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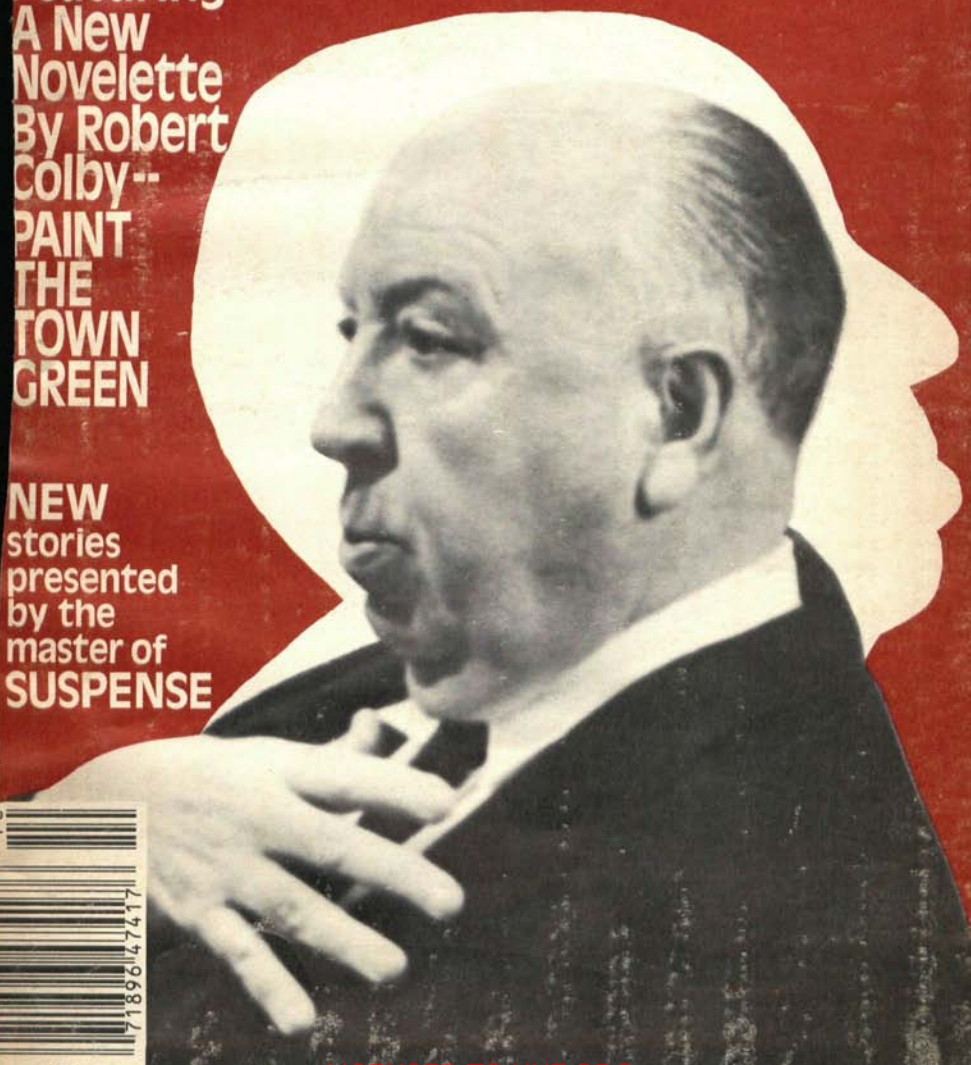
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VOLUME 22, NO. 10

