychotic, safe in his make-believe kingdom, locks the gate behind him and swallows the key.

Hollister walked the line between psychosis and artistic sublimation. Demented enough to share psychotic experiences, yet rational enough to report on them—my hands wept with exhilaration. Through Hollister I would not only lay bare the mechanism of creativity, but decode the fantasies of psychosis as well!

Hollister looked at me truculently. "You're laughing at me."

"Not at all," I assured him. "Haunting is quite a common experience. We refer to it in somewhat different terms."

His eyes met mine and skittered away.

"Tell me about it," I coaxed, making myself control my keen excitement. "Did it start in Paris, that day when your memory failed and you rushed from the stage?"

"My memory didn't fail!" he snapped, rising to my bait. "It never fails! I've trained it too well!"

"But you couldn't recall the third movement of the sonata you were playing at two successive concerts," I reminded him quietly.

"Because the Thing showed up!" He jerked forward in the chair, his hands gripping its arms as if he'd hurtle into space without them to hold nim back. "Great burning holes where eyes should be. A human form, flaming. A nightmare! It sat beside me on the piano bench. Its hands touched the keys, reaching the notes barely before me. And everywhere the fingers touched, every key, white and black, felt hot to my fingers following after because—" he hunched forward, huddling into himself like an old man in the cold, his voice sounding as though it had rusted in his throat—"its fingers burned scorch-marks into the keys."

"Which no one else could see," I said.

He shuddered and covered his face with his hands. That he, a musician with trained hearing, should be experiencing visual phenomena rather than the more customary auditory disturbances intrigued me. I was exploring the possible reasons for this when Hollister lowered his hands and gripped the chair, fighting for his lost poise.

"This Thing came to you at both concerts," I prompted him. "Were there other appearances?"

He nodded his head. "It came for the third time a week later. I was recording Liszt. This time I could see it was female—" He smiled sheepishly, pretending it was all of little consequence.

"You got up and ran from the recording studio," I said.

He stared. "Then you are a mind reader?"

"No." All the while he sat there smiling, holding himself tight to the chair, his heels had beaten the floor in a pantomime of flight. "A Thing," I mused. "Female and in flames. Is that all you can tell me?"

"It's come several times since then when I was alone practicing," he confessed. "Each time I see it a little more clearly. Its face is pointed. It has long hair wound about its head." His hands drummed nervously. "I don't want to see more. And since it only comes when I'm playing

the piano—" his strained face turned white "—I no longer dare to play." His fingers spread, drumming, drumming, acting out their desire to make music. For long minutes he sat there drumming unconsciously while my mind explored possibility after possibility.

"Hollister. What were you playing the last time your Thing showed up?"

"Rachmaninoff. 'The Isle of the Dead.' "

Intuition leaped at me. "And at the Paris concerts?"

"A Chopin sonata."

"The one with the so-called Funeral March?"

He nodded.

"The Liszt," I prodded, convinced that death fear or death wish was at the core of his present state. "What work of Liszt?"

His eyes flashed as he found the path I was on. "The 'Todentanz,' " he answered, hardly breathing. " 'The Dance of Death.' "

I sat back and let him think it out. He concentrated beautifully, with no energy left over for nervous blinking or twitching.

"Yes?" I asked when he drummed his fingers on the chair. "What have you thought of?"

He squirmed. "I don't see how it could mean anything. It's a stupid idea, really—"

Since I'd had the idea first I hardly agreed with him.

"In all the Thing's appearances," he said, "death music has been the common denominator." His eyes had an extraordinary intensity. "Am I afraid of death, then? Or do I have a hidden desire to die? Am I subconsciously suicidal, and the Thing appears to warn me?"

"Possibly," I replied. "More likely the death wish is for somebody else."

He laughed.

"There is somebody you want dead," I persisted.

"You're out in left field."

"Resistance on the patient's part often indicates the psychiatrist is drawing blood," I told him urbanely. At the moment he looked as if the blood he wanted to draw was mine. "We can easily find out."

"How?"

"Go home, Hollister. Play your piano. Summon up your nebulous visitor. Study it. Bring me a detailed description for our next session."

He glowered at me.

"You want to be cured in the shortest possible time, don't you?" I reminded him.

He sulked a moment longer, then nodded. As he left he glanced back from the door as if reluctant to leave the safety of my office. For a moment I wondered if I'd demanded too much.

"I have weighed the risks," I told him.

"In that case—" he gave me a sheepish grin"—on to the summons."

"I've done it!" Hollister crowed, flinging himself into the chair at our next interview. "Summoned her up four separate times. The first was the hardest because I wasn't too eager to see her—"

"Her?" I interrupted. He was too excited to notice.

"It took nearly an hour to make her materialize that first time," he confided. "She hung back, as if some invisible barrier restrained her. The second time and the third she came closer. The last time she stood right by the piano. She seemed to be in some kind of shroud." He grinned with a boyish air of self-approval.

"Who," I repeated, "is *she?*"

"She was all in flames, burning in the oddest way. Like the burning bush that Moses saw—burning but not consumed. Funny I didn't recognize her sooner. She even wore the same filmy blue housecoat. And the earrings. I should have remembered those earrings. She had once let me play with them. The sapphires in their centers were real."

It was useless to keep squawking "Who? Who?" like some brainless owl; I let him chatter on. His mention of Moses made me wonder if Hollister's hallucination was the result of a long-repressed guilt complex rather than a current death desire. Hollister wasn't entirely emancipated from the religious orthodoxy forced on him in childhood. Why shouldn't his psyche represent a hidden guilt to him by a symbol with disguised religious overtones? The flames of his Thing could be a transparent allusion to the flames of hell, for in the subconscious we are all children with a masochistic need for punishment. What better punishment for a virtuoso pianist than to be unable to perform?

The more I mused while Hollister prattled on, the more convinced I became. We were looking for the root of a guilt complex centering around the person or event Hollister's Thing represented.

When at last he ran down I tried my theory on him.

"Guilty?" He leaned back and grinned. "About Dolores? No way."

The Thing now had a name, I noted. I gave Hollister my most superior smile. "No relationship is completely free of guilt feelings. To insist otherwise is as ridiculous as saying one never feels unhappy."

That sobered him. He huddled together, frowning, one hand rubbing his chin in a self-comforting gesture.

"Who," I asked, "is Dolores?"

"Oh. She was my cousin."

"Ah."

My obvious satisfaction deflated him. "What does that mean?" His tone turned belligerent.

"It means," I replied, "that we are about to unearth the root of your present difficulty."

He sat preternaturally still. His eyes again held the stricken look of our first session; his head inclined deferentially towards me. I, after all, held the key to his unknown self.

"Why have you tried to obliterate your cousin Dolores from your mind?" I asked softly. "Why do you symbolize her as a messenger from hell, the cause of your present inability to perform? What have you and your cousin Dolores done that you want her dead rather than remember?"

It was quite effective. His eyes darkened like expanding coals.

"You cannot play," I told him, "because you wish Dolores dead so much you yourself would kill her if you dared. Your hands ache to kill her. You punish them to prevent this murder—this murder you have already committed in your subconscious."

There is a certain risk in shocking a patient. A sudden revelation could prove too great for a sick mind and induce psychosis. It could also induce homicidal urges toward the analyst. A soundproof, deserted office is not the safest place to be with a disturbed patient.

It is necessary to be very sure of your patient, and to time your revelation perfectly. I'd never made a misjudgment.

Hollister sat there, his eyes glowing. Suddenly he laughed. He rocked with spasms of mirth. Several times he attempted to check himself only to start off again. At last he managed to restrain himself to brief chuckles.

"You take my chair and *I'll* analyze *you,*" he said as he choked down a last gasp of laughter. "Dolores *is* dead. Has been for years. She died when I was eight and she was twenty-four. I only saw her that

once that I remember, when she let me play with her earrings."

"Come, come, Hollister!" The irritability of my tone surprised me. I couldn't seem to control it. "The longer you dissemble the longer you remain neurotic."

"Dolores was—oh—too friendly with too many men," he explained. "The family had disowned her. I guess that's why she made such an impression on me the only time I saw her."

My hands were damp and cold. I felt my toes curl inside my shoes. "Nevertheless that girl has become a symbol of guilt for you," I insisted. "Until you are willing to recognize that fact on a conscious level, I cannot cure you on a subconscious one."

That silenced him. He studied me with an insulting kind of familiarity, as if I were a night-blooming cereus and he a botanist bored by my growth pattern.

"Where does the spirit come into all this psychological stuff?" He tilted his head in thought. "God? The soul? Life after death? Witchcraft and magic?"

"My dear Hollister, this is hardly the time for a lecture on psychic phenomena."

"Dolores had beautiful hair," he mused. "On the red side of gold. The day I visited her she had just washed it. She let me brush it for her. Then she showed me the sapphire earrings." He looked beyond me, his eyes shifting their focus as if he watched someone who had just entered the room. "I liked her," he said. "I liked her very much."

I listened "with the third ear," as Reik puts it, for Dolores was the center of Hollister's present affliction; and in Hollister's cure lay both the aggrandizement of my professional reputation and the key to my work on the dynamics of creativity.

"When I had to leave at dusk she knelt down and hugged me." Hollister rubbed his forehead and frowned. "She began to cry. I remember her holding onto me and crying into my neck."

His hands clung to the chair, his eyes glowed with a mad intensity.

"A neighbor found her next morning. Dead. Stuffed with barbiturates." His eyes flickered towards me and away, as if he spoke to a third person. "I have no guilt complex, Jeffers. I'm being haunted. She died a suicide. Do you know what that means? A suicide lies in unhallowed ground. A suicide can't rest; it walks after death. And Dolores has no one to walk to but me."

He nodded towards the wall behind me as if this Thing hung there.

I suppose it's too much to expect even the intelligent among us to be ree of tribal superstition, but considering Hollister's attainments I was lisappointed in him.

"What can be done to help a suicide rest, Jeffers?" he asked plain-ively. "Bless the grave? Pray? Because whatever must be done, she vants me to do. Begs me to do. That's why she's haunting me." He ooked towards the wall. "That's right, Dolores, isn't it? That's what ou want."

Despair gripped me. Had I pushed too quickly in asking him to ummon his Thing? He was deteriorating before my eyes.

"Hollister." I spoke slowly and firmly to make my voice intersect the ath of his blind stare. "Your Thing does not exist. It is a product of our imagination! You cling to it rather than face something so painful o you that you would rather lose your career, your talent, yes, even our sanity, than expose yourself to that pain."

He turned towards me dumbly, wanting to believe me. He wet his ips with his tongue as if to speak. His head started to nod in agree-nent. Suddenly, as swiftly as if an unseen hand had slapped his face, is head swiveled back towards the wall. I felt the hairs rise on the ack of my neck as if unseen eyes concentrated their force there.

"Can't you feel her, Jeffers?" Hollister whispered. "She's standing uite close to you. She's telling me you are wrong, dead wrong. Do-ores is real. She wants prayers. Just a few prayers, so her spirit may est."

"Deny it, deny it!" I warned. "If you don't, it will make greater and reater demands on you. You'll start conversing with it in public. As ou become more disorganized, your Thing will demand your ears of ou, or your eyes or fingers, and you'll hack them off and hand them ver just as willingly as you're prepared to give it prayers now!" My oice kept rising. I swallowed hard to bring it under control. It was seless; I couldn't touch him. Maybe the hostility between us had oured his confidence in me. Maybe I had been too quick in pushing ny theory at him.

I rested my head in my hands, despairing. This wasn't just another atient slipping over the line into unreachable psychosis, unfortunate s that would be. This was a world-famous personality! My reputation ould never recover if I lost him.

I took a desperate gamble. Although I could not reach the cause of his illness, perhaps I could control the symptom.

"Hollister, is your Thing still here?"

His eyes met mine, agonized, his silence creating an uncanny sense of something behind me. He nodded.

"Speak to it, Hollister," I said softly. "Tell it I refuse to let you obey. Tell it—" the words said themselves in my desperate desire to keep Hollister sane "—that if it wants prayers, it must get them from me!"

I put all the force of my will into my eyes and voice. Hollister looked at me. His hands shook as he gripped the chair. A great shudder shook him.

"Dolores." His voice was hoarse and fitful. "You heard the doctor. He says I'm imagining you. He won't let me pray for you." His breath rushed out in a gasp. "You must get your prayers from him."

The sun had been shining on my desk top but suddenly my hands were in shadow, as if something had come between me and the sunlight. The air moved around me as if an unseen hand had stirred it. I shivered.

The eerie minute passed. "She's gone!" Hollister cried.

The sun touched my hands again.

"Of course she's gone." I couldn't stop shivering. I'm getting the flu, I thought.

"She's promised never to bother me again." Hollister's smile was secretive, almost sly. As if he had a new secret to challenge my skill.

It mattered little, for once again I had won. The erasure of the symptom helped open the way to unraveling the cause.

I learned that Dolores had begged Hollister to send his mother to her that evening. Undoubtedly the girl meant to be found still alive, to be reconciled with her family as a result of her near-suicide. But Hollister had been afraid to deliver the message. As a result, Dolores had died. This was the guilt that had caused Dolores to come back as the reproachful Thing.

My last meeting with Hollister came on one of those windy March days when clouds swing like incense burners across the sky. Hollister sat down with the casual poise of his first visit, but now his right foot no longer tattooed escape on the floor and his hands had no need to grip at the chair. He carried a flat package done up in brown paper.

"The proof of my cure," he greeted me. "My latest recording. It will be released next month."

I opened his gift to let him savor the pleasure of my appreciation.

"Music To Be Haunted By," I joked. "The Liszt 'Todentanz' and the Chopin sonata with the famous Funeral March movement."

"The fourth movement is sometimes called 'Wind over the Graves.' " Hollister flashed me an engaging smile. "Thanks to you it's just another piece of romantically named music to me."

That evening, with Hollister's recording playing on my stereo, I made my final triumphant summary in Hollister's file.

That was months ago. For the last two of them I have spent part of every evening going over and over that file. I am right, I know I am right. Hollister's Thing was the manifestation of a guilt complex; only that and nothing more. There are no malevolent spirits wandering the earth, reproachfully begging favors of the living. There cannot be. Even to think it hints of mental instability.

That reproachful voice! The sudden flashing before my eyes of a hand in flames. The uncanny sense of a nonmaterial presence watching me relentlessly, calling my name.

Yes, I shivered in my office when I defied Hollister's Thing. She reminds me of that. But there was no wraith named Dolores standing between me and the sun! There could not have been!

His psychic guilt symbol for some reason must exactly suit my subconscious. I keep telling her that's why she invaded my apartment the night I played his recording.

At first she had been a weak and fragmentary presence. How has she grown so strong? She won't leave. She waits in the living room for me to come home. She hovers over my bed just as I hit the edge of sleep. I feel her eyes on me—great, hollow, burning eyes. Reproaching me, demanding prayers from me. Persistent—so persistent it's all I can do not to yield.

But to yield is madness! The Thing is only a psychic guilt symbol my psyche borrowed from Hollister. If I find the root of my own guilt complex I will be free.

And I will be free! I will not give in to her demands! She doesn't exist! Do you hear me, Dolores? You don't exist!

She talks to me, tells me the horrors of the place she comes from.

Bows to me mockingly. Greets me with insults.

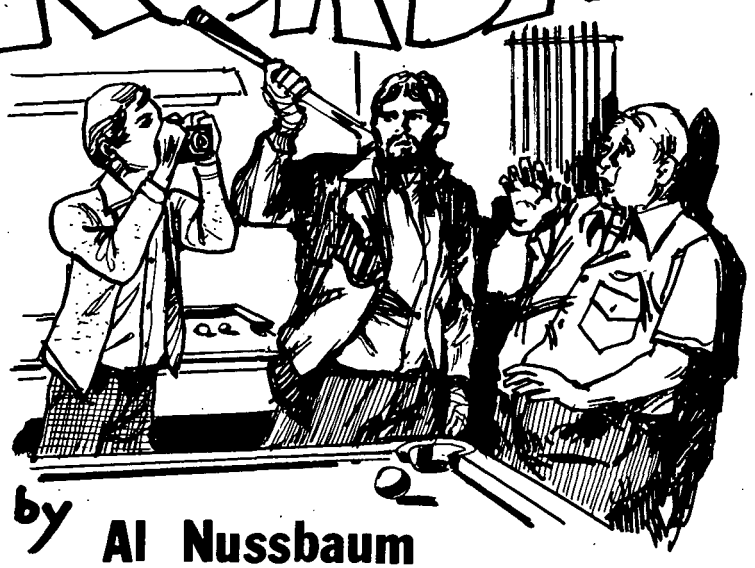
Hollister was able to come to me for relief. Who can I go to? I cling to rationality. My subconscious doesn't approve of me; this Thing has no other reality than that my own guilty imagination gives it. It has no reality of its own!

But if so—and it must be so!—why are five fingerprints burned into my bedroom door where she touched it when she left me last night?

Five scorch-marks so real my cleaning woman pointed them out to me? Pointed them out because she cannot scour them off!

"Amicably if they can, violently if they must . . ."

KORDA



by **Al Nussbaum**

I was sitting on an empty wooden crate in front of my father's workshop, a converted store, waiting to help him unload the truck when he got back from Chicago. He had driven north early that morning to pick up some used jukeboxes, and it was now after six in the evening. He was due back any time.

I was probably the first person in town who gave Leonard Korda any notice, except, of course, the sheriff. Korda strolled toward me from

the direction of the bus station, swinging a small canvas satchel from his left hand. He had a head of bushy, reddish-brown hair and a short full beard. It made him look something like Lon Chaney, Jr., in his Wolf Man makeup on the late-late show. There was a lot of spring in his step.

Korda was about my size. I had just turned fourteen, and I stood five foot seven and weighed one-fifty. Even today when I've reached my full height of six foot one, I don't think of Korda as small. Compact would be a more accurate word. A year ago I saw a Japanese gymnast on television and immediately thought of Lenny Korda.

He had almost reached the sidewalk in front of me when the sheriff's patrol car glided silently to the curb and stopped beside him.

"Hey, you!" Sheriff Masters called, stepping out of the car and adjusting his wide-brimmed hat to sit squarely on his head. He wore khakis and a pearl-handled revolver rode high on a well-padded hip.

Korda stopped and turned toward the sheriff. His beard split in a broad grin. He seemed relaxed and pleased to see the policeman, but his eyes were narrow and wary. "Yes?"

"You jus' got off the six o'clock bus?"

Korda allowed the satchel he was carrying to drop and looked at the watch strapped to his wrist. He confirmed the time and said "Yes" again. He had to tilt his head back to look the sheriff in the eye. His smile held steady.

"Where d'ya think you're goin'?" the sheriff demanded.

Korda hesitated a moment. "New York," he answered. Then added, "Eventually."

"You got a ticket?"

"Uh-huh."

"Let me see it. And some identification."

Korda reached for his hip pocket, and Sheriff Masters put his hand on his pistol butt. Korda must have been watching the sheriff out of the corner of his eye because he slowed perceptibly and twisted his body so the sheriff could see it was a wallet he was taking from his pocket. He opened it and handed a few papers to the sheriff—a folded string of tickets like the bus company issues, a brand-new Social Security card, and an out-of-state driver's license—California, I think.

"This license has expired," the sheriff said.

Korda shrugged.

"What's that supposed t' mean?"

"I don't need an up-to-date license if I'm not driving."