OCTOBER 1977

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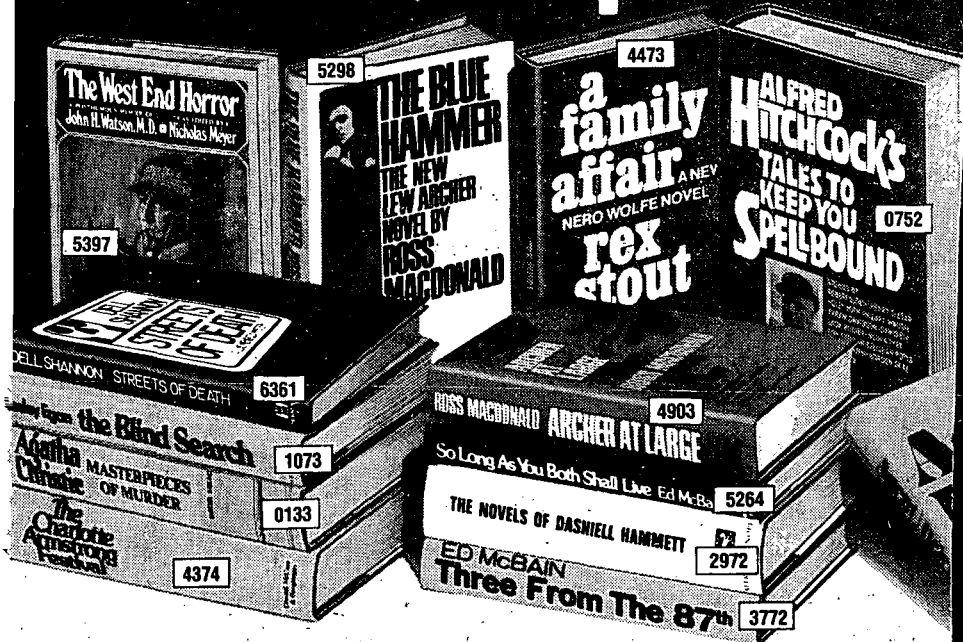
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October 1977



Dear Reader:

You'll find this something of a life or death issue—not only because it contains a story titled *Life Sentence* and one titled *Death Song*, but also because each of the stories brings one of its characters to the brink—and some of them beyond. But don't be fooled into thinking the stories are all of a kind. Consider the characters and where you'll find them.

Two business partners fishing alone in the Bahamas, an outlaw hitching a ride in a Diesel truck, a vengeful policeman in Bayswater, a conman in California who considers himself the devil's own collector, a stubborn old woman protecting her property in Schuylersville, Oklahoma, a widower with a habit for marriage and for holding garage sales, a couple with a miniature town set up in their cellar, a jealous husband in snowmobile country—and Jack Ritchie's detective pair, Ralph and Henry, in confusion.

Good reading.

Jeffrey Hitchcock

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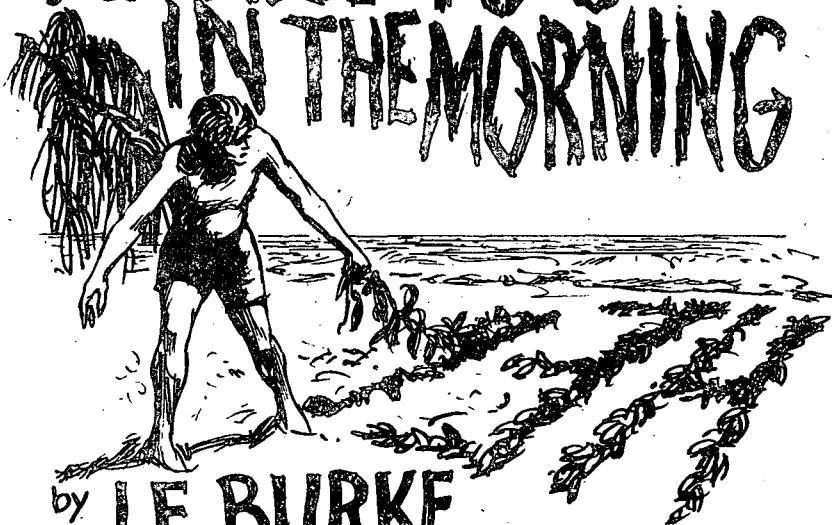
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Was it possible to be as close to a psychotic as he had been to Andy and not know it? . . .

I'LL KILL YOU IN THE MORNING



by **J.F. BURKE**

It was enough to shake your faith. Andy Herrera and I had been more than business partners. We were buddies, or so I thought. Being bachelors and both in our thirties, we made the nightclubs together on weekends, and on regular working days we always took at least one meal together. We often double-dated.

We bought a 40-foot, fully equipped cabin cruiser together, the *Tiburon*, to use on weekends and vacations. By our second summer in

business we'd been doing so well we decided to close up shop for three weeks and go on an extended trip in the boat. We had a television business in Miami—importing parts, assembling, retailing, and repairing. In ten years we could both of us have retired wealthy.

Our vacation began very well, and I thought it was the best I'd ever had. We took some fair-sized sailfish and a few marlin, a lot of red snapper, and ray. Filet of stingray with butter sauce is one of the sea's most delicate dishes. I did the cooking. Andy was helpless in the galley.

At night we'd throw out the anchor and lie back in deck chairs, listening to a Miami station while we drank our scotches and watched bright clouds of stars wheeling across the blue-black velvet sky. Life was good. I'd have said you couldn't find a happier pair of partners—until that afternoon on the Bahama Banks.

We'd been away from Miami almost three weeks and were heading back by easy stages. When we saw those low-lying sandbars Andy said, "How's about a tureen of turtle soup, old buddy?"

"Right on!" I agreed and looked for an anchorage.

Catching a sea tortoise in deep water is tough, but you can sometimes find one among the shallows on the Banks, and then you've got supper for a week. We anchored in three fathoms about a hundred yards off the nearest sandbar and rowed over to it in the dinghy. There we beached the little boat and walked about the sandbar.

It was a strange and desolate seascape. Nothing could be seen but the sea and the sky, the low-lying sandbars, and seaweed. The mainland was a day's run beyond the horizon. We waded and swam from sandbar to sandbar looking for turtle tracks.

Then I saw the granddaddy of them all. He must have weighed two hundred pounds. He was clambering across a bar about fifty yards from us. I ran across the bar we were on, plunged into the shallow water, and swam to the next one, and so on from sandbar to sandbar, hoping to head off the big animal. If I could catch him before he waddled into deep water, I'd flip him over on his back. We'd have a hell of a time getting him to the dinghy, but it would be worth it. I could almost taste the turtle soup.

When I reached the bar the turtle was on, I knew I had him. I turned to wave at Andy, but he was in the dinghy, rowing toward the *Tiburon*.

I called to him. "Andy! Hey, Andy! Where you going?"

He didn't turn around. Could he hear me? Absolutely. Not a doubt about it. He was rowing back to the boat and ignoring my yells. I stood dumfounded and watched him. Was it a practical joke? But Andy wasn't a joker. He laughed a lot, but he didn't make jokes. Maybe he was going after the scotch bottle. Or the medical kit. Maybe he'd been hit by a ray and couldn't wait to explain.

I let the turtle get away while I watched my old buddy. When he reached the *Tiburon* he tied the dinghy to the stern, climbed over the rail, and went straight to the bridge. In another minute the cruiser was moving swiftly toward the horizon.

The sun was high and hot midday on the Banks, the sea as smooth as lead sheeting. A few thunderheads stood like atomic clouds along the skyline where the *Tiburon* was now just a speck.

I spent the next few hours sitting on the sand or walking about aimlessly, trying to believe that what was happening wasn't happening. A man simply isn't marooned by a friend, I thought; it *had* to be something else. But eventually I had to admit it, Andy had played me for a fool. His motive was money, of course. Greed. We'd been doing so well in business that half of our take meant real wealth. Neither of us needed the whole thing.

I'd always known Andy was greedy, but it hadn't seemed important. He'd never been greedy in any but trivial ways; he was more inconsiderate than anything else. Or so I'd always thought. Anyway, partners are supposed to be generous with one another, and I rather enjoyed humoring Andy, letting him have his way. Everyone's entitled to make one mistake, of course. It seemed that I'd made mine.

There are places in the Bahama Banks where the ocean bottom is close to the surface, and here the currents and tidal motions of the shallow waters will kick up small sandbanks, or sandbars. These last from a few hours to a few weeks, until the currents and the tides wash them away. The Banks were a favorite marooning ground of pirates two hundred years ago. Today the regular shipping lanes are charted away from these waters. Several airlines fly this route between New York and the Caribbean, and I might be seen by one of these aircraft, but the odds were long—from twenty thousand feet the sand islands ringed with kelp could be seen clearly, but not a man. Of course a commercial fisherman or a pleasure boat might happen by. Long shots do come in.

The sandbars don't last long enough to pick up much driftwood, so building a raft was out of the question. I would be extremely lucky to find any flotsam.

As for survival on the island, I might catch an unwary fish in one of the shallow pools that settle in the bars at low tide. On the other hand, when the tide rose again I might be too busy treading water to worry about a fresh fish dinner.

It was mid-afternoon when I saw a dark speck on the horizon. A fishing boat, I thought, or a pleasure craft like our own. I stood in the middle of the sandbar and waved my arms and shouted. The boat headed straight for me. My spirits rose. What would my old buddy say when I turned up alive and kicking?