Sheriff Masters handed back the papers. "We don't need any wise guys around here, Korda. Where d'ya think you're goin' now?"

"For a walk. The bus driver said there'll be an hour's stopover here, so I thought I'd work some of the kinks out of my spine. I've been riding for over ten hours."

"O.K., mister, but let me give you a tip—be on that bus when it pulls out. You smell like trouble to me, and I don't want you around."

The sheriff climbed into his cruiser, made a U-turn, and headed back toward the bus depot. He always kept a close personal eye on the bus station because most of the crime in Livingston involved people who were just passing through.

Korda stood with his hands on his hips until the car was gone. He saw me watching him and smiled. "Your sheriff's a hard man, kid."

"But a good one," I answered, echoing something my father always said.

Korda nodded. "That's probably so."

Right then my father arrived. He stopped in the street, then backed his beat-up truck over the curb to the front of the shop. He had two old but still serviceable jukeboxes on the back. They were all chrome, glass, and colored plastic. They looked a lot like the two that had been wrecked a few days before.

"Come on, Bobby," my dad called as he dropped the tailgate and started putting a pair of planks into position for unloading the machines. "And ask your friend if he'll give us a hand."

Korda was standing with his back to him, so all my dad had to go on was his size. He couldn't tell that Korda was twice my age.

We slid the jukeboxes down the planks and into the shop. They were weightier than they looked. Dad and I stood there breathing heavily while Korda glanced around the shop, taking in the bending brake, metal shears, and other tools Dad used for fabricating heating ducts and storm gutters out of sheet metal.

"I thought you were one of my son's school friends," Dad said, noticing the full beard. He offered his work-scarred hand and Korda took it.

Korda smiled, but it was warm and real, not just something to hide behind as it had been with the sheriff. "We just met. I'm Leonard Korda. Call me Lenny." He gestured to indicate all the equipment and

tools, and raised his eyebrows inquisitively. "The music machines seem out of place in here," he said.

"The machines are for a new business I'm starting," Dad told him in his quiet way. "My boy wants to be a doctor, and that's going to take a lot more money than I'm earning now."

Korda pointed to the *Man Wanted* sign in the front window. "I'd like to apply for that job," he said.

"Do you know anything about working with sheet metal?" Dad asked.

"I used to," Korda said. "And I can probably still calculate set-back and bend allowance for most materials."

I laughed. "That's more than the last four guys could do," I said, then stopped myself, knowing I shouldn't have said anything about the others.

Korda picked up on it right away. "You having trouble keeping a helper? Why's that?"

"Well, first there's the pay. I can't afford to pay very much. Then there's the new business I'm trying to start. I'm having some trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I thought placing vending machines and jukeboxes in this area would be a good way to earn the money my boy will need to see him through school. But because I don't have union stickers on my machines, businessmen are being told not to use them. Every time I've hired a helper, he's quit after a few days. I guess someone threatens them, scares them. A few days ago a couple of hoodlums smashed two of my jukeboxes with crowbars. I bought these machines to replace them."

"Why don't you join the union and save yourself a lot of headaches?" Korda suggested.

"I tried. They told me I couldn't join, said this territory has already been taken by a man named Clyde Anderson who lives in Bradyville, the next town west of here. Then I learned he's head of the union."

Korda scratched the side of his face, making the beard fluff out. "That'd make a good plot for a TV show."

"I need a helper who knows sheet metal," Dad said. "If you want the job and don't scare easy, you're welcome to it."

"I scare as easily as anyone else," Korda told him, "but I don't let it get in the way of anything I want to do."

My dad drove Korda back to the bus station in time for him to get his footlocker off the bus before it pulled out. He cashed in the rest of his ticket and returned to the pickup, balancing the trunk on his shoulder. He put the footlocker in back, then climbed into the cab with me and Dad. Across the street Sheriff Masters watched from behind the wheel of his cruiser.

My dad and I were living in an apartment behind the shop. My mother died when I was four, so there were just the two of us. We had a spare room, and Dad offered it to Korda until he could find a place of his own or for as long as he liked.

The next few days Dad worked on the used jukeboxes to see that they'd work properly, and Korda proved that he knew his way around a sheet-metal shop. There didn't seem to be anything he had to learn; he could read blueprints and his work was a match for my dad's.

The Saturday after the machines were cleaned up, I went out to the shop in the morning like I always did when there was no school. Dad and Korda were already there, loading a machine onto the truck. I helped with the second one, then Dad locked the shop and we all got into the cab of the truck.

The two places where the machines had been smashed were out on the highway, a pair of truck stops about a mile apart. When we got to the first one, Dad parked in front and we all went inside, planning to have breakfast before unloading the machine.

The first thing we saw was a brand-new jukebox against the right-hand wall. We gave our orders to the girl behind the counter, then Dad asked, "Is Mr. Allen around?"

"Charlie!" the girl called at the opening to the kitchen. "Someone here to see you!"

A thick-waisted little man in a spotless apron appeared. He had a round face with pink cheeks. The laugh lines around his mouth showed he was the kind of person who is always cheerful, but his smile faded when he saw Dad.

"I thought you were going to use my machine, Mr. Allen," Dad said.

"Yeah. Well, that's right, I guess. I did say that, but—but I was without music for a week. Then a guy showed up and offered to put in a new machine with two hundred songs on it and give me the same

split on the money that you were going to give me."

"We had a deal, Mr. Allen," Dad said reasonably.

"Yeah, sure we did, but those thugs weren't part of it. I'm a businessman—I'm not fighting a war. This machine has the union sticker and won't cause me any worries."

"O.K.," Dad said, accepting defeat. "I guess I can't expect you to put yourself in the middle. I don't want trouble with those people either."

Our orders arrived and we ate in silence. Allen came back when we were nearly finished. "Let me get you folks some more coffee," he said and returned with the Silex. He started to fill my cup, then stopped, staring past me out the front window.

We all swung around to see what he was looking at. A new sedan had pulled up beside the pickup truck and two men were getting out. They both wore dark suits with wide lapels. One pointed to the truck and said something. The other walked around the sedan and joined him.

Allen's voice dropped to little more than a whisper. "Those are the guys who smashed your machine," he said.

Dad got up without a word, wiping his hands on the front of his work shirt, and went outside. I got up and followed him, but Korda hung back. I figured, like Allen, he didn't think it was his fight.

"You men looking for something?" Dad demanded.

"That depends," the larger of the two said. "This your truck?"

"Yes, it's mine."

"Those ain't union machines. My friend an' me, we don't like machines that don't have union stickers."

"Haven't you caused enough trouble already?"

The second man had climbed onto the truck and was tugging at the tie-down ropes. Now he stopped and joined the conversation. "You accusing us of somethin', buddy?" It was as though he were playing a game he'd played many times before.

"You're the ones who've been wrecking my machines."

"You shouldn't go around saying things like that. You need a lesson. Just t' show you how wrong you are, we're gonna dump these two pieces of junk off the truck."

I didn't see Korda approach. Suddenly he was between the men and my dad. He threw a handful of pepper into the big man's face. Then,

while the man clawed at his eyes, trying to get his vision back, Korda hit him below the belt buckle with a looping right hand. The man dropped to his knees, howling in pain. Tears streamed down his face.

The second man jumped down from the truck and roared toward Korda.

Korda stood his ground and waited for him. My dad moved to help Korda, but he wasn't fast enough. The man swung his right fist and Korda stepped inside the arc. He grabbed the man's right wrist with both hands and walked under the upraised arm to stand behind him, twisting the arm and forcing the man to his knees. Korda kept twisting until the man's face was pressed to the asphalt of the parking area.

"Let go! Let go—you're gonna break my arm!" the man screamed.

I thought it was over then, but it wasn't. I thought Korda would let him up, and the two men would drive away, but Korda kept the pressure on the man's wrist, holding the arm straight so he couldn't bend his elbow, then he kicked him in the armpit as hard as he could. There was a loud crack, like a piece of dry wood breaking, and the man's scream ended abruptly. He was unconscious, and it was obvious from its position that his shoulder had been dislocated or broken.

Korda walked back to the first guy. His tears had washed most of the pepper from his eyes. He was kneeling, sitting back on his heels as he looked up at Korda. "Now," Korda said, "go pick up your partner and get the hell away from here."

We watched them drive away, then got into the pickup and headed for the next truck stop, where we also found a new machine had been installed and the owner of the place no longer wanted to use one of my father's.

The next day the sheriff stopped in while Dad and I were getting ready for church. Dad gave him a cup of coffee in the kitchen. The sheriff said he'd heard Dad had been involved in a fight out on the highway and that Korda had hurt a man badly enough to cause him to be hospitalized.

"The highway is outside your jurisdiction, isn't it, sheriff?" my dad said. "Has someone made a complaint?"

"No, no complaints; and you're right, it didn't happen in my jurisdiction."

"What's the problem then? You didn't show much concern when my

machines were wrecked."

"I'm sorry about that, but this is different."

"How?"

"It looks like your troubles with Clyde Anderson are goin' t' be dragged back here. I don't want that. I'm paid t' see that we don't have trouble aroun' here."

Korda came out of his room and joined us in the kitchen. Dad and I were in our Sunday clothes, but Korda wore Levis and a faded T-shirt.

"I see you don't plan on goin' t' church," Sheriff Masters said with disapproval in his voice. He finished his coffee and stood up. "From what I've been hearing about you, a little prayer wouldn't hurt you. Unless you're one of those people who don't believe in it."

Korda smiled. "Oh, I pray all right, but mostly on airplanes."

At seven on Monday morning a deputy sheriff parked an old camper in front of Dad's shop and walked away. He didn't return for it until after dark. He did the same thing on Tuesday and Wednesday. It was there again on Thursday morning when I left for school, but it was gone when I got home.

Dad and Korda were in the kitchen. Dad was fixing spaghetti. I could smell our favorite sauce from the supermarket being heated on the stove. Whenever it was Dad's turn to cook, he made something that was hard to ruin. He was a far better tinsmith than he was a chef, and he knew it.

"The camper's gone," I said. Dad and I had been wondering why it was there, but Korda hadn't seemed curious.

"It turns out the sheriff has been sitting out there, giving us police protection these last few days," Dad said.

"Why did he leave?"

Dad and Korda exchanged looks, then Dad said, "I guess he figured we didn't need him any more."

I was burning with curiosity, but I knew better than to push it. I figured he'd get around to telling me about it in his own good time.

After dinner, while Korda went out for a walk, Dad turned to me. "An odd thing happened today. Lenny and I were working in the shop when two men I'd never seen before started to come in. They had the door open and one of them was already inside when the other one swore like he'd been surprised, grabbed his partner by the arm, and pulled him back outside again. They were hurrying away when the

sheriff climbed out of the camper and took them in for questioning."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Dad said.

The doorbell rang, and we could see the silhouette of the sheriff, easily recognizable because of his wide-brimmed campaign hat, through the curtain on the door glass.

"Maybe the sheriff'll be able to tell us," Dad said and went to let him in.

"Is Korda here?" Sheriff Masters asked.

"He went for a walk," Dad said. "Can I help you?"

"Maybe," the sheriff answered, stepping inside. "I want t' talk t' him about those two men. I couldn't hold them for anythin', but I think they were workin' for Clyde Anderson. I knew he wouldn't like the way his other two flunkies were treated and would bring in a couple more. Their car had Michigan tags on it. An' they had very little luggage, so they didn't plan t' stay, jus' do whatever they'd been hired t' do an' then leave."

"Aren't they in jail?"

"No. I couldn't hold 'em. They hadn't broken any law, an' I can't prove they were intendin' t' break one. I was able t' make 'em identify themselves though. An' they didn't waste any time gettin' out of town. If that kind can't be anonymous, they don't do anythin'."

"It looked to me," Dad said, "that they were planning to leave even before you showed up."

The sheriff nodded. "I had that thought myself. That's what I'd like t' talk t' Korda about."

The sound of power shears came from the shop. "That must be him," Dad said.

"I thought he wasn't here."

"He wasn't. He must've let himself into the shop with the front door key I gave him."

"You gave him a key t' your shop?" the sheriff asked, shaking his head in disbelief. He motioned for Dad to lead the way.

We all went out into the shop and found Korda hard at work, making a length of heating duct. He looked up when we came in and wiped his hands on the front of his shop apron.

"Why d' ya think those fellas were in such a hurry t' leave this afternoon?" the sheriff asked him.

"Maybe they suddenly remembered something else they had to do."

"That's your best guess, is it?"

Korda shrugged.

"In that case, maybe you won't mind comin' down t' my office for a few minutes."

"Why?"

"I'd like t' take your fingerprints, Mr. Korda. I'm not all t'gether satisfied with you. You don't mind givin' me your fingerprints, do you?"

"No," Korda answered slowly, "I don't mind. But I'd like to clean up first." He held out his oily hands.

"Sure, go ahead," the sheriff replied.

Korda walked back to the utility sink to wash his hands. I saw him reach up and take a brown bottle off the shelf above the concrete basin. I didn't realize anything was wrong until I heard the bottle crash against the bottom of the sink and he called, "Bobby, help me quick! Turn on the cold water!"

I didn't pause to wonder why he didn't do it himself. He sounded urgent, so I ran over and did it for him. Then I looked at the hands he plunged into the rushing stream. They were a mess.

Instead of taking down the bottle of hand cleaner, Korda had grabbed the sulfuric acid Dad used to prepare metal seams for soldering. The two bottles were similar. Korda had poured about an ounce of it into one palm, then brought his hands together, rubbing the acid over them until the odor and sudden pain made him realize he'd made a mistake. Anyhow, that's the way I think it happened.

Dad wrapped a clean towel around Korda's hands and the sheriff rushed him over to Doc Bryant's office in the cruiser. Dad went too, and I stayed behind and watched the shop.

It was almost two hours before Dad and Korda came back. Korda's hands were both bandaged—he looked like he was wearing white boxing gloves. The sheriff dropped them off in front of the shop and then sped away.

"He's angry," Dad said. "He thinks Lenny may have burned his hands intentionally to avoid being fingerprinted."

"That's crazy," I said. "He'll be able to get them as soon as Lenny's hands heal."

"No he won't. The doctor said the burns had reached the third layer

of skin. Whatever fingerprints Lenny had are gone forever."

Now that Korda couldn't work, it became more necessary than ever that I hurry home from school afternoons and spend a good part of the weekends in the shop too. But although Korda couldn't use his hands, there was nothing wrong with his head. As I worked, he taught me more about sheet metal than I'd thought there was to learn. Dad was a fine craftsman who knew all there was to know, but he wasn't the teacher Korda was. In one afternoon Korda taught me how to estimate material for the more common jobs, and he soon began instructing me on the fine points of design. I knew then that if I didn't become a doctor, I'd still be able to make a living anywhere in the world.

You might think Dad would have been jealous with a stranger teaching me all the things he hadn't been able to pass along, but that wasn't the case. He worked right beside us, listening to every word. Whenever I looked his way, he'd nod his head in agreement with what Korda was saying and tell me, "That's right. You listen to Lenny, Bobby."

Six weeks after the accident, the small ad my dad had in the telephone book paid off. Someone called about having him install a jukebox in a new restaurant. He drove over and talked to the man, and a couple of days later the two of us loaded the machine onto the truck and took it to him. Korda's hands were now only lightly bandaged, but he still couldn't use them for any heavy work.

A week later, Dad got another call about a jukebox and went out to see if he could place the last one. A few hours after he left, Sheriff Masters came by to tell us Dad was in the county hospital. He'd been found beaten and unconscious outside a vacant building.

We rushed to the hospital and were allowed to see him. His nose was broken and so was his left leg. He didn't know who had done it. They had been two strangers armed with clubs made from cut-down baseball bats or pool cues. That's all he knew.

Korda didn't say much while we were in the hospital room, but as we walked back to the pickup truck he began to swear. I'd heard most of the words before, but I'd never heard them spoken with such venom, and it frightened me.

"Do you have a camera?" Korda asked. He was driving despite the

fact that he had no driver's license.

"Yes."

"When we get home, you get it."

He parked in front, and we entered the house through the back. I headed for my room to get the camera and he went directly to his. It took me a few minutes to locate the camera and put a fresh roll of film into it, and when I came out Korda was waiting by his door with his footlocker beside him.

"Give me a hand with this," he said, and I helped him. We took it out to the truck and put it in the back. His hands were still very sensitive, and he couldn't have handled it alone. We got back into the cab and he started to drive.

"Why did you pack your trunk?" I asked.

"Because I have something to do, and I won't be able to stay here when I've finished."

He took the state road south, then turned west toward Bradyville. I didn't have to ask where we were going.

The Bradyville main street was only half a dozen blocks long and it was dominated by a long flat building that covered most of one block. Across its face was a plastic and neon sign proclaiming *Clyde Anderson's Amusement Center*. It had a restaurant, a bar, a pool hall, and a theater for showing X-rated movies.

Korda parked across the street and went to a pay phone. He was back in a minute, but he didn't get into the cab. "Come on," he said, heading toward Anderson's, "and bring your camera."

I followed Korda through the entrance of the pool hall. It was a deep narrow room with a line of eight billiard tables extending back to a low counter where a fat grey-haired man sat guarding the telephone and cash register. There were half a dozen men playing on the tables farthest back and an equal number sat on high benches along the wall, watching them.

Korda fumbled in his pocket until he found his penknife. It had a thin two-inch blade not much good for anything except sharpening pencils. He went to the first table, jabbed the blade through the green-baize covering, and slit it the entire length of the table.

When he got to the second table he did the same. And at the third too. The blade was penetrating all the way through the pad to the slate base underneath and as it slit it made an agonized sound, like chalk on

a blackboard. By the time he reached the tables that were in use, the players watched his progress with their mouths open. He continued to slash and walk rearward until the fat man shouted an order to two tough-looking spectators who ran forward and blocked Korda's path.

Korda swung at the first one with what looked like an awkward slap, but the lower half of the man's face was driven to one side and he dropped like a sack of cement.

The second man had a cue stick in his hands. He reversed it so he could swing the heavy end like a club and aimed it at Korda's head. Korda crouched and raised his left arm to protect himself. I heard a bone snap when he was hit, but it didn't stop him. He straightened up and fired a billiard ball at the center of the man's forehead. His eyes rolled back and he fell forward, hitting his head on the edge of a table and smashing an ear on his way to the floor.

Korda picked up the fallen stick and stuck the thin end into a table pocket. He leaned on it until it snapped, leaving him with the weighted end in his good hand, and advanced on Anderson. The fat man was pressed against the wall, his eyes darting right and left, searching for a direction to run.

"Sit down," Korda ordered, jabbing him with the jagged end of the broken stick. The fat man started to sputter and protest, but Korda pushed him. He stumbled backward and fell into his chair.

"I'm an old man," he whined.

"You may not get any older," Korda said. Then to me, "Bobby, take this guy's picture."

I aimed my camera at him and snapped the shutter. The bulb flashed and the fat man blinked his eyes.

"Take another," Korda said.

I advanced the film and took the fat man's picture again.

"Now give me the film."

I gave it to him. The room was so quiet I could hear the fat man's breathing.

Korda casually swung the stick in a short chop to his nose.

"I'm leaving this area," Korda said, "but I'm taking this film with me. If my friends have any more trouble—any kind of trouble—I'll send someone around to see you."

We walked back to the truck and drove away. No one tried to stop us.

Korda pulled up at the bus station, and I helped him carry his footlocker to the next bus heading east.