But it wasn't a fishing boat or another pleasure craft. It was the *Tiburon*. She dropped anchor where we'd anchored once before. I watched Andy get into the dinghy and row toward me.

He beached the dinghy and called to me. "Hey, Jim! Come on! Let's go!"

I started toward him, but slowly, wondering what he was up to now. He stood there, smiling his country-boy smile.

"Andy!" I shouted. "What the hell were you trying to do?"

"Come on, fella!" he called back and laughed good-naturedly. "Let's haul out of here!"

I stopped where I was and studied him. The sandbar was about one hundred yards long by fifty wide and roughly oval-shaped. I stood about thirty yards from Andy. He was holding his right arm down at his side, rather stiffly, with the hand behind his right leg.

Remembering the gun we kept for killing sharks, I whirled about and ran for the far end of the sandbar. He fired twice as I ran.

At that range he could hardly expect to hit me except with a lucky shot. He never was good with guns, but even a good marksman isn't likely to hit a moving, dodging target at more than ten yards. Not with a snub-nose .38 revolver. What I had to do was keep enough distance between us and keep moving. Sooner or later he'd run out of bullets.

And then? Then Andy would row back to the boat for more ammunition, and I'd wait for the next high tide—or for Andy. He could do it the easy way, just lay offshore and wait for the ocean to take care of me, or he could come back with more bullets. In time one of his shots would have to score, unless I could get to the dinghy.

Andy was never the profoundest thinker in the world, but he was shrewd. He made sure to keep himself and his gun between me and the dinghy as he closed in on me. I kept moving along the far curve of the sandbar, but little by little he came closer. He couldn't move toward me and shoot at the same time, so whenever he stopped to take aim I broke into a zigzag run. He shot at me the way a hunter leads a duck, and the sand kicked up in front of me. He cursed like a teamster. In fury and frustration he fired wildly. He got so mad he emptied the revolver and didn't even scratch me. While he was reloading I rushed him, but he got a bullet into the cylinder before I could get close enough and I backtracked fast.

He remained fresh and strong, while I became overheated, increasingly tired and exhausted. I drove myself to run and run, for only running could save my life. Once I tripped over a clump of seaweed and sprawled flat on the sand, and he got off a few quick shots as I scrambled to my feet.

I was wearing nothing but swim trunks. The afternoon sun was baking my brains. Thirst was like hot sand in my throat. I hadn't eaten since breakfast, and while I wasn't hungry I was feeling weak in the legs. But there could be no resting. Every time I glanced over my shoulder, Andy was coming on. If I paused a moment, he cranked off a shot. He was closing the distance, driving me toward the end of the sandbar. My back was to the sea.

"Let's get it over, fella!" he yelled at me. "It's only a matter of time!"

That *fella* tore it. That got to me. If I could have torn his heart out with my teeth, I'd have done it smiling.

Then he scored. It was a Sunday shot. It caught me in the left leg, in the calf—just a flesh wound but the slug passed all the way through, taking a chunk of muscle with it. Both holes began to bleed at once, and heavily. Andy saw what he'd done and stopped to reload the gun. I couldn't run well enough to try rushing him again, so I hit the water and struck out for the next sandbar. There was a shallow channel with sand sharks between the two bars, and they smelled the blood. They were almost within snapping distance when I scrambled above the tideline. Unlike bone wounds, flesh wounds are often slow to hurt, but mine began to throb with pain, not only from the torn muscle but also from the strong salt seawater.

I sat at the edge of the sandbar, moaning in pain and watching Andy make his way back to the dinghy. He got in, pulled away from the sandbar, and started rowing around it to my new refuge. When he was close enough I pegged a few conch shells at him, hoping for a lucky hit, but there weren't enough of them lying around. Soon I had to abandon the sandbar for the next one, with Andy rowing after for the same desperate, exhausting game of dodging bullets.

My leg was giving me hell. I could hardly stagger. I fell often. And I was losing a lot of blood. When Andy stopped to reload the gun, I ripped the cord out of my swim trunks and cinched a tourniquet around my leg.

I was saved for the day by the sun dropping behind some low clouds on the horizon, the usual quick sunset of the tropics. As the sky darkened, Andy turned back to the dinghy. Wounded though I was, he'd never try me in the dark. That was another thing I remembered about my old buddy. He was not only greedy, Andy Herrera was a coward. It was something I'd always known about him, but I'd been tolerant of his failing. Not all men have courage, nor should be expected to have. We don't live in courageous times.

Standing up in the dinghy, he called to me, "Good night, sport! I'll kill you in the morning!"

He laughed and sat down and picked up the oars. I watched him row back to the *Tiburon*. He tied up to the stern and climbed aboard. He weighed anchor, started the motors, and pulled out to sea about a mile farther, where he dropped anchor again. He was taking no chances. And he was right. I might have made it to the nearer anchorage despite the loss of blood, my exhaustion, my pain, my hunger, and the terrible thirst. I think I would have made it. A hundred yards. But a mile? Nevertheless I did consider trying, for if I simply waited I'd only be waiting for the end. But first I had to rest.

I lay on the sand and fell asleep immediately. A broken leg couldn't have kept me awake. When I woke, a full moon was flooding the sea with pearly light. The tide had risen a little, covering some of the sandbars, but the one I was on had at least a foot of freeboard. The *Tiburon* lay at anchor far out with no running lights. The sea and the sky and the ghostly sand islands were lovely under the moon, but I was hardly touched by beauty then, for my leg had stiffened and the pain when I moved it was excruciating.

I knew I couldn't undergo another day of bullet-dodging under the furious tropic sun, without food or rest and with a hole in my left leg. It might be better to drown trying to swim out to the *Tiburón*.

"I'll kill you in the morning!" Well, I thought, he probably could. But if he couldn't, if he was short of ammunition—I tried to remember how many boxes of shells we had for the .38, and I thought it was four. He'd used maybe two. He had enough, all right.

But if I got lucky, if I was able to keep far enough away from him until he did run out of bullets, then I had only the sea itself to fear. If a boat came by, I could signal it. If an airplane flew over. . .

What I needed was a signal visible from twenty thousand feet. I think I must have been slightly delirious. No one in his right mind would try what I tried then. I began gathering all the seaweed I could find on the sand island and laying it out in huge letters twenty feet long, spelling out H-E-L-P. It took hours of agony. I moved very slowly, dragging my wounded leg.

When it was done, I realized that H-E-L-P might be the wrong language for some aircraft pilots. I should have made a big S-O-S, the international symbol. So I went back to work, gathering more seaweed, and built the letters S-O-S.

Delirious I might have been, but not too much to feel a bit ridiculous. I knew the odds against what I was trying. But what else could I have done? There was nothing else. And aircraft do fly over the Bahama Banks.

The night was nearly over. I tried to rest and to think. It wasn't much I'd done to save myself. I worried this thought. I'd done something but it wasn't much. Or it *was* much, but it wasn't right. Along towards dawn I began to understand what I had to do.

I gathered more seaweed, and in the center of the island I built a mound of kelp about four feet high, big enough to hide a man if he were crouched inside.

When Andy beached the dinghy at sunrise I watched him from a distance of about fifteen yards, but he couldn't see me. He stood by the boat, looking around at my work: H-E-L-P and S-O-S. And of course the four-foot mound of kelp in the center of the island. Though he couldn't see me, I could see his look of utter bafflement.

From any point on that sandbar you could see all the other bars in
I'LL KILL YOU IN THE MORNING

the area. And to all intents and purposes I had disappeared. Andy looked around, his country-boy smile gone now, his eyes narrowed as he stared intently at every part of the island. He walked slowly about, careful to keep near the dinghy. I hardly breathed.

Then the smile again spread across his face, and he laughed a short, chuckling laugh. I began to tremble, sure he'd see the ruse. The trembling came from fear, not from the pain in my leg, the hunger in my belly, the thirst in my throat. It was pure fear.

Andy had made out the symbols, my signals, and he began to laugh. He laughed for quite a while. A greedy man, a coward, and apparently a psycho. Could I be as close to a psychotic as I'd been to Andy and not know it? Evidently I could.

"Pretty smart!" he yelled.

Since the letter S was nearest to him, he kicked it apart.

"Did you make this for the seagulls, fella?"

He kicked the O apart.

"Look!" he shouted. He held the .38 high for me to see, though he still hadn't seen me. I saw that he'd attached a piece of wood to the butt of the gun to make a sort of stock, which he could brace against his shoulder while aiming, thus giving him a little more accuracy. Now he held the makeshift stock against his shoulder and took slow, careful aim at the big clump of kelp I'd piled in the center of the sandbar. The gun roared like a cannon. He laughed. "How do you like *that*, fella?"