Weeks later the sheriff visited Dad and me. He had a pair of wanted posters and a newspaper clipping. One poster told about a man named Coffey who was an escapee from Folsom Prison. He fit Korda's description and had been a syndicate enforcer serving a life sentence. The picture showed him clean-shaven, so he didn't look much like Korda.

The second poster offered a reward for help in locating a missing war hero who had walked away from an Army hospital. He, too, fit Korda's description and his face might have been the one Korda had beneath his beard.

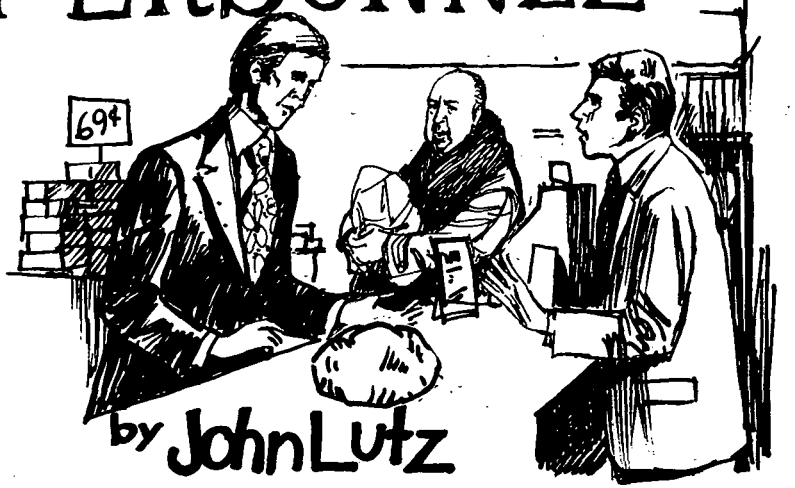
The newspaper clipping was from the *Los Angeles Times*. It told about an aircraft design engineer named Leonard Kaiser who had killed his wife's lover in a fit of rage and disappeared. His physical description matched Korda's.

Any of these men might have been Korda, but I don't believe any of them was.

But whoever he was, I'll never forget him.

Caveat emptor . . .

MISSING PERSONNEL



by John Lutz

November 15. Lieutenant Scotty Mahon was let into Trichard's Department Store through the east door. The time was eight-forty. Trichard's opened at nine.

The store was warm after the raw wind outside that danced along the downtown pavement, chilling the cold-hunched, hurrying pedestrians on their way to work, causing plumes of heavy white exhaust fumes to shred behind the cars sitting idling at the traffic lights. Rubbing his

gloved hands together, Mahon nodded a good morning to the young well-dressed man who'd opened the glass doors for him.

"Mr. Frank?" Mahon asked.

"No, sir," the man replied, bending with practiced alacrity to relock the closed doors. "He's waiting for you up in Housewares."

Mahon signaled for Ames, the uniformed patrolman who'd accompanied him, to stay near the door, then followed the young well-dressed man toward the still escalators.

Trichard's was one of the better department stores in town. As he walked behind his guide, Mahon's trained eye took in the racks of expensive women's gloves and handbags, the counters of jewelry and watches beyond a display of leather luggage. The carpeting was deep and spongy, and Mahon thought that in one way or another the customers were paying for it. He never shopped here.

Frank was on the third floor, not in Housewares but in Notions, near the store's offices. He was a small, nervous man in a perfectly cut blue suit with an artificial white carnation in the lapel. Mahon guessed him to be about forty-five by the etched lines of concern on his bland face and the predominance of grey in his hair and neatly trimmed moustache.

"I was surprised when I called Headquarters to find you were already on the way here," Frank said. He was a medium-ranked executive, but he was in command this morning, and he was worried. The main office in Detroit would hear about this, however it turned out, and judge him. He feared Detroit.

"We got eleven missing-person calls during the night," Mahon said. "At about seven this morning it occurred to us that ten of the missing persons were employed here at Trichard's."

"And they're not here this morning," Frank said, twisting a squarish diamond ring on his left little finger. "That's why I phoned the police."

From the display alongside where he and Frank were standing in Notions, Mahon idly picked up and examined a small gold-plated bull statuette that was in reality a whiskey decanter. "Altogether," he said, "how many employees aren't here this morning who are supposed to be?"

"Thirteen," Frank said, "including Mr. Harper, the store manager."

"Are most of the missing employees salespeople?"

"About half. . ." Frank seemed annoyed with himself for not being

ready with that statistic for Mahon. His eyes narrowed with calculation and he recovered his aplomb. "Seven, to be exact, Lieutenant. Five of the salespeople are male, as are five of the non-salespeople. A total of ten men and three women are missing."

"You're sure they're not somewhere in the store? You have three floors here."

Frank shook his head emphatically. "No, Lieutenant, we checked everywhere. They simply didn't show up for work this morning. And when I arrived half an hour ago, one of the loading doors facing Seventh Street was unlocked."

"Had it been forced?"

"No, it was simply left unlocked, possibly forgotten. Though that's never happened before."

Mahon reflected that a large part of his job consisted of things that had never happened before. "We'll put in a call and have Burglary take a look at that door," he said.

Frank nodded, happy to see some action.

"Nice," Mahon commented, and put down the gold bull.

November 14. "I'd like to return this," Habersby said.

The clerk in Crafts and Hobbies squinted down at the hardened mass of grey sludge and torn cellophane Habersby had set on the counter.

Habersby smiled. "I have my receipt."

The clerk, a gaunt man with a wide flowery tie, looked at him much like a large cod Habersby had once caught during a vacation. "Why do you want to return it, sir?" the clerk asked coolly.

"It hardens too quickly," Habersby said, tapping the shapeless mound on the counter with the nail of his right forefinger. "Modeling clay isn't supposed to do that."

The clerk examined Habersby's receipt as if it were a forged passport. "This item was on sale when you bought it, sir. We can't take it back."

"It hardens too quickly," Habersby repeated.

The clerk shrugged, handed him back the receipt. "I'm sorry, sir." He directed his attention elsewhere.

Habersby saw that, behind the clerk, the modeling clay was still on sale. Sixty-nine cents. And there were high stacks of the cellophane-

wrapped boxes next to the leather-craft kits. It seemed to Habersby that there were tons of the modeling clay there. Probably more in the storeroom.

"You still have it on sale," Habersby said, causing the clerk to turn.

"Would you like to purchase another box, sir? We can do that."

Habersby shook his head. "I don't understand. If it's still on sale, why can't I trade this box in for a good box? This clay hardened too quickly."

The clerk seemed on the edge of exasperation.

An elderly woman with a puffy face and hard eyes approached. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Well," the clerk said, "this gentleman wants to return some modeling clay that's on sale. I tried to explain to him that that is impossible."

"I'm Miss Grabek, the department head," the woman said to Habersby. "Would you like to purchase another box of the clay?"

"No," Habersby said. "I want to exchange this box."

Miss Grabek knew she could not allow that. Just two days ago the main office in Detroit had issued an edict on tightening the store's returns policy. She feared Detroit.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, "we can't take returns on sale items."

"Not even a return on a sale item that's still on sale?"

Miss Grabek's resolve seemed to waver for a moment.

"I know about modeling clay," Habersby said. "This clay hardens too quickly."

"Perhaps it's quick-hardening clay," Miss Grabek suggested.

"No, modeling clay doesn't do that."

"Perhaps you should talk to Complaints on the second floor, sir."

"All right," Habersby said, "I will." He picked up the hardened mass of clay and left.

Mr. Mathers was the name of the man behind the Complaints counter. He listened patiently to Habersby's tale of the modeling clay that hardened too quickly, probed at the shapeless grey mass with a pencil point. The clay was definitely hard, but then how long had Habersby left it exposed to the air?

"Why, hardly any time at all," Habersby said with some indignation. "No longer than I leave my other modeling clay exposed. I know about modeling clay—I use it to make figures of the people in my life. It's

my therapy, Dr. Bemen says; so I know what I'm talking about when I tell you this clay hardens too quickly."

Mr. Mathers looked at Habersby for a moment over the clear rims of his glasses. "Oh, I'm sure you're right, Mr. Habersby, but this is a sale item. All sales are final on marked-down merchandise." Mr. Mathers knew that he could not bend the rules here. Detroit would be watching. Mr. Mathers feared Detroit.

"I would like to see the store manager," Habersby said.

"That's impossible," Mr. Mathers told him. "The assistant manager will see you."

"I'll see him," Habersby said. He could feel the old irritation coming on. Were they trying to trick him? Was it possible that *all* the modeling clay was defective?

The assistant manager sat behind a large desk in a small office. His name was Mr. Clark. He sat behind the large desk and listened to Habersby's story of the modeling clay that hardened too quickly. Ordinarily, for a 69¢ item, if a customer had taken his complaint this far, Mr. Clark would have waived the rules and allowed an exchange or refund. But Detroit was coming down hard.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Habersby," he said, "the rules are the rules."

"They're the wrong rules," Habersby said.

Mr. Clark tried to be understanding. "Unfortunately, it's company policy, sir."

"I demand to see the manager," Habersby said. And though he was a small man, he leaned forward in his chair in a way that was menacing.

Mr. Clark swallowed his nervousness and sighed. "I'll see if that's possible."

Mr. Harper was the store manager's name. He sat behind a large desk in a large office and smiled as he listened to Habersby's request. Then, remembering Detroit, he said no.

"I had planned to buy my winter coat here," Habersby said. "Now I won't."

Though his voice remained friendly, Mr. Harper's features became stern. "I'm sorry you feel that way, but in this situation we simply can't allow an exchange or a refund."

"I had planned to do my Christmas shopping here," Habersby said.

Now Mr. Harper's voice became stern. "I suggest that you leave now, sir." His right hand moved toward a button on his intercom.

Habersby picked up the clay from the desk and left the office. As he walked out onto the sales floor in Notions, he heard a pleasant voice announcing that the store was closing. That meant that the doors were locked and an employee at the main door was letting remaining customers out onto the sidewalk. Habersby paused for a moment and cocked his head. He would just have time to make it to Sporting Goods.

November 15. "There's a rifle and a box of ammunition missing from Sporting Goods," a sergeant attached to Burglary informed Lieutenant Mahon.

Mahon asked Mr. Frank to accompany him, and with the sergeant they left Notions and walked hurriedly down the frozen escalators toward Sporting Goods in the west wing of the store's main floor.

As they hurried through Men's Wear, Mahon glanced over at a grey tweed suit that by its ill fit on the mannequin looked to be worth nowhere near its two-hundred-dollar price tag.

Then he stopped and looked again, not at the suit but at the mannequin.

He looked at all the mannequins.

They weren't mannequins at all.

He turned to get Mr. Frank's attention, but Mr. Frank was staring wide-eyed, the heels of his hands pressing his throbbing temples.

Would they believe this in Detroit?

The working girl these days will protect the working girl . . .

LOVE and ZPG

by MacLean O'Spelin

Consumer protection is big these days. So we all know about tar and nicotine. And aerosol in the ozone and cholesterol in the cream and so on.

But there's one as yet untested product for sale that, in a different way, may be equally dangerous.

Let me give you the facts.

It began eighteen months ago when I was summoned from Chicago

by Leigh Driscoll, president of Coordinate Toy, Inc., of Granville, Mass. I don't enjoy being summoned anywhere but that was just Leigh's way, and when I arrived in her office she greeted me with brisk affection. Then, crisply: "Jake, dear, I want you to steal a doll for me."

"No job is too small," I grinned. "Need any candy from babies?"

"Not any old doll," she said, an edge to her tone. "A doll that Jouets de Paris is developing. I want their design."

Her dark-brown eyes were much too bright and her face was thinner, more tense. As I've always been a sucker for those eyes and that face, I felt a knife-sharp pang. "Jouets de Paris? That ultra chic French outfit that stole your Bionic Baby design?"

She nodded, then smiled—tenderly. It put a soft glow in her brown eyes and a soft glow in my heart. But I wasn't conned. Essentially, Leigh played two roles. One was loving wife—my loving wife. When she took the notion, she could play it with genuine tenderness.

But in our seven years of marriage she'd climbed from chief of design to president of Coordinate Toy. A heady rise. And she pretty much revelled in her role as chief executive.

Understandably, I suppose. But eventually I'd found I couldn't take living with a chief executive. So we did the with-it, Now thing and lived separate lives—a highly unsatisfactory arrangement that I longed to change, but couldn't quite see how.

"Stealing makes me nervous, Leigh."

The brown eyes mocked me. "After ten years with the CIA? Jake, spooking is in your blood. You quit because you thought stock option trading would be almost as dicey—and pay far more. But, admit it, you're bored in Chicago among the wheeler-dealers."

I wasn't all that bored. But I loved the damn woman. "Pitch me."

It was a typical case. Competition in the toy game is knockdown, dragout. Cutthroat. Designs for new toys are the devil's own drudgery to dream up, and they're worked on in tight secrecy. But scruples aren't part of the name of that game and more often than not the first thing a toy company knows, its secret is out.

"An old-fashioned doll, according to trade whispers," Leigh was saying. "Nostalgic. Irresistible to girls of all ages. I must have it, Jake! You can be in Paris tomorrow."

"Yeah," I said. "We'll debate it over dinner tonight."

My thought was that the evening air, or something, would transform Leigh the president into Leigh the wife. Naturally, that didn't fit her idea of executive efficiency. But I can be tough-minded too and eventually she gave in. I couldn't win our little war, but now and then a skirmish went my way.

During dinner in what passed for Granville's class restaurant, she chatted overbrightly of local doings. With the liqueurs, though, she switched abruptly to business. "Coordinate has never had a smash hit like Barbie Doll or Cher or Raggedy Ann," she said. "Just the usual humdrum collection of pink-cheeked, blah-faced stereotypes."

I made sympathetic noises. Insincerely.

"Profits have plunged. Jake, I need a winner. The stockholders have never been keen on a woman president. Some of them would like a change."

Great news, I thought, but didn't say so.

"Imagine. They want something done about ZPG. What can I do?"

"ZPG?"

"Zero Population Growth. The lunatic notion that parents should have no more than two offspring. Preferably, one or none."

"Scares hell out of the toy industry, I'll bet."

"It scares me."

I felt like saying something about her own views against our having children, but I passed. Because I was feeling better by the minute. If she got fired. . .

"I'm rusty, Leigh. I've forgotten how to spook."

She reached for my hand, squeezed it. "Get me that design, Jake."

Blast her! If her design would save her job, it was the last thing I wanted to steal. But the hell of it was I was going to try. That's the way she affects me.

So I muttered an O.K. and went to her apartment to have champagne, in celebration of what I wasn't sure. But I popped the cork, poured the wine. She sipped, set her glass down, and leaned back into the depths of a sofa. Her smile was slow and warm. "Jake, my love," she said softly, "you're such a comfort. Come over here."

You'll notice it was a command. But she was my wife. And a president. Could I have refused?

From the window of the 747, Paris looked as inviting as ever. But I

had a job to do and I got down to it as soon as I cleared customs. I found the man I wanted in his favorite bistro in the 12th arrondissement and we drank *vin ordinaire* and talked of old times and old ops. Then I told him what I needed.

He thought a moment, ordered another demi of the ordinary red, and when it came told me he had an idea. The great-uncle of a second cousin of his wife's was night watchman in the building where the chief of design of Jouets de Paris had his office. And, *sans doute*, his safe.

"Hell no," I said. "I haven't tipped over a safe in years."

His shrug was pure Gallic. "Such a skill is never lost, *copain*."

"It gets creaky, old friend."

Still, for a moment I toyed with the idea of doing a safe job. I've never lacked nerve. But I've never lacked common sense either. A spook who values his health always tries the indirect approach first. If you're caught hunkered over somebody's safe in the dead of night, you're out in the icy cold, naked. And likely to catch a fatal disease.

About all you can do is shuffle your feet, hang your head, and promise never, never to do it again. Which seldom buys much.

My friend was disappointed. But I cheered him up with a discreetly passed wad of francs and told him to get busy nosing out people with more direct access to Jouets' designs than a watchman would have. Direct access—the heartbeat of professional espionage. Even for semipros like I now was.

My favorite hotel was just off Boulevard Raspail and, after checking in, I took the Metro to Cambronne in the 15th arrondissement. Jouets de Paris's factory was in Vincennes, but its design atelier was on Rue Grisel, a few hundred feet from Boulevard Garibaldi—a narrow three-story building shouldered in between two taller ones.

On the ground floor, a gaggle of chattering midinettes in blue smocks scurried every which way carrying materials or templates; a couple of male executives in traditional blue serge strutted about to no apparent purpose—everyone talking, no one listening. Normal French chaos.

And no one paid me the slightest attention as I picked my way through the mob and mounted a stairway in the rear. At the top, a slender girl in a fuchsia sweater sitting beside an antiquated PBX halted me with a dazzling smile.

"Vous desirez, monsieur?"

Admiring her lovely brown eyes, I said I was a buyer for a small but exclusive chain of boutiques in Washington and might I look over Jouets' latest line?

"But of course, monsieur." She turned to grapple with the old PBX. Finally: "Our Monsieur LeSourd can see you. Follow me, *s'il vous plaît.*"

Closed doors flanked the narrow hallway and I took my eyes from the girl's slimly rounded figure to check each one. Halfway down on the left was one marked CHEF DE DESSINS.

Three doors along on the right we found LeSourd's office and, dazzling me with another smile, the receptionist left me with M. le Directeur du Commerce.

From behind an old but handsome desk, he cocked a noncommittal eyebrow at my tale of small, chic boutiques and said warily, "I have thought I know all boutiques in Washington. And all buyers."

I wasn't sure I looked the part but from Leigh I'd absorbed enough of the jargon of the toy game to talk it. And I explained that the Washington in question was the state, not the city, and by the time we'd sorted out U.S.A. geography, LeSourd's manner had relaxed slightly.

"We're expanding," I said. "We want a line of toys. Unique toys. Top-of-the-line toys."

He didn't thaw completely, but sales directors salivate at the mere hint of high margin, top-of-the-line sales. Rising, he ushered me through a connecting door into a display room. I stifled a whistle. Jouets de Paris's top-of-the-line toys were class.

Now I like children and, ZPG or no ZPG, I wouldn't mind having some. But these items were far too fine for children's eager paws. Hell, I could have spent hours myself with the handcrafted figures of French kings in full panoply—nine inches tall with, as LeSourd proudly proclaimed, every detail of armor and heraldry authentic. Even the kings' horses had been researched and their body markings exactly reproduced.

There was a toy computer—that worked. Dolls of all nations, their intricate costumes handsewn. A solid-state Bionic Baby—obviously built to the design stolen from Coordinate Toy, and built beautifully too.

"Interesting," I condescended. "But not unusual. Not new."

He smiled thinly. "But, as you desired, very very expensive."

Which meant he'd accepted me as buyer but was skeptical of the size of any order I might place. So I made a show of jotting down some prices—which almost made my hair stand on end—and said I'd be back to chat further about two or three items that interested me.

Nodding, he pressed a button which brought the brown-eyed girl. As she was escorting me along the hall, the chief of design's door opened and a man came out.

Before he could close and lock the door, I got a quick glimpse of a paper-strewn desk and a bulky black safe.

I stopped at the PBX to exchange pleasantries with the girl and to mention that I sought not only toys but any kind of merchandise appropriate to boutiques specializing in the costly unusual. I hadn't been in Paris for some time, had she any ideas of where I might look?

Propping her chin in one slim hand, she considered. No, nothing occurred to her. But she'd give it thought and, should I stop in again, who knew what ideas she might have?