I didn't answer, of course—I didn't move. He took slow aim and fired again. Another .38 slug plowed into the heart of the clump of seaweed. He looked puzzled.

He stepped closer to the big clump, and when he was only ten yards from it he fired three more shots.

He looked nervously about and saw nothing but sand, sea, and seaweed. And of course the remaining letters of my signal, H-E-L-P, and the broken kicked-apart S-O-S.

He yelled in sudden fury and kicked the big clump of kelp. He kicked it savagely. He fired his sixth bullet into it.

As the truth struck him he screamed and spun about, saw me erupt from under one leg of the H in H-E-L-P, and frantically tried to reload. I staggered towards the dinghy, dragging long streamers of kelp. I had maybe fifteen yards to go, he had thirty. He tried to run and reload the gun at the same time. He stumbled and fell. I struggled on.

hopping on one leg, slowed by the dragging seaweed. I reached the dinghy, shoved it into the water, and clambered in. He was at the water's edge before I'd taken three strokes with the oars, and he began shooting wildly, emptying the gun again.

He floundered into the water, yelling something about a joke. He hadn't meant to shoot me. He raved wildly, yelling things I didn't understand. I rested the oars about thirty yards out, and he started swimming. He was always a lousy swimmer. As he drew closer I took a light stroke with the oars and pulled away from him. He was already tired and threshing his arms, gasping, choking, pleading. I let him come a little closer, then dipped the oars and pulled away a few yards. When we'd done this three times he had to turn around and make for the sandbars.

I waited until I saw he was safely on the sand. Then I rowed out to the *Tiburón*. As I tied the dinghy to the stern rail, I could see my ex-partner trying to repair the broken letters of S-O-S.



The trouble with Harry Caribe was that he lacked the feeling the great ones had . . .

DEATH SONG



by **STEPHEN WASYLYK**

Grundy and I answered the radio call because we were in the neighborhood, which made us the first on the scene after the patrolmen who had discovered the body.

As we pulled up, the patrolmen were standing in the glare of headlights alongside the form of a woman just off the sidewalk that paralleled the blacktop curving through the park. I stepped out into the cool night and stopped about twenty feet away while Grundy charged

over to the body.

My hesitation was deliberate. It gave me a better perspective of the scene. At least that was the way I rationalized it. Deep down I knew I hesitated because I wanted to postpone the real impact of death. Only when I leaned over the body did the fact that it had had an identity and had lived and breathed only a short time before hit like a sharp jab to the ribs.

This was a woman, dressed in a white short-sleeved dress, one light sandal missing. Her hair was long and dark. She lay under a young elm, and behind in the darkness, only a short distance away, lighted windows in tall buildings rose high into the soft black sky like a jeweled backdrop.

Grundy rose. "Another one," he said. "This is the third."

"I was afraid of that when I heard the call," I said.

Cars were pulling up behind us and in the distance the wailing of another siren rose and fell.

I knelt by the body. The face lacked the freshness of youth, but the marks of life hadn't indented themselves too deeply so she was probably in her middle thirties; a pretty woman with a small nose and a wide mouth. There was blood on her white dress as there had been blood on the dresses of the other two, and without examining her any closer I knew a knife had been used.

I rose, a tenseness in the pit of my stomach.

Several patrolmen came up. I felt someone brush past me and Mandola, the lieutenant, knelt by the body.

"Hell," he said.

The words stuck in my throat. "I knew her."

He looked up at me.

"Her name is Edie Bolton," I said. "She was Harry Caribe's woman."

"The singer at the Peacock Club?"

I nodded.

"That's a break," he said. "With their purses missing, it took a while to identify the other two. Maybe we can get the jump on this one."

An ambulance cut off its siren, wheeled in an arc, and began backing to the curb.

"Do you want to tell him?" he asked.

"I'll tell him," I said.

"Grundy can stay and help finish here. You get Caribe and take him to the morgue for a positive I.D., then bring him to the precinct. Maybe he can tell us something. Is there anything you want to say?"

"You see what I see," I said. "Purse missing, shoe missing. And one other thing that's different from the others. It's a cool evening and she's wearing a short-sleeved dress. She wouldn't go out that way. She should have a shawl or a jacket or a sweater."

He nodded. "We'll look around."

I walked toward the car. If there was anything more to be learned from this one than from the other two, Mandola would find it. Three women had been knifed in two weeks, all with purses missing and one shoe gone. Another crazy was roaming the streets acting out a twisted vendetta that only a psychiatrist could begin to understand.