There was a glow of warm mischief in her dark eyes that reminded me of Leigh. Of Leigh before she became the uptight executive, that is.

I'd seen or heard nothing of a new doll, but I hadn't expected to. What I had done was make the acquaintance of two people who'd have some degree of access to the secret design. People in the toy business—who'd be on guard against nosey American strangers.

I played it softly. I bought LeSourd long, sumptuous Parisian lunches, which he ate with carefully repressed gusto. And he ate up my heavy flattery, and told me what was wrong with America and Americans.

For me the lunches were dog work. And LeSourd volunteered nothing about secret designs. But I learned what made him tick.

In the evenings, I worked on the brown-eyed girl, Monique. Pretty name, pretty girl. Spooking isn't all dog work. We dined. We cruised the moonlit Seine on the *bateaux mouches*. We danced in *boîtes de nuit* and in discos. We ate early morning onion soup where Les Halles used to be.

In just under a week, I had evaluated them both. LeSourd could be bought. He'd know of any new designs on Jouets' drawing boards. He was sly enough to figure how to get his hands on them. But he couldn't

be trusted. He'd get me the doll design. He'd accept a healthy payment. Then he'd find a safe way to let his superiors know that somehow, inexplicably, the design was no longer a secret. He'd consider that being honest. And he'd thrill with secret joy at having flimflammed les Américains. I wrote him off.

For if Jouets knew that a competitor had their design they'd simply whip into priority production and get their doll on the market first.

First to market, first to cash in big is axiomatic in the toy game.

Monique, too, could be bought. But not with money.

With her, it had begun as a lark. I was the amusing stranger from across the seas, the not-too-repulsive Yank who enjoyed Paris as much as she. But then those brown eyes had begun to soften when they looked into mine and I could read in them thoughts far more serious than what a gas it was to be squired around by a droll fellow who spoke French with a quaint accent.

Sure, I could persuade her to get me the design. I'd been a hard-nosed spook, and I'd learned to play the dog-eat-dog Chicago stock options game and make a solid profit. Persuading a little French receptionist to steal a few sheets of drafting paper was right down my alley.

But warm dark-brown eyes get to me, so, kicking myself for being a soft-nosed sucker, I wrote off Monique.

Back to zero. Which was fine. I hadn't wanted to play Leigh's game in the first place. What the hell, I *wanted* her to lose her job.

All I had to do now was go back and eat a plate of crow and explain to Leigh that I'd given it my best but it hadn't been good enough. Her eyes would flash. Icily, she'd ask me to recommend someone with enough moxie for the job. It would be demeaning. But my failure just might work to bring us together.

Facing her would be no cakewalk, though. So it was easy to convince myself to spend a few more days revisiting Paris. I drifted through the Egyptian rooms in the Louvre, Le Musée de l'Art Africain, Le Jeu de Paume. But when Van Gogh's Bronze Vase didn't blaze from the canvas for me as it always had before, I knew I was whipped. Against my better judgment, I took the Metro to the 12th arrondissement.

My old friend was drinking Alsatian beer and eating sausage. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he told me he had lines to a couple of artisans at Jouets. I said to forget them and get me and his relative, the watchman, together. "H'okay, pal," he said, beaming, and

while I ordered more beer he headed for the telephone.

The watchman turned out to be a spry gamecock of sixty plus, and he had scruples. But he also had a little granddaughter he loved very much and she needed her teeth straightened. French orthodontists are as overpriced as their American colleagues—we had the makings of a bargain.

He held out for more than I wanted to pay. But when I agreed to remove nothing, to photograph nothing, he dropped his price and we sealed the bargain with a clink of our beer glasses.

Training in visual recall was a CIA fundamental. All I needed was a close look at the contents of the chief of design's safe. I remembered that safe. A Mercier. A French make I'd once been an authority on.

Blowing or drilling a safe leaves a godawful mess. Jouets de Paris would know some cat had made off with their prize pigeon. Tipping a safe via the combination is the safest and tidiest bet, but not the easiest. I was sweating when the watchman let me slip into the design atelier very late the next night.

The safe was a Mercier, all right. But, like Monique's switchboard, it was an antique. Ordinarily I like a little age on a safe. Long use leaves minute traces of wear in a locking mechanism. To someone with sensitive ears and practiced fingers those traces are clues to the combination. But I was rusty, and that squat black hulk was so worn its time-eroded mechanism gave me a mountain of clues. All false. After an hour, the watchman began to mutter in my ear. "Monsieur, you have assured me you are expert. You have told me—"

Sure I'd told him I was an expert. I *had* been. But this ugly old box would be rough to open even if you knew the combination.

For three hours I sweat over it. The old watchman was game—he knocked off muttering so I could listen to the Mercier's innards. But he got to jittering around the increasingly stuffy room until I had to tell him to get the hell out into the hall.

On the forty-seventh try, I twisted the dial back to zero without much hope and levered the handle. *Thunk*!

That *heartwarming* thunk that means a safe's steel bolts have disengaged from the frame.

Taking a breath that went clear to my heels, I eased the heavy door open.

In four minutes I'd found what I wanted. Six sketches in a numbered series, beginning with one of a carved figurine that I recognized at once. Each of the other five was a development, a modification, of the one before. The sixth, though not quite a working design, was recognizably a doll—old-fashioned, as Leigh had said, nostalgic. Though age-old might have been a better word.

I committed the sketches to memory, replaced them, closed the safe, and spun the dial. Spurred by undisguised relief, the watchman herded me swiftly out into the first glimmerings of dawn.

In my hotel room, I tossed down two quick cognacs. Maybe Leigh was right, maybe spooking was in my blood. But hours of sweating over a balky Mercier would water anyone's blood. I went to bed.

When I awoke, I immediately got to work reproducing the sketches. What Jouets had in mind was clear. The first sketch was of an A'kua Ba, a traditional good-luck fetish I'd seen many times in West Africa. The others progressively softened and modernized the ancient original.

Nothing new about inspiration from Africa. You can see it in Picasso's work. Modigliani's enchanted, enchanting women could be sisters to the women of Fulani carvings. So why not a commercial item, a doll derived from a tried-and-true centuries-old pattern? With a little good luck magic thrown in for good measure.

I don't believe in magic and neither do the French and neither do you.

But I could read the minds of the people at Jouets. Just in case, just in *case* there is power in the ancient mysteries, let's borrow some. Mightn't we come up with that little something extra that might make a new doll sell like hotcakes—or, better still, crêpes suzettes?

When, two days later, I spread out the six sketches on Leigh's desk, she got the idea right away. Not about the magic—that was just a daydream I'd had that wasn't worth confusing a sharp chief exec with—what she saw was the six-step metamorphosis of a primitive, oddly fascinating figurine into a quietly compelling doll with an endearing expression.

"They're sketches, not designs," I pointed out. "Jouets isn't ready for full production. You can beat them to market easily."

"Perfect, Jake," she said, her eyes warm. "You're a doll yourself. How can I ever thank you?"

"Easy. Crack another magnum of champagne with me tonight. And quit your job."

She looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. Then she buzzed her secretary and fired off an action memo to her design staff re the new doll.

Well, what the hell—at least we celebrated something or other that evening. I'd made a copy of the final sketch and, before burning it in Leigh's fireplace for security reasons, we propped it on the mantle. I spouted a dozen or so toasts to it and Leigh raised her glass an almost equal number of times, saluting the surging sales Coordinate would soon experience.

Not exactly matrimonial bliss. But, not hell on earth either.

The doll has been on the market for over a year now and it's selling like crêpes suzettes. I think I may start watching population statistics.

A'kua Ba is a good-luck fetish. In Africa a major form of good luck is having many children. Essentially, then, A'kua Ba is a fertility doll.

Families of a dozen children are common in West Africa. If just a little of the ancient magic has survived, Zero Population Growth is in for a rugged time. Maybe a mind-boggling time.

So if ZPG is your bag, this new product on the market could be dangerous.

Nonsense. I don't believe in magic and neither do the French and neither do you.

When I'd propped that sketch on Leigh's mantle I'd known there was no magic in it. But I'll admit that I'll try anything to have a full-time wife again and I figured that becoming a mother would get Leigh fired.

One hundred percent wrong. The stockholders love a chief executive who's also a mother. What better image for a toy company than motherhood?

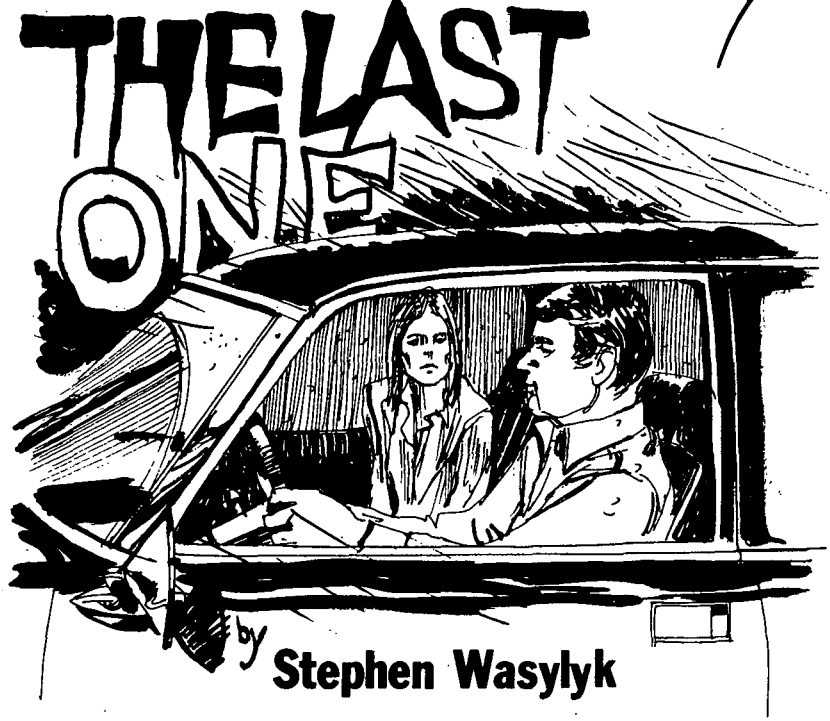
So I lost again. But there's a big consolation. A beautiful baby daughter. And she has the big dark-brown eyes that get to me every time.

Well, those are the facts I promised you. What do you think? Magic? Or nonsense?

Of course, if this new doll on the market really worries you you can always try knocking on wood.

A woman's spirit is something Ibsen also wrote about . . .

THE LAST ONE



by **Stephen Wasylyk**

Darkness caught Mace Griffin on the road, the summer night descending with a swift-flowing, purple fluidity that quickly filled the ancient creases of the Carolina valleys, spilled over the tops of the rolling mountains, and blotted out the landscape with a density that left Griffin with the feeling he was driving along the bottom of a dimensionless black pit.

The narrow blacktop was straight and smooth, and Griffin, with ten

hours of driving behind him, found himself fighting the sensation that he was suspended motionless while the white center line flowed beneath him. Then the thunderstorm hit. The storm settled low in the valley, the lightning close, the rain smashing hard against his windshield and forcing Griffin to strain to see where he was going and to work to keep the car on the road.

His headlights picked up a frantic motion on the shoulder far ahead and as he neared it, he saw a small, white-faced young woman waving him down.

Griffin slowed and stopped. Beyond the girl an old pickup truck canted awkwardly, its right side deep in the ditch beside the blacktop. He leaned over and unlocked the door and the young woman tumbled inside, her breath coming in low sobs. In the weak yellow dome light, she appeared no more than eighteen, her long blonde hair hanging in soaked, tangled strings. Wetness glistened on her narrow, fine-boned face; her thin shirt was sodden and pasted to her body.

She clutched at his arm, her eyes shadowed and frightened, her voice thin with desperation. "Please! You have to help me! He'll kill me!"

"Who?" asked Griffin dumbly.

"My husband." She hugged herself as if she were cold, rocking back and forth like a child impatient to get started. "Please! Let's get away from here!"

Griffin put the car in motion. "Why should your husband want to kill you?"

"He's cruel," she said. "He'll kill me sure for leaving him. He said he would."

Griffin had heard the words spoken many times before with various degrees of intensity. He tried to make his voice comforting.

"Some men talk like that," he said. "They don't really mean it."

"He means it. He'll kill me."

The flat despair in her voice gave Griffin a cold feeling. He glanced at her in the dimness and saw she had lowered her face to her hands and was crying softly.

Her presence had brought a musty odor into the car, as though a chest of moldy clothing stored too long in a damp place had suddenly been opened. She exuded a coldness he could feel on his arm, and Griffin reached down and turned on the heater.

"Relax," he said softly. "You're safe enough in here. Is there a town up ahead?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then a law officer will be there. We'll find him and he'll see that your husband won't harm you. What's your name?"

"Selma Ann Monroe," she said.

Griffin went back to concentrating on his driving. The storm seemed to have acquired an anger directed solely at them, gusts of wind trying to nudge the car off the road, rain flooding across the windshield to be thrown aside by the wipers with an anger of their own. In the fringes of the headlight beams, the dense wet-black trees along the road swayed, and shallow pools of water in the roadway drummed against the underside of the car.

The girl remained hunched over, her face in her hands, the heat flooding the car doing nothing to dispel the moldy odor.

Griffin sighed. If he had any sense, he would have been sitting in a pleasant bar somewhere miles behind him, enjoying a drink after a good dinner.

But then, as the lieutenant had said, "You want to take a week off and visit your sister in Florida, fine, but go down to the airport and climb on a jet and two hours later you're there. When your week is up, you climb on a jet again and two hours later you're home. Driving down and back alone shows you ain't got no sense, Griffin."

Griffin was inclined to agree with him.

The town came up suddenly, a few scattered houses first and then more, closer together, linked by intersecting streets on either side of the highway that preceded a small, darkened business district of two-story brick buildings. At a main intersection protected by several large traffic lights flashing a high-intensity yellow that burned through the rain, Griffin knew he had reached the town's center and he leaned forward, looking for an open service station or restaurant where he could ask the location of the police. To his right and ahead, he spotted the red neon sign of a motel.

The motel wasn't large, a long low building painted white, fronted by a walkway that ran the length of the building under a low roof and hemmed in by a wrought-iron railing. Griffin pulled up under the lighted "Office" sign, ran around and opened the door for the girl.

"Come on," he said.

She hung back, fear in her eyes, shaking her head. "Not here," she whispered.

He placed his fingers gently on her arm, the wet shirt cold against his fingers. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said. "You'll be warm and dry and the police will take care of you."

She left the car so slowly she might have been sleepwalking.

He pushed open the door to the small lobby. Fastened high on one wall, a small television set with a snowy picture spoke softly to itself. Griffin could see no one behind the high counter. To one side, several aluminum-and-plastic chairs were lined up against the wall. He motioned to the girl. "Sit down and relax."

He walked up to the counter. Behind it, hidden from view, was a young man of high-school age tilted back in a chair, his hands folded on his stomach, sound asleep. Griffin slapped the counter top.

The young man snapped forward, his eyes wide and startled before they focused on Griffin. He grinned.

"Sorry," he said. "Some of them programs will put you to sleep. You want a room?"

"Yes," said Griffin, "but first I want the law. Where can I find the sheriff or police chief?"

"Sheriff Keeshaw would be home right now," said the boy. "I have his number. Is something wrong?"

"Not really," said Griffin. He pulled the phone on the counter toward him. "You want to give me that number?"

The boy grabbed up a small plastic-bound book. "Sure," he said.

Griffin dialed. A man answered.

"Sheriff Keeshaw?"

"Yeah," said a deep voice.

"My name is Mace Griffin. I picked up a young woman some twenty miles south. Her pickup truck went off the road in the rain but that isn't the real problem. She says she's running away from her husband because he's threatened to kill her."

There was a silence.

"Did she give you her name?"

"Selma Ann Monroe," said Griffin.

There was another silence.

"I suppose you're at the motel," said Keeshaw.

"It's the only place I found open."

"Is she there with you?"

"That's right," said Griffin. "I don't know what it's all about but it seems to me you should lend a hand."

"Stay there," said Keeshaw, his voice urgent. "For God's sake, keep an eye on her and don't let her leave. I'll be right over."

Griffin cradled the phone and turned to the girl.

The chair was empty.

What the hell! thought Griffin.

She couldn't have gone out through the door—he would have heard it open and felt the draft. The only other entrance to the lobby was a door behind the counter and she certainly hadn't used that.

He turned to the boy. "The young woman who came in with me. Did you see her leave?"

The boy's eyes were puzzled. "I didn't see no woman."

Griffin stared at him for a moment before he realized the boy was telling the truth. He had been asleep when they had come in, so he hadn't heard Griffin speak to the woman and the high counter had blocked his view of the chair where she had sat.

Griffin ran out into the rain. No one was in his car. He trotted out to the highway and looked in both directions. Nothing moved.

She must have slipped out somehow while his back was turned, but by that time the boy was on his feet and facing the door so he should have seen her.

What the hell, thought Griffin again. She's walking around somewhere. Let the sheriff find her.

He went back into the lobby where the boy offered him a tentative smile.

"Honest, mister," he said. "I didn't see her."

Griffin waved a hand. "It doesn't matter. Let me have the key to a room. When the sheriff gets here, send him over."

He had dragged his bag in from the car, changed his wet clothes for a robe, and was toweling his hair when the tap came at the door. He opened it to find a middle-aged man as tall as he was but a great deal thinner, with skin stretched tight over his facial bones and deep creases on either side of a firm mouth. The man was wearing a

western-type hat and a yellow slicker, both dripping water.

"Come in," Griffin said. "Did the boy in the office tell you the woman left?"

"He said he never saw her," said Keeshaw.

"He was sitting behind the desk," said Griffin. He tossed the towel aside. "Nevertheless, I did pick her up and she *was* here. She shouldn't be too difficult to find. Where can she go in the rain?" He paused. "Of course, the longer you wait, the further she'll get."

Keeshaw took off his hat and slipped off his slicker. "No hurry. I could cruise the streets all night but she isn't going to be there."

Griffin felt a flicker of anger. "Look," he said. "I've driven a long way today and I'm tired. I told you. I picked up a woman in trouble. She said her husband was going to kill her. I brought her here and then she walked out—why I don't know, because she was wet and cold and scared and where she thought she could go on a night like this is beyond me. But that isn't my problem. I did what I could and it's your ball game from here on in. All I want to do is take a hot shower and go to sleep."

"There's a little bit more to it than that," said Keeshaw. He smiled and motioned to the flask in Griffin's open suitcase. "Does that flask of yours hold more than one drink? I think we're both going to need one."

Griffin stared at him for a moment, splashed a little bourbon into the bathroom glass, then filled the jigger-shaped cap of the flask for himself. He held it up. "Cheers," he said.

Keeshaw emptied the glass and stared at it thoughtfully. "Where are you from?"

"Philadelphia," said Griffin. "Driving back from a vacation in Florida."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a city detective," said Griffin.

Keeshaw studied him with new interest.

"Detectives take vacations too," Griffin said.

Keeshaw walked back and forth. "Maybe it's a good thing you're a detective. What I'm going to tell you makes no sense to me, but maybe you can come up with some sort of answer.

"About a year ago I got a call from this motel about six in the morning. A traveller had wanted to get an early start so he went to the

office to check out. As he passed one of the rooms, he noticed the door was open wide and the room torn up. He poked his head inside and saw a badly beaten man on the floor who seemed to be dead. When he ran into the office to tell the clerk, he found him dead too.

"When I got here, I discovered the man in the room wasn't dead yet, although he wasn't far from it. The nearest hospital is twenty miles away but we got him there fast and managed to save him. It was a good thing we did, because otherwise we would have had no idea what had happened. The man was a sales representative just passing through. The night before he had picked up a young woman named Selma Ann Monroe whose pickup truck had slid off the road during a rainstorm. She told him she was running away from her husband because he had threatened to kill her. The man brought her here the way you did. He suggested she call the police, but she said she would be all right. He took a room and so did she. He went to bed. All he could remember after that was hearing someone enter his room and, before he could move, being dragged out of bed and beaten unconscious."

Griffin leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "And you're going to tell me there was no woman."

"No," said Keeshaw. "She had been here, all right. We found the registration card with her signature and a small bag in her room, and I was well acquainted with Selma Ann Monroe and her husband." He paused, and Griffin thought he detected a brief shadow of pain in his eyes.

"Selma Ann running away because Muncie was going to kill her made sense because Muncie is one of those men born mean and brutal," said the sheriff. "He treated her as bad as a man can treat a woman but Selma Ann had a lot of fight and spirit and it was only a matter of time until she took off. And anyone who knew Muncie knew he wasn't going to stand for that. If he couldn't break her, he'd kill her, and he's the kind of man who'd also kill anyone he thought had helped her."

Keeshaw pulled forward a small chair and straddled it, folding his hands over the back. "The way I figured it, Selma Ann finally had her fill, took the truck, ran it into the ditch, was picked up by the salesman, and felt safe enough when she reached the motel. But the clerk, an old guy who was a first-class busybody, took it upon himself to call Muncie and tell him his wife had checked in with a strange man.

"The phone records showed a call to Muncie's number that night. He claimed it had been Selma Ann telling him she wasn't coming back, but that he never knew where she had called from. It was my opinion that Muncie came, killed the old man so he couldn't be a witness, beat up the salesman and left him for dead, and took Selma Ann back. So I went out to Muncie's farm, expecting to find Selma Ann there, but Muncie said he hadn't seen her since she had stolen his pickup. I knew he was lying, so I got a couple of men and checked out all the buildings on the farm.

"We didn't find her. There was nothing else I could do. There was no way to prove he had killed Hooper, beaten the salesman, and taken his wife from the motel room. And there was the outside chance that Selma Ann had managed to get away. Until. . ."

"Until what?" asked Griffin.

"A few weeks ago, I had a call from this motel again. A truck driver told me exactly what you did. He had picked up a young woman who told him her name was Selma Ann Monroe and she was running away because her husband was going to kill her. The driver thought I should know about it, but by the time I got here the woman was gone. The clerk hadn't seen any woman but the driver swore he had brought her in and she must have run away. I cruised the streets all night and found nothing. In the morning, I went out to Muncie's farm. He said he hadn't seen her since the night she disappeared. Does that strike you as a little strange?"

"Strange would be a mild word for it," said Griffin.

"All right," said Keeshaw. "Then see if you can find a word for this. Last week it was a couple from Ohio. They picked her up at the same spot and brought her here. The man came inside and called me. His wife stayed in the car with Selma Ann. Selma Ann was in the back seat, the woman in the front. The woman was talking. She asked a question and didn't get an answer, so she turned around. Selma Ann was gone, yet the woman swore neither door had opened."

He smiled wryly. "The couple didn't stay long. They talked to me and took off and I don't think they stopped until they reached home." He stood. "Now tonight you call me with the same story."

His voice held a note of soft appeal. "Maybe you can tell me. What do I *have* here? A ghost? Because I might as well tell you, I convinced myself a long time ago that Muncie killed Selma Ann that night and

buried her somewhere in the woods but I can't prove it any more than I can prove his killing the clerk."

Griffin poured himself another drink and downed it. "I don't know what you have," he said slowly. "If I hadn't picked up that girl myself and you told me this story, I'd have to think you were either crazy or putting me on. But I saw her just as sure as you could produce the names and addresses of the truck driver and the couple from Ohio. I'm not going to deny the existence of ghosts because I've seen too damn many strange things happen, but if that girl I brought in tonight wasn't flesh and blood, she sure fooled me."

He stood up and thrust his hands into the pockets of his robe. "You have an unusual problem but I don't see how I can help. I'm due back the day after tomorrow and I have a full day's drive ahead, so I'll get a few hours sleep and take off. Maybe the girl will turn up again. Maybe you'll see and talk to her yourself. Maybe you can settle it somehow, but there's nothing I can do."

Keeshaw studied Griffin and then sighed. He pulled a notebook from his pocket, scribbled in it, tore out the page, and handed it to Griffin. "That's my phone number. I can't shake this thing from my mind. I don't think you'll be able to either. You might get an idea about it. If you do, call me, because for me there's more involved than trying to figure out why a girl comes and goes. I'm sure Muncie Monroe has two murders on his hands and him walking around free sticks in my craw."

Keeshaw paused and when he resumed, his voice was gentle. "Selma Ann was a pretty little thing, Griffin—feisty and full of good spirits. She should never have married Muncie Monroe. Trouble was, no one had a chance to prevent it. She just ran off and did it. But if she wanted to walk out on him later, she was entitled to do that. He had no right to stop her."

"Why didn't she come to you for protection?" asked Griffin.

Keeshaw slipped into his slicker and stood torturing the brim of his wet hat with his fingers. "I wish she had," he said softly. "Lord, how I wish she had. But there was a thing, you see—" He broke off and jammed his hat on his head. "No use worrying about that now. Call me, Griffin. If you can make anything out of this, call me."

Griffin lay in bed, his hands clasped behind his head, his eyes closed. He was relaxed after his hot shower, but his conversation with

the sheriff had wiped out his desire to sleep.

The girl. Was she a ghost? She had touched his arm when he had picked her up but he had felt no pressure from desperate fingers, only a cold sensation. And when he had taken her arm to help her from the car, he had again felt that coldness. And there was the moldy odor the heater would not dispel.

He hadn't seen her leave the motel office and the woman from Ohio hadn't seen her leave the car.

Weren't ghosts supposed to be able to pass through solid walls?

Griffin frowned.

The sheriff could be crazy, except that he didn't come across as crazy. He had impressed Griffin as sincere and conscientious, a man who could be as tough as he had to be.

And there was still the girl, ghost or not. There had been an appeal in her eyes that was too deep and too anguished to be put into words. Maybe she was a ghost, but her appeal was real because Griffin had seen it before.

There is nothing I can do now, he thought.

He forced his thoughts elsewhere and eventually he dozed off.

Suddenly he was wide awake. It took several seconds to realize where he was, and then he saw her in the darkness near the door, her face white, her blonde hair hanging in wet strings, her shirt soaked and clinging.

He felt his skin crawl. Until the sheriff had talked to him, the thought that the girl in the car wasn't flesh and blood hadn't occurred to him.

But there was no question now that the figure he was staring at was like nothing he had ever seen before: faintly luminous and translucent and seemingly floating several inches off the floor. Yet the desperate appeal in her eyes was more urgent than ever.

Involuntarily, Griffin stretched out his hand, but she was gone and he couldn't decide if he had really seen her or if she had been created by his imagination and the soft illumination filtering through the window drapes.

Shaken, he lay still. He had no experience against which to measure the girl, no background that would help him explain her away, but he felt that unless he did something to answer the appeal in her eyes, this would not be the last time he would wake to see her staring at him in

the darkness.

He lay listening to the whisper of the rain on the roof and the splashing of water cascading from a broken gutter outside, and it was almost dawn when he rolled out of bed, switched on the light, and dialed the sheriff.

The morning brought a finer rain and a misty greyness that settled in the valley. Keeshaw drove carefully.

"I don't understand why you want to go see Muncie Monroe," he said.

"Does he know about these incidents?" asked Griffin.

"Only the first one. I told him a truck driver had seen a woman who looked like Selma Ann."

"All right," said Griffin. "This time you'll lie a little. You'll tell him someone actually picked her up and you had to rush her to the hospital because she was sick and delirious. You couldn't question her about where she'd been but she'll be all right in a few days."

"He's not going to believe that. I tell you, he killed her a year ago."

Griffin shook his head. "I don't think so. If that was what he wanted he could have done it right there in the motel when he killed the clerk and tried to kill the salesman. He took her with him."

"So he could hide the body," said Keeshaw stubbornly.

"If he had murdered her in the motel room, you couldn't have proved it any more than you could prove that he killed the clerk, and he would know that."

"Then why—?"

"You said it yourself. He wanted to break her."

Keeshaw stopped the car and stared at him. "Are you trying to tell me he's kept her a prisoner for a whole year, hidden somewhere on that farm?"

"Would that be so hard to do?"

Keeshaw thought for a moment. "No," he said softly. "It wouldn't. I searched the place only once and damn few people visit a man like Muncie. But what about the girl on the road?"

Griffin decided not to mention the girl's visit to his room. "I can't explain it," he said. "All I can tell you is that I think she's alive."

"Then I'll get some men and go over the place again."

"He's not stupid," said Griffin. "He wouldn't keep her in a place

you'd be likely to look, no matter how many times you search. But I'll tell you what I think he will do. When you tell him she's escaped and you have her, you'll shake him up. He'll laugh in your face but he'll go to her after you leave. What I want you to do is drop me off where I can watch him. Drive up, get him out in the open, tell him, and leave. Do it quickly and firmly as if there can be absolutely no question about it and the only reason you are there is because as her husband he is entitled to know. I'll see what he does then. If I'm wrong and he does nothing, you can get your men and give it one final try. But if I'm right, he'll lead me to her."

"Then what?"

Griffin smiled grimly. "You'd better be back with your gun in your hand."

Keeshaw let him out along the muddy road that led from the highway. Following the sheriff's directions, Griffin fought his way through the wet brush to the top of a small knoll. Some three hundred yards below were the farm buildings: a house, a barn, and two small sheds. He saw Keeshaw's car negotiate the lane that led to the house and pull up. The sheriff opened the door and stepped out, one hand inside pressing the horn.

A heavyset man with thick brown hair and a beard, dressed in a black waterproof jacket, jeans, and heavy boots, came around the corner of the barn and up to Keeshaw.

Keeshaw talked to him, lifted a hand in farewell, climbed into the car, and drove back down the lane.

Muncie Monroe stood for a long time after the sheriff left and then turned and strode angrily past the house and toward the knoll where Griffin waited, passing within yards. Griffin slipped through the brush after him.

Monroe angled left and stopped. He bent down and pulled aside a mound of brush, exposing the door to a half-buried shedlike building built of rough-hewn lumber that age had darkened so that it blended with the brown-black trunks of the trees. The shrubbery around it was thick and dense.

Monroe pulled a key from his pocket, unlocked a padlock, pushed open the door, and stepped inside.

Griffin heard the sharp report of an open hand striking flesh and a

thin, quavering, pitiful mew of a sound, and he charged through the brush, skidding to a stop at the door of the shed.

The interior was dim but there was enough light for Griffin to see the girl on the bare dirty mattress of the cot, one bony ankle shackled to the wall, her blonde hair matted and tangled, her eyes deep-shadowed pools of blackness in a white and shrunken face. Her eyes found his and pleaded with him as they had in his room the night before.

Through his horror and pity Griffin remembered when he had forced the door of an old woman's house because her neighbors hadn't seen her for a week, and he had found her lying on the floor at the foot of the stairwell, her hip broken, unable to move. But that had been the result of an accident and the fault of no one.

This. . .

Monroe charged at him with a growl, his hands grasping Griffin's throat, driving him back through the door, and the two of them rolled over and over in the wet leaves. Monroe's body was hard, his strength maniacal, but Griffin shook him from him and threw him aside. As Monroe, snarling, launched himself at him again, Griffin's hands found a broken limb and with a cold rage and no pity, he smashed him to the ground. Finding the keys in Monroe's pocket he ran into the hut, fumbling through them until he found the right one to release the shackle.

As he scooped up the girl, her weight nothing at all, she looked up at him and whispered something.

"You're all right now," said Griffin gently.

Keeshaw met him breathlessly at the door, reading it all with a glance, and he stepped forward, his arms out, tears in his eyes. "I'll take her."

"No," said Griffin. "Better check Monroe."

"You should have killed him."

"Maybe I did," said Griffin. "If I didn't, handcuff him to a tree and come back for him later. We've got to get her to a hospital."

In the small restaurant in the center of town, Griffin pushed his empty plate aside and reached for his coffee. "That was a good breakfast."

Keeshaw grinned. "The best the town has to offer. I owed you that."

Griffin finished his coffee. "I don't like to run but I'll get skinned alive if I don't report on time tomorrow and I have a long way to go."

"I'll walk with you," said Keeshaw.

They walked outside toward Griffin's car. The rain had stopped, leaving everything glistening with a wetness that would soon disappear in the strong steady wind that drove low-hanging, dirty-cotton clouds ahead of it.

"Tell me," said Keeshaw. "What made you so sure she was still alive?"

Griffin leaned against the car. "I don't know who or what I and the others picked up along the road. Obviously, it couldn't have been the girl. That shackle had been on her for a long time. But whatever it was, I saw a look in the eyes that you sometimes see in people who are certain they are dying and are begging for help. It occurred to me that if you were right and she was already dead and what I was looking at was a ghost, that look couldn't be there. So if she was still alive and trying in some manner to get help, where would she be? She had to be on Monroe's farm."

Keeshaw shook his head. "I guess we'll never know exactly what it was that you and the others saw."

"When I get back, I'll talk to a few people I know at the university. They'll have access to documentation of similar incidents but I don't think they'll be able to come up with a better answer." Griffin grinned. "Of course, they'll have words like mental telepathy and materialization and I don't know what else, but all it will amount to is that something in that girl wouldn't die and went looking for help.

"You said she had a fighting spirit. You were right. If she didn't, Monroe would have broken her a long time ago."

He slid into the car and held out his hand. "Take care of her, Keeshaw. Her testimony will be all that you have."

Keeshaw shook his head. "We don't need any testimony. I didn't tell you, but when I went back for Monroe, he came at me like the crazy man he was. I had to shoot him."

Griffin's head jerked around, his eyes on Keeshaw. The sheriff looked back at him steadily.

Griffin started the engine and let it idle. "I think you ought to tell me," he said slowly. "At the hospital, the doctor had to throw you out to get you to leave. You know Selma Ann well."

Keeshaw stared into the hills. "She's my daughter," he said. "When she ran off and married Monroe, I said some pretty harsh things. I guess she believed me, which was why she didn't come to me the night she ran away. I've been living with that for a year. It hasn't been easy. I hope she's ready to forgive me."

"You should have told me."

"Around here, we keep our troubles to ourselves. Who she was had nothing to do with it." Keeshaw slapped the roof of the sedan. "Drive carefully and let me hear from you. Be pleased to have you down for a visit. Good fishing around here."

Griffin squirmed to a comfortable position. It would be night before he reached his apartment. In a jet, he would have been home in a little more than an hour. But there was no way to balance the life of a girl against the time he would have saved by flying.

She had whispered something when he had scooped her from the cot, words he had heard and yet not heard because they had no meaning then.

How it was possible, he didn't know, but she had recognized him as the man from the night before, and he must have been her last hope because she knew that she was dying and whatever it was within her that went seeking help could go no more.

"You were the last one," she had whispered.

Griffin settled down to the drive, thinking that it really wasn't such a long trip after all, and the lieutenant had been known to be wrong before.

She was an expert at plotting . . .

SHORE LEAVE

by Patrick O'Keeffe

She signed the hotel register "Mr. and Mrs. James Weir," remarking to the bearded reception clerk, "My husband is chief officer of one of the ships in port, the *Murcia*. He'll join me here this evening."

The reception clerk acknowledged her with a polite nod. If she'd registered in her maiden name, she mused, he'd perhaps have shown interest in her. As Janice Clive, mystery short-story writer and novelist, her latest book, *Assassin on Board*, had become a best-seller.

She followed the bellboy to the elevator with her two leather suitcases, airline tags still attached. She was a tall, auburn-haired woman in her early thirties and she wore a dark felt hat with her well-cut mauve pants suit. As soon as the bellboy had withdrawn, smiling at his tip, she sat down at the telephone and, removing her gloves, she immediately began to check up on her husband. She put a call through to the steamship company's office and asked to be connected to the *Murcia* at the pier. A crew member answered and told her he wasn't sure that her husband was on board. Mr. Kalder, the young third officer, happened to be standing close by and overheard him. He came on the line.

"Why, hello, Mrs. Weir." Kalder sounded startled. "This *is* a surprise. Your husband never mentioned that you were coming."

"He doesn't know yet. I wanted to surprise him. I just registered at the Garstang."

"Fine!" Kalder hesitated. "I—I enjoyed reading *Assassin on Board.* Maybe if I—well, if I drop by the hotel sometime, you'll autograph my copy."

"I'll be delighted to."

"I—I was hoping I'd be in it. You said you'd put me into one of your stories, you know."

"I haven't forgotten. The next one, perhaps. Now please call my husband to the phone."

There was a brief silence except for the toot of a towboat siren and the banging of chipping hammers at the ship end of the line. "He's not on board right now, Mrs. Weir. I think he went over to the office to see about something. I'll let him know you're here the minute he gets back."

"Thank you. Please tell him I've taken room 321."

"Sure thing. And I want you to know I'm looking forward to your next novel."

"My most faithful fan," she said with a light laugh, but as she set down the receiver her mouth tightened. He was, perhaps, no less loyal to her husband. Out of necessity, of course, being a junior officer and beholden to him.

Removing her jacket, Janice went about unpacking the suitcases while speculating on the meaning of young Kalder's brief silence and nervous manner. They were due perhaps to uneasiness about what to

say if he knew that James happened to be ashore with another woman. The chitchat about her novel may have been a stall to give him time to think of the best thing to say. He might now be telephoning James to warn him that she was in town. This after only three years of marriage, Janice reminded herself with bitterness.

By the time she had unpacked, Janice had reviewed her life with James Weir, whom she had first met during a cruise aboard the *Murcia*. Their shipboard romance had been swiftly followed by their wedding. The *Murcia* had then been in the fruit-and-coffee trade to Latin America out of New Orleans, making five-week voyages. It had been an ideal schedule for her, since, with the ship in the home port only two or three days between voyages, she was able to devote most of her days to writing, as a part-time wife.

Almost a year ago, however, the *Murcia* had been transferred to the company's northern division for service to East Coast ports. She and James had hoped that the change was only temporary, but as the months passed with no word of a return to the Gulf, they faced the prospect of having to move their home to the East Coast.

The telephone rang as Janice was putting aside the suitcases. It could only be James, she concluded, turning to answer. Either he really had gone over to the office and just returned, or else young Kalder had been able to reach him quickly.

Her husband sounded annoyed. "Janice, you might at least have let me know you were coming."

"I wanted it to be a surprise, James. You don't sound a bit pleased."

"You told me over the phone last evening you had an important television-taping for today."

"I cancelled it. I decided it wasn't that important."

"You'd have done better to have kept it. The ship's getting a quick turnaround this time, not stopping to load the usual general cargo. We sail tomorrow evening as soon as the last of the fruit's discharged. Sometime tonight the ship has to move to another berth. That means I'll have to be on board all night."

"Oh, James! You mean we won't even get to see each other?"

"I might be able to slip up to the hotel for an early dinner late tomorrow afternoon. You'd have spared yourself this upset if you'd let me know you intended coming."