The Peacock Club was on the other side of the park, down a cobblestoned side street hardly wide enough for the car. A badly-executed neon peacock looking like a scrawny rooster in drag hung above the door. It was one of the last remaining supper clubs in town, one of the few places with music where you could stop for a drink or dinner without being forced to listen to electronic rock so loud it made the crockery dance. All you got at the Peacock was moderately good food, high prices, and Harry Caribe at the piano, singing a lot of old tunes and a few new ones to the middle-aged crowd.

Harry and his piano were on a little dais to one side of the dining room. I waved away the maitre d' and waited for him to glance in my direction.

Harry Caribe. I guess twenty or twenty-five years ago there were many Harry Caribes in the entertainment business—good-looking guys with enough voice and musical ability to start out with dreams of making it big before rock and country-and-western came into their own. But the years went by and musical tastes changed and after ten thousand nights in a thousand clubs, only a few still hung on, singing in the few clubs remaining, where no one ever really listened.

That was the way it was with Harry. I looked at him and saw an automatic man, with nothing in his voice and nothing in his fingers, and it was as if his whole life spread before me—the hundreds of women who had wanted to reach out and touch the closest thing to a celebrity they would ever meet, the ratty clubs, the records that didn't

sell, the songs that never caught on.

He was singing one now, a song he had written and was the only one ever to sing, a blues song, of a heartbreaking love and loneliness, and I realized for the first time why Harry had never made it. He lacked that intensity and deep feeling that the great ones had, the quality that made you stop what you were doing and listen and be part of the song.

I felt very sorry for Harry Caribe.

He looked up and saw me, his gleaming smile wide, and I motioned toward the bar. He nodded, his carefully brushed black hair like patent leather in the spotlight.

He joined me in a few minutes. I motioned to the bartender. "Give him a double."

Harry grinned. "How about you, Cole?"

"I'm on duty."

"Then what brings you here?"

I put my elbows on the bar. "You'll need that drink, Harry," I said quietly.

He stood straight, a well built man with a heavy, handsome face. "What the hell?" he said.

"It's Edie," I said. "She's dead."

He gripped the curled edge of the bar, his shoulders slightly hunched, and stared at the racked and gleaming bottles. His voice was husky. "How?"

"It looks like the same one who got the other two."

"Oh, God," he said. "I told her. I told her tonight—don't walk through the park." His hand clamped on my arm. "Where is she?"

"I'll take you to her," I said. "Then we'll go to the precinct. You may be able to help."

He moved along with me woodenly, as if his brain no longer had full control of his body, a handsome marionette in a perfectly fitted tuxedo. I thought, he's going to crack up.

After we left the morgue and were driving to the precinct, he said quietly, "She was all I had."

I didn't say anything.

"I'm just a saloon singer and not a very good one," he said. "There was a time when I thought the only thing left was to step in front of a

subway train or a truck. But she came up to me one night. At first I thought she was just another broad, but you know something? She cared about me. Not Harry Caribe, me. They say that all of us have someone inside that no one knows, that we keep hidden from everyone. She reached out and touched that someone in me." His voice held a tinge of awe. "All those years, all those people, and none of them. . ." His voice cracked. "Only her," he whispered.

"You're a lucky man, Harry," I said. "Think of it that way."

"Yeah," he said softly. "I'm a lucky man."

In the precinct, I took him into Mandola's office. Mandola squeezed into the armchair behind his desk. If he didn't stop hitting the pasta and the good wine every night for dinner, he soon wouldn't fit at all. He ran a hand through his thick black hair.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Harry nodded.

"Why was she in the park?" asked Mandola.

Harry's eyes focused on Mandola's clasped hands. "I don't know. I warned her not to walk through there. Our apartment is on the other side and she'd come to the club every night to meet me when I was done. We'd have a bite and a couple of drinks before we went home. She used to cut across the park when she came directly from the apartment."

"Every night?"

Harry shook his head. "Some nights she'd go to a concert or a movie. If she did that, she'd take a cab. She only came through the park on the nights she stayed home."

"She went to those places alone?"

"She didn't mind."

"But tonight she stayed home and cut through the park to meet you."

Harry nodded. "She must have."

"Did you know she wasn't going out last night?"

"She told me before I left for the club."

"What time was that?"