"I thought it was going to be such a wonderful surprise. I'm so

dreadfully disappointed."

Janice kept the conversation going for several minutes, but by the time she hung up she hadn't detected a single sound indicating that James was telephoning from the ship. She had been tempted to ask him to have young Kalder speak again, but James, if ashore, would merely have had to say that the third mate had gone to attend to some duty or other. But there was another way of checking James's whereabouts. For that, however, she'd have to wait until after four o'clock. She glanced at her wristwatch. It was now 3:15.

She passed the interval recalling previous trips she had made to join her husband during the ship's brief stopovers in East Coast ports. After her third novel became a best-seller, it always seemed that the ship docked when she had a deadline to meet or a radio interview or an appointment with her publisher.

At first James had seemed most understanding, but of late his letters and telephone conversations were less warm—cold, in fact. Then came that anonymous letter hinting that if she didn't want to lose her husband, she would be well advised to see more of him. The letter was friendly rather than malicious in tone, and she suspected that young Kalder had written it. He had been a cadet aboard the *Murcia* when she made her cruise, and she had delighted him with autographed copies of two of her novels.

The letter had infuriated her. Some pretty-faced blonde had probably infatuated James, some scheming creature who would try to take him away from her. Well, she'd give her a rude awakening,

Janice telephoned the ship again around 4:30. She had become familiar with ship procedure and knew that after four o'clock a night mate would be on duty, relieving the deck officers. He would be provided with a list of telephone numbers for recalling the captain and officers spending the night ashore should an emergency arise. She had to call before 5:30, for at that hour the company-office switchboard would close for the day and the ship's line would be disconnected.

When the night mate responded, Janice said, "Western Union with a telegram for the chief officer, Mr. Weir."

"Sorry, he's ashore right now. I can give you a number to try."

Janice reached for the pen on the writing table and jotted down the number. "Ask for room 745," the night mate added.

Janice set down the telephone. Room 745 suggested a hotel, but

which? She lifted the telephone again and asked the hotel operator to call the number. Seconds later a voice announced, "Hotel Beswick."

"Room 745, please."

Janice heard the telephone ring. It was answered almost immediately by James saying, "Hello?" Janice didn't reply. James spoke again, impatiently, "Hello, who's calling?"

Janice put down the telephone in silence. She sat benumbed. James had not only lied to her, but he was spending the night with that creature, perhaps not for the first time. Janice suddenly flew into a rage. They'd probably be going out together for the evening. If she acted at once, she might be in time to intercept them before they left the hotel. She'd have a showdown right there, even if it had to be in the lobby.

She had changed into a pale blue dress. Slipping into a light coat and pulling on her gloves. she went down to the lobby. It was crowded with tourists and their luggage from a newly arrived tour bus, and the desk was inaccessible at the moment. Janice dropped her room key into her pocketbook and hurried out into the cool spring evening. She raced a stout woman to a cab just drawing up. The journey across town in the rush-hour traffic took almost twenty minutes. The Beswick lobby was less crowded than the Garstang's, and Janice was alone in the elevator she took to the seventh floor.

In response to her sharp rap on the door of 745, it was opened by a slim brunette shorter than Janice and younger by about five years. Janice brushed past her into the room and glared around. The brunette had been watching television from a divan and had left the set switched on. Over in a corner by a partly open window was a grey canvas overnight bag bearing the initials J.R.W. The bathroom door was ajar. Janice strode over to it and pushed it wide open.

She swung round, glowering. "Where is my husband?"

The brunette appeared startled for the moment, then shut the door and faced Janice. Janice took in her pale grey eyes, small mouth, and short black hair, and wondered what about her could possibly have infatuated James. She wasn't even pretty, and her sack of a dress must have come off a bargain rack.

"You are Mrs. Weir?" the younger woman queried.

"Mrs. James Weir. I asked you where my husband is. He was here when I phoned a short while ago."

"So it was you who hung up without speaking. Your husband was about to leave for the ship when you called. He has to move her to another berth. He'll be gone three or four hours."

"Well, then, I'll deal with you alone. I'm warning you to stay away from my husband."

The brunette went over and switched off a noisy television commercial. Turning back to Janice, she said quietly, "Mrs. Weir, you've got to hear about me and James. We met at a waterfront cabaret my brother owns. I was visiting my brother when James happened to drop in. We've been seeing each other ever since. When he learned this that you were in town, we discussed our situation and came to a decision. James intended to tell you of it tomorrow, but since you're here, I'll tell you myself. Your husband intends to ask you for a divorce."

Janice was astonished. This was more than a passing infatuation. Her dismay turned to hot anger. "What leads you to think for one moment that I'll give him one?" she fumed.

"Mrs. Weir, James no longer loves you. Won't you please try to understand?"

"Love! Is this your conception of love, a sordid hotel-room affair?"

The brunette flushed. "Your husband turned to me because he was lonely. You were too taken up with your writing and the glamour it brought."

"I was being a wife he can take pride in, not a pickup from some sleazy dockside dive!"

The young woman stepped forward and slapped Janice hard across the face. Janice's right hand shot out in a karate chop she had learned when researching her second book. It caught the other woman on the neck and she choked out a gasp and collapsed to the floor.

Janice glared down at her. She had lost control of herself. Well, there was no point in waiting for her to recover. She'd got her rude awakening. When James returned, he'd hear about Janice's visit and would realize the hopelessness of expecting a divorce. She would go back to the Garstang and wait.

Lying on the dressing table was a pocketbook. Janice opened it and fingered through the contents, glancing at a credit card in the name of Edna Saunders and a business envelope addressed to Miss Edna Saunders, Head Buyer, Glenvale Department Store. She returned to the

lobby, caught a cab back to the Garstang—its lobby still crowded—and went straight up to her room. Too agitated to go back down to the dining room for dinner, she ordered drinks and dinner from room service.

She remained in her room for the rest of the evening, half expecting a call from Edna Saunders when she recovered consciousness. Failing that, she would surely hear from James when he returned from the ship and was told about her visit.

The hours dragged past, however, and there was no phone call. Janice sat with the television set switched on, but paid little attention to it. She finally went to bed, humiliated and angry. They had ignored her, as if she were of no consequence.

After a restless night, Janice ordered breakfast sent to her room. While sipping the black coffee, she switched on the television set. She listened to the newscast with little interest until the announcer said: "A young woman was found dead under suspicious circumstances last night in a room of the Hotel Beswick. An officer from the *Murcia* is being held for questioning . . ."

Janice turned off the set in a daze. She could imagine the details. James had found Edna Saunders dead when he returned to their room. He had called the police and naturally come under suspicion.

Janice became frightened. As a deceived and potentially vengeful wife, she too would be investigated. What could she tell the police? That she'd only struck in retaliation, in self-defense, forgetting in her anger that such a blow could be fatal? She'd still be open to a charge of involuntary manslaughter, compounded by the fact that she had made no attempt to revive the young woman. It might be believed that she had gone to the hotel with murder in her heart.

But was there any necessity to tell the police the truth? Unless they could prove that she had knowledge of her husband's affair with Edna Saunders, she'd appear to be without a motive for murder. The police wouldn't be able to place her at the scene of the crime. She had worn her gloves all the time she had been in room 745. She hadn't left her key at the hotel desk when she went out. She was a stranger in town and it was most unlikely she had been recognized or particularly noticed at either hotel, or by her cabdrivers. And once the police were satisfied that she was without a motive for the killing, they wouldn't be apt to make inquiries. Their investigation would stop short of uncover-

ing the anonymous letter and the phony Western Union call.

Janice began to recover her composure. To maintain the appearance of innocent, unsuspecting wife, she went out and wandered through the neighboring stores, making several purchases. When she returned to the hotel she picked up her key at the desk. As she started toward the elevator, a man standing by the desk followed her. A second man rose from a lobby chair and intercepted her, presenting his I.D.

"Lieutenant Wade, Detective Bureau, Mrs. Weir. May I have a word with you?"

When they were seated in her room, the lieutenant said, "Mrs. Weir, did you hear on television or radio this morning that a young woman was found dead in a room of the Hotel Beswick?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. It caught my interest since it mentioned that an officer from the *Murcia* is implicated, and my husband is an officer on that ship."

"Didn't it occur to you that the officer might be your husband?"

"Most certainly not." Janice looked shocked at the very idea.

"I regret having to inform you that it is your husband, Mrs. Weir."

"That's impossible. You're mistaken. My husband spent the night aboard ship."

"That unfortunately is what he led you to believe, Mrs. Weir. Your husband booked a double room the night before last at the Beswick for himself and the deceased woman, Edna Saunders. He left around five o'clock yesterday afternoon and went to his ship. He returned to the hotel toward nine o'clock and found Miss Saunders lying dead on the floor of the room. He telephoned the police at once. The Medical Examiner reports that Miss Saunders died of a blow to the neck."

"That's terrible," Janice gasped.

Lieutenant Wade continued. "We're trying to establish the motive for the homicide. Your husband denies any guilt. There were no traces of entry by a thief whom Miss Saunders might have surprised. Her pocketbook with money in it was undisturbed on the dressing table. Miss Saunders may have threatened to reveal their affair to you, and your husband may have struck her in anger and accidentally killed her."

"She could have tried to blackmail him. I had absolutely no knowledge of his infidelity," Janice said.

The detective eyed her quizzically. "This is your first visit to your husband in some time."

"Professional engagements have prevented it, not any kind of estrangement from my husband."

"When you telephoned the ship yesterday afternoon, Mr. Kalder, the third officer, informed you that your husband may have gone over to the company office. You didn't suspect he was lying?"

"Of course not. I had no reason to disbelieve him."

"And when your husband telephoned you shortly afterward, you didn't suspect it wasn't from the ship?"

"How could I possibly have known it wasn't? If I'd had cause to suspect the horrible truth, would I have remained in the hotel all evening, hoping his orders would be changed and my husband would be free to join me here?"

"You were here at the hotel all evening?"

"I didn't even leave my room. I had dinner sent up."

Lieutenant Wade shot his colleague a glance.

"The third officer seems to be an enthusiastic fan of yours, Mrs. Weir. He's expecting to be put in one of your stories."

Janice smiled. "I promised him that as my most faithful fan."

"He also told us that he came here about five o'clock yesterday afternoon and knocked on your door. He waited in the lobby for half an hour or so in the hope you would come in and before leaving he tried you without luck on the house phone."

Janice felt her throat go dry. She stared at the detective, not fully comprehending.

He refreshed her memory. "Mr. Kalder wanted your autograph on your latest novel."

Janice gave a bitter laugh. By destroying her alibi, young Kalder had assured himself of a place in her next story—but this would be one written about her, not by her.

is the least of my problems. I also have a dead man in the cellar Jaffee wants me to explain about.

"Look, Kelly, I'm not trying to hang something on you, but this is a damn peculiar business, so why don't you shed some light?"

Him, I don't trust. You, I do, so I'll let you in on the whole thing. Besides, Jaffee isn't shaking me. The most he can do is lock me up for raising chickens inside city limits.

A snake, a corpse, and a chicken—it sounds pretty nutty, I know, but it happened this way.

If I were irrational, unfairminded, and seeking a scapegoat, I would say the whole mess was Jack MacCarthy's fault. But I'm none of those things—and it's *still* Jack Mac's fault.

Jack MacCarthy is my kitchen manager. Anyplace else in town, he'd be called a steward, but something strange happens to people once they come to work for Chick Kelly. They want titles. They want recognition. Jack Mac is supposed to be responsible for the purchase and inventory control of all the liquor and food that comes into the place and all the garbage that goes out. But that's not enough for him. He wants to be a *sommelier*.

I looked up at him from behind the desk in the back office with a wide swath of incredulity on my face.

"What do I need a wine steward for? Maybe you're going to serve Guido personally, huh?"

Guido LaSalle is my head chef. He likes titles too. He also likes wine. Cheval Blanc '49 at $34.00 the bottle, to be exact. Guido pejoratively calls himself a *grilliarde* because he resents the fact that I insist on running a steak-and-chops menu. So Guido defers to me, but not without dreaming up some nutty European rule that since a *grilliarde* is working over hot coals all evening he is entitled to all the wine needed to replenish his loss of body fluid. I don't know, folks, I'm content to be what I am—a comic who was smart enough to get off the club circuit and open my own place. Do I run around listing myself as a *cafetier comique*?

"Guido can get his own wine," Jack MacCarthy said. "Chick, we're missing the boat on not pushing wine. The markup is terrific. Look, all the swells that come in here, they're saying to themselves, 'Would I love a bottle of Pouilly Fume '69 right now.' Only all we've got on the

Chick's trouble may have begun when Mars turned Alectryon into a cock . . .

ALECTRYON SLEPT

by **S. S. Rafferty**

His name is Donald Jaffee: occupation, Lieutenant, NYPD Homicide; avocation, to put me, Chick Kelly, in Slamsville for an eon or two. Time, about midnight on a hot humid August Monday. Place, the back seat of an unmarked prowl parked in front of the saloon-cum-boîte I own on Third Avenue.

It's not that I'm inhospitable; I can't invite him inside because the ASPCA is still looking for a deadly snake, or think they are. The snake

wine list is Dom Perignon and some Mumms."

"That's chopped liver?"

"For champagne it's fine, but what about the Burgundies, the Bordeaux? What's fall without a new Beaujolais?"

Next he'd be breaking into song a la Chevalier. But I couldn't just give him a flat "no" because Jack Mac thinks I'm the greatest thing since four-wheel brakes. I have no doubt that he knows good wine—he's worked the best private clubs in town—but the thought of little Jack Mac, all five feet three of him, putting on a *sommelier* chain and rattling off vintages in fractured French was too ludicrous. However, I am not without tact.

"Look, Jack Mac, I appreciate that you want to up the income around here, but be practical. To stock a good cellar would take thousands of dollars, which I don't have. Besides, the society crowd—like, say, Jay Porter Pembert—have their own private cellars which would make anything we could come up with look silly."

All the wide grin on his face lacked was canary feathers. He leaned across the desk and gave me a mock sock on the jaw.

"Gotcha that time, champ," he said, and went into what was obviously a well-rehearsed pitch. "Here's the thing of it, Chick. We don't have to stock a thing. We let Mr. Pembert and his friends bring in their own stock and keep it in our cellar. Ready for the beauty part?"

I wasn't, but what the hell.

"The beauty part is that we collect a storage-and-corkage fee. The wine cellar's half empty now, so it don't cost you zip."

Suddenly from the couch came a voice like a rising oracle who has spent two hundred years in the Bronx. Barry Kantrowitz, my former agent when I was on the road, and present partner, surfaced from a nap.

"It's an idea with possibilities," he yawned. Big deal. By Barry, the Edsel had possibilities.

"You left a call for 9 P.M., sir," I told him, "and it's only 8:30."

"I mean it, Chick," he said, sitting erect, rubbing his bald spot and paunch with either hand at the same time. His wife Sylvia should get the Croix de Guerre for facing *that* every morning. "Jack and Charlie's have done it for years. It's a good traffic-building gimmick."

So they went to work on me. They even got Ling, my *maitre d'* (by me the headwaiter), and Cuz, the head bartender, to help with the

barrage. Two days later, I gave in, but not without some points for my side. First, no storage-or-corkage fees. Second, no *sommelier* chain for Jack Mac. (Did you ever see a grown man cry?) Third, Jack Mac had to go to day classes in French at Berlitz.

I thought the last caveat would kill the whole idea. But he swallowed it, and we were in the wine-cellar business—and eventually in deep trouble.

So there I was on a Saturday night, scouting for clients. My first nibble was from Digby Lawler, a southern gentleman who owns half of Virginia but gets bored with running "daddy's old place" and spends every other week in his pied-à-terre on Park Avenue.

Lawler thought it was a "mightah fine ideeah," and so did Randy Brooks, who only owns one-quarter of New Jersey, but whose real estate has nice big manufacturing plants on them that turn out Brooks Products International. That's a euphemism for fertilizer and other chemicals.

Both guys were at the bar talking about crop rotation, nitrates, and such when I mentioned the deal to them.

"In fact, Chick, ah'd deem it a favoah," my FFV says. "The storage space is limited at the apartment." I'll bet it is. Wall-to-wall broads.

"You know, Kelly, I might be interested in off-loading some of my lesser stock."

We all took a gander at the speaker with the cigarette holder. There in the flesh was Niles Paine, who is aptly named. He is, in the neck and other anatomical areas. Paine is a professional dilettante. But he qualifies for pro status in that he writes a column on art for some la-de-da magazine and is a consultant up at the Museum, so even if I don't like him I can use him as a patron of my wine cellar. People like to follow those they believe to be arbiters of good taste.

"Well, men," I said, "that's great. Look, let's go down and look at the facilities."

We were just walking out of the bar lounge when someone poked me in the back. I turned to find Tossi Barbera standing there, smiling sheepishly.

"I couldn't help overhearing you at the bar, Chick—about the private wine cellar you're starting. Look, I'll pay a thou up front to get in on the action."

I tell you—once a poor boy, always a poor boy. Even though Tossi has made millions in importing olive oil and could buy and sell most people, he still acts like a downstairs maid around "society." Tossi built his pile all on his own and didn't need to back off from the likes of Lawler, who inherited every foot of land he owns from dubious ancestors, nor did he owe any deference to Randy Brooks. As for Niles Paine, Tossi spends in tips what that snob knocks down telling art collectors what's *in* this season.

"Tossi, you don't need any front money. If you've got wine, I've got the space."

"Well, I got to level, Chick. I'm just getting into wine collecting. I got this guy who recommends to me, but I'd like to get close to those heavy hitters you're signing up. You know, I could learn from them. I can see what they stock and I can follow suit."

"Sure. Come on, Tossi, before you run out and buy a polo pony and break your neck."

Of course, I keep calling it the cellar, so you're probably visualizing a musty old tomb with cobwebs and such. It's really a finished basement with tiled decking. At the front end are the vegetable-and-meat reefers. Along the left wall are the shelves for canned goods and staples. On the right wall is the liquor lockup and at the back end is the walk-in wine cellar, which is thermostatically controlled. I've been down there twice in my life, but standing there looking at it then, I was thinking I had the swingingest bomb shelter in town.

I was showing my foursome the thickness of the wine-cellar door when we all heard it at once. It was a weird sound, like a high chuckle.

"Better not be mice," I told them, "not with all the money I pay out in exterminator fees. Now you can see, fellows, that there's plenty of room in here for. . ."

"Yeawk, yeawk," the sound came again.

"Sounds like someone heckling my act," I joked it up.

"Sounds like a roostah to me, Chick old boy."

We backed out of the wine cellar and started over toward the staples shelves. The "yeawks" were lower now, and hard to follow.

"Seem to be coming from over here," Randy Brooks said, digging around on the third shelf from the floor. He pulled forward a square object covered with a blanket.

"Well, take it off, Randy," Lawler encouraged.

Brooks pulled the covering away and jumped back, and we were treated to the loudest cacophony of yeawks yet. A chicken had its head up through a slot in the wooden cage and it was madder than hell.

"I think the thing is in pain," I told them. "It looks sick too. The neck feathers are all shot."

It must have been a heavy line, because Digby Lawler was fit to bust a gut with laughter.

"Now that's what ah call pretty sharp, Chick. Here he's got himself a fine-looking fighting cock and he plays Ignorant Annie. It's O.K., Chick, we'll keep youah secret. Hell, ah like to watch a good cockfight myself."

"He sure is a beauty, Chick," Randy said, going over to the cage. "Looks like an Irish Gilder."

"Hell he is, boy," Lawler corrected him through his laughter. "His daddy had to be a Dominique, if I ever saw one. Bet you turn a good dollah on that old boy, Chick. He looks meaner than spit on a hot griddle."

"I don't know, gentlemen," Tossi Barbera said, giving the yawker the once over, "there's a Chinese strain that looks something like that."

This is unbelievable. "What are you guys, chickenologists or something?"

"I dropped a bundle or two at the old Club Gallistico in Havana before Castro took over," Barbera tells us, "and they had Chinese strains that looked like this bird."

"I believe Mr. Barbera is correct about its Chinese origins," Niles Paine said with authority. "I know nothing of cockfighting, but that rooster is found in Oriental paintings over and over again. There's a lovely print from the Ming dynasty. . ."

While he's giving the lecture, I headed for the wall phone. If you think the chicken was angry, you should have seen me. Some clown was turning my cellar into a chicken coop and making a turkey out of me in front of the customers. To paraphrase the gentleman from Virginia, I was madder than spit on two hot griddles.

I punched the intercom button marked "Kitchen." A voice said " 'Allo."

"Hello yourself. Is Jack Mac there?"

"Who's dis? Meester Chick?"

"Yeah, Julio, it's me. Get MacCarthy down here."

Julio Martinez goes silent for a moment and then he says, "You in de cellar, Meester Chick?"

"I'm on Line 5, aren't I? Where's MacCarthy?"

More silence. "Meester Chick, if you are in the cellar—you sound very *enfadado*, huh?"

"You bet your butt I'm angry. Come on, Julio, get MacCarthy!" Now I've got to explain to my own salad chef why I want to talk to my own kitchen manager!

"Perhaps, Meester Chick, you could tell me why you are so *en*. . ."

"Yeah, *enfadado, muy, tres enfafado*, damn it. What are you, Julio, the regional Torquemada? I want to ask Mr. MacCarthy if he's planning to go into the fresher-than-fresh egg business. Now get him, pronto!"

I don't believe it! On the other end, I'm getting chuckles from this guy.

"Ho ho, Meester Chick, fresh eggs! Ho ho. Don' you know the rooster he don' lay eggs, ho ho."

"Julio, are you trying to tell me something? You know something about this blinking bird down here?"

"Si, Meester Chick. I think I come down and 'splain."

"Yeah. Great idea, Julio. You come down and 'splain."

Niles Paine was still giving his lecture when I got back to the group.

"They go all the way back to Greek mythology, you know. The god Alectryon was ordered by Mars to guard the chamber where Mars was seducing Venus but Alectryon fell asleep, and Mars punished him by turning him into a cock that would eternally herald the sunrise."

"He's doing O.K. for himself right now, and it's only 12:30," I said, glaring at the rooster, who was arching his head and sending up another racket.

"They crow any time they feel like it, Chick," Barbera tells me.

"Yes, I can believe that." Professor Paine is in again. "In the Bible, the cock crowed. . ."

Between the damn rooster crowing and Paine slathering us with culture, I got a cross between the old Pathé news and Sunrise Semester going down in front of me.

Lawler took me by the arm and led me aside. "Chick," he whispered, "this is one of the best setups ah've ever seen. When do you

have the faghts?"

"I don't run cockfights, I run a gin mill. Don't you know cockfighting is illegal in New York, Lawler?"

"And just about everywhere else, Chick, but that doesn't stop the sport. Hell, these birds were born to faght."

"Not in my cellar, they're not. Look, fellows, I'm sorry about this. I have a suspicion this thing belongs to one of my people—who's on his way down here by way of Staten Island from the length of time it's taking."

The ferry must have docked, because the footfalls on the stairs brought Julio into view. Julio Martinez started with me three years ago as a busboy, and I promoted him to kitchen assistant. I liked the guy because he's quick-smart. Now he's my salad chef at $320 a week. This is gratitude? This is what I get for taking in the poor, the tired, the homeless?

" 'Allo, Meester Chick," he said sheepishly. "I din' think you ever come down here."

" 'Splain, Julio, fast and clean."

"Well, Meester Chick—" he raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders "—I'm sorry if I make trouble. But you see, El Kelly Grande, he fight tonight and I don' wanna go alla way home to get him 'cause the match is downtown."

"El Kelly Grande!" I crowed louder than the rooster. "You named that buzzard after me?"

More sheepish smiles. "To show my gratitude. You give me a good job, good money, so when I buy *el gallo* I say I name him for you."

Lawler was back splitting a gut again and so was Randy Brooks. Very funny. I haven't minded laying a few eggs in my time, but having a chicken named after me is not my idea of affection.

"He's a top cock," Barbera said, putting his finger perilously close to El Kelly Grande's beak. "I remember once in Cuba one of these birds fought a big snake, and damned if he didn't win."

"He's one fighting machine, dat guy," Julio proudly announced.

"How many hacks has he won?" Lawler asked, and Julio looked puzzled. Then his light bulb went on.

"Hacks? Oh, the matches, si. You Americans have a funny way of talkin'. He wins 99 matches so far."

"With that record, he's worth a small fortune at stud," Lawler said

with a low whistle.

"A chicken gets stud fees?" Paine finally doesn't know something in this world.

"Hell, yes," Lawler went on, "that old boy would produce a string of golden eggs. You must be doing pretty good on side bets, eh, Julio?"

My salad chef gave a slight grin. "I do O.K. Not as good as in the beginning when I could get better odds. Now he has the reputation, the *fama*."

I'm thinking, ain't life grand? I have put money into racehorses that had hearty appetites and slow legs. I've backed pugs who grew canvas mold on their backs. But here I give an immigrant a good job and he parlays it into a roll with a bird that lives on a handful of corn. I noticed a ten-pound sack of chickenfeed on the shelf and bemoaned all the hay I had paid for.

"The only trouble is, you could maim your champion in a snap," Randy Brooks said, fondling a mean-looking set of curved wires embedded in what looked like brass. "Suppose he gets killed?"

"Hispanics don't fight the cocks to the death alla time."

"Well, these are pretty sharp gaffs, Julio. . ."

"Oh, the *postiza*—the spurs. Those are just good-luck charms. They are in my family for years. I hang them in his cage to keep in his mind that I can send him to death in an American match. Hispanics use plastic *postiza*. They can cut, kill sometimes, but it is rare."

"Most humane." Niles Paine studied the brass spurs with interest. "These would tear an opponent to shreds. You know, the Latin mind really understands the classic struggle for survival, and portrays it through beautiful symbology. The *corrida de toros, las peleas de gallos*. Take bull-leaping in ancient Greece—"

I cut him off with an invitation to all for drinks up in the bar. They all went ahead, leaving me and Julio alone. Excuse me, also with El Kelly Grande.

"I ought to wring two necks in this cellar, Julio, only his looks tougher. Get that thing out of here tonight before we all get pinched."

I started up the stairs, then stopped and turned to him. "Why the hell did you name the bird after me, Julio? I'm a card-carrying coward."

"No, Meester Chick, you are no *manilo*." He gave me a curious wink. "I named him after you—how do I 'splain in English?—we have a say-

ing, there are only two creatures in the world who are not sad after making love, the rooster and the human female."

I turned and just kept climbing. I could have told him that *we* have a saying in English, but why kick a compliment in the teeth?

That was Saturday night, and since I close the place on Mondays during July and August I opted for a long weekend. That was my first mistake. I took Jeepers to an estate party out on the Island and managed to get myself broiled medium rare in the sun. When we got back to the city around noon on Monday, I bid the world goodbye and locked myself in the pad. Jeepers wanted to play nursey, but I hate that action so I packed her off to a girl friend's for the night.

I finally fell asleep around seven o'clock after basting myself in white vinegar until I smelled like one of Julio's tart salads. By ten, the phone was clanging me into painful consciousness. It was Barry. A very upset Barry.

"Chick, you'd better come down to the club right away."

From the seriousness of his tone, I thought the joint must have burned down. (At least I hoped so. I've got a hell of a fire-insurance policy.)

"What's happening, Barry? I can hardly move with this sunburn."

"It'll look better if you come, Chick. Jaffee will only come and get you."

"Jaffee? Homicide?"

"Joe Tooms, the night man, came in as usual around nine to get set up for tomorrow. . ."

"Barry, I know what Tooms's job is! Who's dead?"

"Julio. Get down here, will you, Chick? Jaffee is scaring the hell out of me."

When I got to the club, Barry called to me from the back of Jaffee's prowl, which was parked at the curb.

"Get in, Kelly," Jaffee said and then proceeded to give me the score. It was a crazy tale. Tooms found Julio lying on the cellar floor around nine o'clock and called an ambulance. Julio was dead when they got to him.

"The kid's an intern, but he knows what he's talking about because he's from Nevada and has seen death by snakebite before," Jaffee said from the front seat. "The precinct people weren't taking any chances

and called the ASPCA to look for the snake—which they can't find."

While I had visions of a serpent slithering around my cellar, Jaffee went on to explain how Julio had two fang marks on his right hand and had probably died between seven and eight o'clock. Jaffee stopped his spiel when two men walked up to the car window. I recognized the shorter one as Dr. Mo Glickman, an assistant M.E. He introduced his companion as Dr. Draper, an ophiologist from the Bronx Zoo. Why anyone would want to spend his life fooling around with snakes is a mystery to me, but Draper seemed to know his stuff.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said, leaning in the front window, "it sounds crazy, but from the size and angle of the puncture I'd swear it was a cobra strike. I can't imagine why the man handled one. Excuse me, but I want to give the ASPCA people a hand in there. They're not experienced in this sort of work. We've covered the entire restaurant already, but there are a number of places it could coil up."

That was just dandy to hear. I thought of what it would do to my business. Eating at Chick Kelly's would be like something out of Gunga Din.

When Glickman and Draper walked away, Jaffee looked at Barry and me. "You two can start working on the lies you're going to tell me."

I gave him a squint. "I thought you handled homicides, Jaffee. This looks like an accident to me."

"Sure, salad chefs all over town play with cobras. Something is fishy about this, Kelly, and anywhere *you're* concerned, I'm interested."

I ignored him. "Has anyone bothered to tell his wife, Barry?"

"I thought you'd want to do it."

"Sure, all the dirty work is left to yours truly. Next you'll want me to catch the snake."

Jaffee jumped in again. "I'm going to see her, but I'll take you up on the snake offer. Did this Martinez have any enemies on your staff?"

I told him no to that and thirty more questions about Julio, got out of the car, and watched him drive away.

"Chick," Barry said, "I'm very confused. It's nuts. A snake!"

"I can trap it in a way, Barry. The other night Tossi Barbera mentioned a snake versus a gamecock match, and maybe it gave Julio an idea."

"Gamecock?"

I explained El Kelly Grande and the whole bit for him. He looked

floored.

"What gets me is that none of the staff knew he had the rooster in the cellar."

"I can dope that one for you, Chick. Julio is probably the only person who ever went into the cellar. Anytime one of the cooks wanted something, he was like a jack-in-the-box with 'I get it.' You know kitchen help, if they have an obliging gopher they take advantage. I'm thinking though—if he was a big winner with the bird, maybe he got in wrong with the gamblers."

"I'll go you one better, Barry. He was putting poison on the rooster's beak, and the thing pecked him on the hand."

"Why would he put poison on the bird's beak?"

"Maybe that's how El Kelly Grande won 99 fights. He'd peck his opponent and it would drop dead from the poison and not the fighting. Only my theory is full of holes."

"Why?"

"Jaffee never mentioned the rooster being in there, and he would have, believe me."

The ASPCA man and Dr. Draper were coming out of the club—empty-handed.

"Damned if we can find it, Mr. Kelly. We've turned the place inside out."

"Terrific. What do I do now? Close down until the thing gets hungry and rings for room service?"

"I'm beginning to question whether there ever was a snake. It could have been a sharp prong of some kind; but that would make it murder."

"Yes, Doc, that's why Jaffee was nosing around. But just in case there *is* a snake in here, could you lend me a mongoose for a few days?"

By golly, he did it—two of them. I closed down the club for two days and gave them the run of the place. Dr. Draper finally came to the conclusion that, if there had been a snake, it had somehow gotten out of the building, or had been taken out by whoever brought it in. This brought Jaffee back into my young life with more questions than a loan department. I kept my mouth shut on several counts. One, I like making his life difficult; two, I learned some things at Julio's wake that I wanted to keep to myself; three, I was doing a little detective work

myself.

If Julio's sendoff was typical of Hispanic wakes, they are all pretty grim affairs. I paid my respects to the distraught widow, sat among the mourners for a respectable ten minutes, and started to make tracks. She caught up with me as I was going down the funeral-parlor stairs.

"Mr. Kelly," she said, "may I have a word with you?"

She could have forty-million words with me if she wanted them. If they ever cast *Blood and Sand* or *The Mark of Zorro* again, she's down for the raven-haired beauty's part. She had skin like a tree-ripened nectarine. Where she got the blue eyes from was probably a genetic mystery, but they sure went swell with the overall appearance.

"I'm Constanzia Della Verce, Julio's sister-in-law. I'm looking after things because my sister is near collapse."

"I'm sorry for your trouble," I said, using mankind's dumbest cliché. "Did my accountant get in touch—"

"Yes, it was most generous of you."

"His employee-insurance money should clear in a couple of days, and if there's anything else I can do—"

"There is. I'd like to pick up the gamecock sometime in the next few days."

I gave her a puzzled look.

"It's still at your club, isn't it, Mr. Kelly?"

"No, it's not. What makes you think I have it?"

"Not *you* personally, but he always kept it there. My sister wouldn't have it in the house."

"That's news to me, Constanzia, but—"

"Connie, please. My sister and I were born here."

"O.K., Connie. I have a suspicion that Julio probably did house the bird in my cellar, but it wasn't there when his body was found. I only saw it once in my life, and told him to get it out of there. Someone else must have been keeping it for him. Have you checked his friends?"

"He wouldn't have trusted anyone with that animal. That's why he hid it at your club. He told me so. There's something else." She hesitated and darted her eyes around the street. "Can we go someplace less public?"

I took her elbow and walked her across 110th Street to Third Av-

enue, where we found a little mastrador called Vinny's. The jukebox was pouring out crazy salsa rhythms and I thought to myself as I followed Connie's back to a booth that she could probably dance a mean foxy-trot hustle. I had a VTNL as usual; she ordered coffee.

"Well, Connie?"

"If you say you don't have the gamecock, I guess it complicates things."

I asked how.

"Well, I can't sell it, and $10,000 would help my sister and her three kids a lot."

"Someone offered 10 Gs for the rooster?"

"Yes. After Julio was murdered."

"The cops haven't called it murder, Connie. Not yet."

"That Lieutenant Jaffee is so dumb."

I smiled appreciatively.

"Asking all sorts of questions about voodoo rites and snake handling. He's crazy."

"But you didn't bother to tell him about the rooster, did you? I have an idea that Julio's bird had a string of wins because he was putting poison on its beak, and—"

She laughed, tossing her head back to catch more air for the lusty expression of amazement. Then she stopped and leveled her blue eyes at me. "Poor gringo. Before any match, the referee always pours water over the cock's beak and forces him to swallow it. If poison has been used, the bird dies. Besides, if Julio had been pecked accidentally, where is the bird?"

She was right, of course—unless the rooster got out of the building the same way Jaffee's mythical snake did. Even the cage was gone. In fact, I had found nothing except the ten-pound bag of chicken chow which sparked my original suspicion that El Kelly Grande had been a permanent resident in the cellar.

"No," she went on, "Julio was murdered for the cock, the money, or both."

"Money?"

She rooted in her purse and came up with a small book that looked as if it could be used for addresses. When she showed it to me, I saw it had a different function—it was a record of winnings over a ten-month period, amounting to over $150,000.

"That's why I said nothing to the police. There's $150,000 in illegal money somewhere, but I don't know where. I went through all Julio's things. No bankbook, no safety-deposit key, no money." Her voice took on a dejected tone. "Now you tell me the bird is gone too! It leaves my sister with nothing! Why don't you want to share, Mr. Kelly? Must you have it all?"

Her last question had the effect of a solidly placed kidney punch. This dame had maneuvered me.

"Look, Miss Della Verce, if you're looking for a patsy you just hummed the wrong tune. I don't have the bloody bird or Julio's profits. One thing I do have is a gold-plated alibi. I was lying on my belly with a sunburned back when Julio died. But why futz around? Let's go down to Centre Street and get a referee named Jaffee. He can pour water on both our faces and we can see which of us has the poison on his tongue."

Her neck muscles and veins went rigid, betraying some inner tension and maybe a possible eruption, which was the last thing I needed. Then the tide came back into her eyes and dampened her fight, but not her spirit.

"That stupid greenhorn!" she sobbed. "Lots of second-generation boys my sister could have married, but she wanted this dumb canewhacker. Now he's dead and she has an apartment full of kids—and someone else has the $150,000 and a valuable gamecock."

I handed her a paper napkin from the dispenser and she blotted her tears. "Julio was always singing your praises like a god, so I thought you had something to do with it. He called the bird after you, he kept it at your place. It's natural to come to conclusions."

"Yeah, second-generation conclusions, Connie. Greenhorns know how to trust people, it's an old American custom. Now look, Connie. *Look* at me!" She did. "Julio was riding high with the bird. He probably had more enemies than he could count. Losers are like that. Whoever killed him obviously took the money and the bird. The cops could ask questions all over the barrio until they're hoarse, but no one is going to tell them zip."

"I know, Chick, I know that here." Her hands went to the fullness of her breast. "There's nothing now."

"Maybe not. I've been sitting here trying to figure out why one of Julio's enemies would take the bird. It would be recognized if it were

put into a match, wouldn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Who offered to buy the bird? Anyone you know?"

"A man named Lawler, Digby Lawler. I have his phone number."

I was telling myself that I had his number, period. It was dumb of me not to have hit on it sooner. If Julio hid the bird at the club, even from my staff people, then only four people knew where it had been—me, Lawler, Randy Brooks, and Niles Paine. The bird had no value in the pits, but it did as a stud—Lawler had even remarked on it when we were in the cellar. But it was still nuts. A wealthy gentleman farmer doesn't knock off a little guy like Julio over a chicken, or over $150,000, which might have been stashed at the club. I told Connie to hang loose for a few days, left her back at the funeral parlor, and headed back to the club—to find Jaffee camped in my office. As I said, I'm playing detective too, so he gets nothing from me. Does Macy's tell Gimbels?

"How are we doing, Lieutenant? Arrest the snake yet?"

"I think I may be looking at one, Kelly. Where were you between seven and ten o'clock Monday night?"

"Home with a sunburn, which is just fine now, thanks. Just a bit itchy."

"And of course some broad will swear to it."

I shrugged and sat behind the desk. He was trolling for something because Jaffee doesn't waste time.

"You know, information is hard to come by in this town, especially in the barrio, but if you dig long enough—"

"Yeah, I hear you're into voodoo."

"No, funnyboy, I'm into chickens—gamecocks, to be exact. Seems you are too."

"I like mine broiled with lemon butter."

"Keep joking. Maybe you'll die laughing. Julio Martinez owned a fighting cock that seems to have disappeared. My information says you had a piece of his action—maybe all of it. The bird was named El Kelly Grande. A lot of money goes down at these fights and Julio was racking up quite a string of victories. Maybe he was holding out on you. The bird was kept here."

"Who told you that fairy tale?" I had a feeling Constanzia had decided not to hang loose after all.

"No one had to tell me. Cops catalogue things at a death scene, and one of the items was a ten-pound bag of chicken corn which I don't see — on your menu."

"Now let me get the scenario straight, Lieutenant. Successful restauranteur/entertainer wants to knock off alleged partner, so he lures the poor guy into his cellar, whips out his pet cobra, says 'Sic 'em, Rollo,' then takes the chicken upstairs and broils it in butter and lemon and eats the evidence—maybe I even ate the snake. Sure, let's go all the way."

"That's not bad, Kelly."

I get nervous when he gets cute.

"There are only a few flaws. First, strike the 'successful' before 'restauranteur.' You're up to your elbows in debt. Second, there never was a snake—only this."

He reached down on the floor and took up a long two-tined serving fork. There are at least six of them in the kitchen.

"These are your fangs. The tines are dipped in snake venom."

"Has that got venom on it? I mean, I wouldn't want you to stick yourself."

"No, you washed it clean enough, the same as you did with the glass you used to give Martinez the mickey. Autopsies are very thorough. You drugged him and then dreamed up this snake canard just to confuse the issue."

"What's on reel five, Lieutenant? Your fantasy is weak so far."

"That's going to be my surprise ending, and I hope you don't like it," he said, getting to his feet.

"Let me know how it turns out."

"You'll be the first to know."

When his fat back had disappeared from the doorway, Barry's fat front took its place.

"That guy scares me," he said as I thumbed through the phone book under the D's. Dr. Robert Draper seemed to be one of the few municipal employees who actually lived in the city. I dialed his number.

"Oh yes, Mr. Kelly, how are you?"

"Swell, Doctor. How are Step and Fetchit?" That's what I called my mongeese.

"Fine. I hear they enjoyed their stay."

"Any time, Doc. Maybe I'll send them to camp next summer. Look,

I have a personal interest in the Martinez death because he worked for me. Jaffee says that he wasn't bitten by a snake, but was pricked with a sharp instrument dipped in venom. Where in hell would someone get snake venom in New York City?"

"At the zoo. We milk some of the reptiles for antivenom serum. We don't produce it ourselves, however. It's sold to chemical companies and some universities for research purposes."

"Do you know who it's sold to?"

"Well, offhand it's hard to say. The records are at my office. I know Columbia takes some, and I think Princeton, but I'm not sure. No, wait, that's a joint venture with the Brooks Labs in Camden."

"Brooks International! I thought they made fertilizer and stuff like that."

"They do, but they have a small medical research subsidiary. More window dressing for public relations purposes."

I was wondering if Randy Brooks also used it for private relations purposes. "Why would some lab want to make anti-cobra venom?"

"Oh, your man was killed by rattlesnake venom. Didn't Jaffee tell you?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do with that man," I said in mock desperation. "He doesn't tell me anything. Thanks, Doc. Love to Step and Fetchit and all the gang in the Bronx."

I hung up feeling pretty chipper. Things were beginning to jell for old Kell. Randy Brooks had access to the venom and he knew about Julio's prize bird. He also knew something about fighting cocks. But, just as in Lawler's case, a motive was hard to figure. Both guys were loaded. Maybe El Kelly Grande was worth killing purely for ownership, like the guys who buy stolen paintings they can never show to anyone. For that matter, old Digby could milk a rattler down on his plantation. I went out front to the bar for a nightcap—and got another surprise.

Tossi Barbera was nursing a brandy when I walked up to him.

"Hello, Tossi, you're becoming a real regular around here."

"Nice place, nice people. Actually, I wanted to see you, Chick. I read about that fellow's death. A very strange thing. A snake?"

"That's what the police say."

"I hear he's got a family too."

"Yeah, a bunch of kids."

"Maybe we could help."

"Who's we? I'm already helping."

"Brooks and myself." He leaned closer to my ear. "It's kind of a secret, Chick, but Brooks has one of the fanciest cockpits you ever saw on his estate in Jersey. They bet very large numbers over there. All gentlemen, you understand." Tossi the poor boy looking in. "After we all saw that bird the other night, I had a talk with Brooks and we figured we'd offer this Julio guy 25 Gs for him. You know, we form a little combine, make a little money, and have a little fun."

"Did he turn you down?"

"We never got to make the offer. We'd still like to have the bird and we hoped you'd talk to the widow for us. It's a good deal for them, Chick. $10,000 cash and $15,000 in Brooks Products International stock."

"Right now the widow isn't talking to anyone."

"Well, see what you can do. We'll even go a finder's fee for you."

"I thought I was the only one allowed finder's fees," a voice said over our shoulders. It was Niles Paine, cigarette holder and all.

"I thought you didn't know anything about gamecocks," I said.

"Oh, gamecocks. Heaven forbid! I thought you were talking about objets d'art. I didn't mean to interrupt, gentlemen, but you called my office this afternoon, Mr. Barbera, and I thought—"

"Oh, yes. Randy Brooks tells me you did one hell of a job selecting paintings and sculpture for his plant's lobbies and executive offices. I'd like you to do the same for my outfit."

I drifted away from them to digest this new wrinkle. Now Barbera was in the picture, but he sounded legit, unless Brooks was using him. And while I was at it, why discount Paine, except that he wouldn't know what to do with a rooster if he had it? It wouldn't be arty to be seen at a cockfight, but he might have his eye on a finder's fee.

I called Lawler's apartment on Fifth Avenue and was told by the butler that he had gone down to Virginia for a few days. After ten lies and some fancy footwork, I found out that he had left town on the night of the murder—by car, which would be the best way to transport a chicken.

I went out into the street for a breath of fresh air and of course, it being Third Avenue in August, I got none. I leaned up against the building, smoked a cigarette, and watched the midnight traffic trying to

make all the green lights from here to Mamaroneck.

A car pulled up to the curb and Jaffee's ugly puss pushed itself out of the front passenger window. He motioned me over.

"Honest, officer—" I minced up to him "—I haven't turned a trick all night."

"Cut the comedy. You saved me the trouble of looking for you. Take a look in the back seat."

I did so, not out of obedience, but curiosity. There, spread out on a tarp, was a smashed cage and the mortal remains of El Kelly Grande. Alectryon was copping the big sleep.

"Funny things you find in catch basins, Kelly, and this was in the one right around the corner. No gamecock involved, my eye. I knew you'd have to ditch it near here. You'd be pretty conspicuous walking around with it. It's starting to build against you, Kelly. All I need is a few more threads."

I talked across him to the driver, a dogrobber named Coogan. "Get this man to Bellevue pronto. The heat's got him." I turned and walked back into the club just as Paine and Barbera were leaving. Paine was rhapsodizing about how the only art for an olive-oil company was Etruscan, which delighted rich-little-poor-boy Tossi. I felt sick, not because the damn bird was dead, but for Julio's family, which was out of luck.

Unless!

Back in the office on the phone, I could hear the little boy's voice yelling "Aunt Connie!" and when she got on, she sounded sleepy.

"Chick, it's late."

"Maybe *too late* unless you listen to me. Who do you know who knows a lot about fighting cocks? I mean local birds."

"My God, Chick, let me think. Well, my Uncle Coco, I guess."

"Get him and bring him to me."

"Are you crazy? He's an old man! It's what? 2:30!"

"I'll come to him then. And Connie, see if your sister has any pictures of the bird. It's important."

"I'll call you back in ten minutes, Chick."

Señor Coco Della Verce was one of the handsomest old gents I've ever seen. His hair and moustache were white as overly refined flour

and played against his strong-boned mahogany face like counterpoint. I knew now where the blue eyes came from. We were sitting at a small table at the rear of a socidado, where the bond seemed to be card playing. He had a large glass of rum in front of him. Connie wore a simple white sleeveless dress that revealed light down on her arms—my nectarine had a little peach in her.

"Kelly," her uncle said, scrutinizing me. "Once, long ago in the Argentine where we come from, there were many Irishmen." Now I *really* knew where the blue eyes came from. "Nice people," he said, "but drink too much." He polished off the rum and signaled for more.

Connie had brought along a pack of color Polaroids of Julio and El Kelly Grande. Many were useless because the bird was either in Julio's arms or in its cage, but one was a beauty, with the bird in profile and his plumage fluffed. I slid it across to the old man and asked him a question.

"Of course there is a cock somewhere that looks like El Grande, but to fight like him? Never. What a heart, what spirit. That, my young Irish, cannot be replaced."

"Tio, Mr. Kelly is second generation. He is American."

"Ah, this one—" he chided her with a forefinger"—with generations she talks. She will be her own last generation with the *dar calabazas. . .*"

Somehow my high school Spanish short-circuited, because it seemed he was talking about Connie handing out pumpkins. The old man saw the confusion in my face.

"*Dar calabazas.* She hands a pumpkin to all suitors—she jilts them because they are not born here."

"Tio!" The peachy nectarine blushed.

"I tell you, young Irish," he went on, "she does not comprehend. Julio was a fine man. I knew his father and his father's father. Did you know he was descended from the Conquistadors?"

"Yeah, Mr. Della Verce, that's swell. All us Irish have a king or two knocking around in our pasts too. But what about a double for the bird?"

Nothing comes cheap. But old Tio Coco knew of a farm in Texas that could help. That meant a round-trip air ticket, which I considered an investment. So the next day, Señor Della Verce was airborne, with Connie riding shotgun to make sure the rum didn't deter him.

She called from El Paso that night. "It's remarkable, Chick, you'll see. The damn thing could be El Kelly Grande's twin. Same weight, same coloring, everything. Only it doesn't fight too well, according to Tio Coco. He wants to keep looking."

"Tell him no. Bring it back before the deal folds. These people only saw El Kelly Grande once. It's the looks that count."

"Chick," she said after some hesitation, "I don't like this. It's fraud, you know."

"Fraud, hell. I'm trying to trap a killer."

"How, for God's sake?"

"Because with the help of a guy called Cordova, I figured in the missing pieces, and all I need is that chicken. Come on, baby, fly back to Capistrano-on-the-Hudson."

The invitations went out that night with no suspicions aroused, I was sure.

Every once in a while, I toss a party for my friends in the private bar in back that I call the Pig Sty because a women's libber once took me to court to integrate it. I lost, but somehow the ladies don't favor the tangy conversation and stay away. I invited twenty guys, but the only four I was interested in were Barbera, Lawler, Brooks, and Paine. They had all been involved with the bird from the first. One of them was a murderer and the other three were witnesses before the fact.

The "do" was set for Friday, and everyone accepted. By nine o'clock, everything was going down great. During the festivities, Barbera sidled up to me.

"I guess the deal for the bird is dead, huh, Chick?"

I gave him my best *au contraire* stare. "Hell, no. I've got a surprise for you, bubby."

"The family agreed to sell?"

"Yep, but you and Brooks have some competition."

"Who, for crying out loud?"

"Lawler's in."

"I'll be damned! If you're trying to bid it up, Chick, I'll have to level with you. Lawler's on his uppers, so don't be fooled by all that country gentleman jazz. He's a bum, believe me. Land poor, as they say."

"Yeah, as they say. What do you really think the chicken is worth? 50 Gs? 60 Gs?"

"Chick—" he grinned like I could never believe a word he said "—no cock is worth that."

"Hell he isn't. I've done some research, Tossi. In the big pits, a bird can earn 40 to 50 points a night, and you know it. It's just that Julio had a Seabiscuit on his hands and played him in the bush leagues. You come on strong with the Havana stuff, so you know the action is big. And Lawler's not the only bidder, so get your checkbook ready. There's an old guy here from Argentina with lots of jack and also a syndicate from the barrio."

"Chick, I think you're making a mistake. O.K. you're representing the family, but don't ace yourself out of a nice fat fee. Look, I know Brooks will go along—the original deal plus six bills for you."

"No deal, Tossi. May I introduce you to Señor Colome Manuel Della Verce."

"Coco will do," said my fake millionaire, who was, as they say in the theater, rising to the part.

About ten o'clock, I decided it was time to move, so I got Lawler, Barbera, Brooks, and Tio Coco together, along with a guy named Carlos, who was supposed to represent the barrio syndicate. I even asked Paine along. He wanted to know what was up.

"I'm auctioning off a chicken and I need a witness to the deal."

"How exciting."

Five minutes later, we were all in the cellar, where Jack Mac had set up a small table as a bar. When everyone had a drink, I went to the center of the floor and went into action.

"Gentlemen," I said, "we've got a bit of business here and then we can enjoy ourselves. Four of you have put in bids for El Kelly Grande, and I'm happy to say that Julio's family has agreed to an open auction. Connie!"

She came out from behind the staples shelves carrying the cage I'd had built at a woodworking shop on 74th Street. Inside was a yawking facsimile of my namesake.

"What's for openers, fellas?"

Digby Lawler sipped on a bourbon and said almost inaudibly, "Fifteen thousand."

"I think you're holding a stiff hand, my friend," I told him and looked at Brooks and Barbera. Barbera bent his head to his new buddy's whisper, looked up and said, "Thirty Gs."

Carlos had a haughty look on his face as he said, "I go 65, cash." go 65, cash."

"Seventy-five," Tio Coco said pompously. He was overplaying it, but doing beautifully.

Lawler shook his head and sneered. "Hell, I could have bought a piece of Secretariat for that."

"So your cheques are all on the table, Lawler?" I asked.

"Hell, Chick boy, that's a nice bird, but he's no eagle. I've never even seen the thing fight."

"But you checked him out. You *all* have."

"By reputation," Lawler countered. "Can you guarantee he's a winner?"

"I don't have to guarantee a thing, Lawler, but your bolt is shot, so what's to argue? How about it, Tossi? Seventy-five is the number."

More whispers and then Randy Brooks said, "All right, 100. Seventy-five in stock."

"I already have seventy-five in cash."

"Look, Kelly, are you impugning the integrity of my company's financial position? The stock will double in ten years."

"He has a point, gentlemen. Can't knock the stock. Going once, going twice."

"Hold it, Kelly." Lawler acted a little drunk. "I had a deal with the Martinez family."

"All deals are off. Going three, and sold to the gentleman in the grey suit and stocks and bonds."

Connie's eyes were flashing as she opened the cage and took the bird out—then dropped him to the floor.

"Watch out!" Tossi Barbera cried. "He has spurs on!"

The cock arched his wings and started scampering around the cellar floor. Lawler and Brooks tried to stop him as I herded him into a corner near the liquor lockup. "Watch it, Paine," I yelled as he picked up the bird, letting the spurs scratch his hand.

"Good God," he screamed, "I could get blood poisoning!"

"You could get more than that, Niles—maybe go rigid." I took the vial of venom that Dr. Draper got for me from my jacket pocket. Paine's face went white. "Go ahead and play it out, Niles buddy. It's just another 'accident' as far as I'm concerned."

"Are you insane, Kelly? This is murder in front of witnesses!"

"Kelly, what's going on?" Barbera shouted.

"You're watching a snake die. Look at him. His eyes are already starey. Breath getting short, Niles buddy? That's the way rattler venom works. But you should know."

"Kelly, for God's sake, get me to a hospital!"

"I can do better than that. I have the antidote, and this lady is a nurse. Tell these people why you killed Julio Martinez."

He slumped against the food locker. "This is a frame-up," he bawled.

"To coin a phrase, Niles, poppycock. You got in touch with Julio somehow. He let you into the club. You got a mickey into him and gave him the rattler venom with a prick of some fork tines."

"Kelly!" Brooks stepped forward. "I want no part in this! If this man is dying—"

"He's dying all right, but he can save himself by talking now. He planned it well, Brooks, and you were his dupe. When Tossi told me he had decorated your manufacturing plants, that gave me an idea. He had access to the snake venom. That was the pin. You, Tossi, and Lawler—you had no motive. Rich guys don't kill for a bunch of feathers. So that left Nilesy boy."

"I know nothing of gamecocks, for the love of God! *Please,* Kelly!"

"I clock it for a few minutes more, Niles. You didn't want the bird, buddy, you wanted something much more valuable—something you saw that first night down here. The only thing Jaffee didn't find in the catch basin with the cage and the dead bird—the spurs."

"The spurs!" That from everybody.

"Let me introduce Dr. Carlos Cordova of the Museum of Natural History, not the barrio syndicate. Tell 'em, Doc."

As he came forward, he put his hand in his pocket and took out the blow-ups of the Polaroids showing the spurs on the bird's cage that I had made the day after Jaffee had found the cock and the cage. "There is no doubt that the spurs shown here date back to the time of the Conquistadors. The markings on them undoubtedly prove them to have been the property of Cortez himself—"

I looked at Paine's startled face. "You shouldn't have ditched the bird and cage so close to the club, Paine, otherwise I wouldn't have put it all together. With the bird dead, it let Lawler, Barbera, and Brooks off the hook—they could only gain something if El Kelly Grande was alive. The only thing missing were the spurs. The idea that Julio was killed for them sounded whacked out, until Dr. Cordova

got a peek at the pictures. You spent some time examining them that night down here. Julio told us that they had been in his family for years. I can't prove it, but I think you made Julio an offer and it made him suspicious of their worth. Whether you killed him for profit or from a desire to own a chunk of antiquity, I don't know or care."

He was holding his throat now. "All right! Give me the antitoxin, please! The spurs are at my apartment." He slumped to the floor.

"Is he dead?" Lawler asked nervously.

"No," I laughed, "he's mickied. The show's over, boys, but a bald-headed Lieutenant will want statements."

In the cab uptown, she snuggled into my shoulder.

"It's wonderful, Chick. Dr. Cordova says the spurs are worth a fortune."

"Yeah," I answered sullenly.

"What's the matter?"

"I never had a chicken named after me before. I'm sad. Also I don't know what happened to Julio's winning profits."

She cackled. I *swear* she cackled. "It's not lost, Chick, see?" She reached into her purse and came out with a closed fist. When she opened it, I saw a handful of sparkle.

"Diamonds?"

"I'm sure they are. Julio was converting his winnings because diamonds are easier to hide than a bundle of money."

"But where did you find them?"

"In your cellar, dopey. The huge sack of chicken corn. Fighting cocks don't eat regular chicken feed. They're fed ground meat and hard-boiled eggs and a few grains of corn a day. It would take El Kelly Grande years to finish all that corn. That made me suspicious, so I dug around in the sack while I was waiting for you to bring everyone down tonight."

The heat was coming in through the windows of the cab, salsa hot, and the sweet smell of her mingled with the torpor coming off the East River. "You're a foxy little thing," I told her.

"Takes a fox to catch a Chick," she said, turning her face up to me. "You crazy gringo."

Nectarines are luscious on August evenings, and I stopped being sad.

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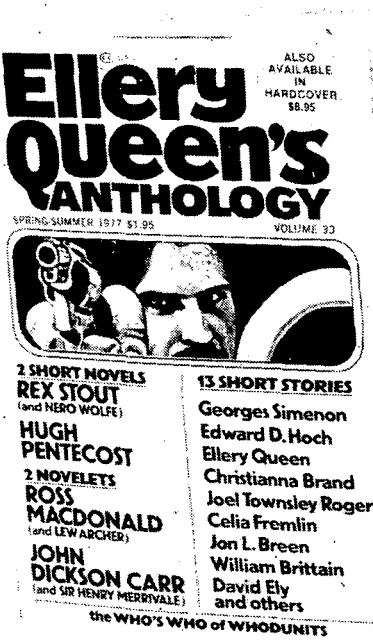

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