"About eighty-thirty."

"What time did she usually cross the park?"

"I finish at midnight. She usually left about eleven. The walk would take only about twenty minutes."

"So someone could have known her pattern, that she'd be there almost every night at the same time?"

"I guess," said Harry.

"And you're sure she didn't go out last night?"

"If she had, she wouldn't have been in the park—she would be alive."

There was a sudden commotion in the squad room. Mandola raised his eyebrows. I went to the door and opened it.

Two uniformed men, one old, one young, were talking to Grundy. The older one had a hand clamped on the arm of a slightly built young man with straight black hair combed down over his right eyebrow. The eyes behind his thick-lensed glasses were wide, magnified by the heavy glass. A short beard ran from his sideburns, along his jaw, and over his chin. He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and plaid slacks and his hands were cuffed behind his back.

I stepped out of the office.

"He was standing there," the young patrolman said, "long after everyone else had gone. I asked him what he was doing. He said he had a right to be there because it was a public park and he'd heard a woman had been killed. I told him it was none of his business unless he had some information that would help the police. He laughed—he said he had a lot of information but he wasn't going to help the dumb police with anything. So I braced him against the car and shook him down." He held out a long slim switchblade knife. "When I found this, I put the cuffs on him, read him his rights, and brought him in."

Grundy picked up the knife and pressed the catch. The blade swished forth, gleaming and deadly. Mandola came up beside me.

"The car," said Grundy. "Did you search it?"

"Not yet. It's still in the park."

"Get a search warrant, Grundy," said Mandola. "Bring the car in."

Grundy nodded.

Mandola brought the young man into his office. "Sit down."

"You can't prove anything," said the young man.

"Prove what?" asked Mandola mildly. "I haven't even asked you anything. You know your rights. You don't have to say anything. All I want is your name so we know who we're talking to."

"You'll see," said the young man. "You'll have to let me go. You think you're going to prove I killed those women, but you can't."

"No," said Mandola. "I don't think that. There is no way you can be guilty."

The young man drew himself up. "Why not?"

"You're too small and skinny," said Mandola. "You could never handle those women. It would take a big man, someone with a lot more muscle. All you use that knife for is to clean your fingernails. You carry it because it makes you feel big."

The young man's eyes were enormous behind the glasses. "Don't say I'm not big!" he screamed. "You have no right!"

Mandola turned to me. "We might as well let him go. This guy wouldn't have the nerve to step on an ant, let alone kill three women."

"Wouldn't I?" bawled the young man. "That's your stupid opinion!"

"Even if you could," said Mandola, "you had no reason."

"Reason?" The young man smiled. I didn't like the smile. "Don't you know who I am?"

"No," said Mandola. "Who are you?"

The young man's eyes gleamed and he leaned forward as if he had a secret to tell. "I am the Angel of Death, the Messenger of the Apocalypse!" The words lashed the quietness like the deadly whisper of a whip. "I am here to punish all those with sinful ways, especially those whores of Babylon who walk the streets flaunting their bodies!"

"Oh, Lord," sighed Mandola.

The young man spat. "Blasphemer!"

I had forgotten Harry Caribe until I sensed him at my elbow.

"He's the one," he said softly.

"It sounds that way," I said.

I had unbuttoned my coat and was standing with it pushed back, my hands on my hips. Before I could move, Harry reached around, snapped my .38 from the holster, pushed me aside, jammed the gun against the young man, and pulled the trigger.

The young man, his eyes wide, stared at nothing as he sank to the floor.

I grabbed Harry. Mandola grabbed the gun, both of us reacting seconds too late.

Mandola dropped to one knee alongside the kid, felt for a pulse, and found none. He raised his eyes to Harry, his face glistening with sudden sweat. "You damned fool," he said tightly.

"He killed her," said Harry. "You heard him. No smart lawyer can

plead insanity and get him off now."

"And you?" snapped Mandola. "What are you going to plead?"

By dawn, the place was loaded with more brass than I knew existed, from the Commissioner down to the internal-investigation crew. It would be hard to imagine a situation worse than one in which a handcuffed prisoner, not yet charged with anything, gets shot with a detective's gun while he's in the process of being questioned.

It didn't matter that when they brought in the kid's car it turned out to be a van with suspicious stains on the floor, that inside was a plastic trash-bag containing the missing shoes and purses of the first two victims, which more or less locked up the fact that he had to be guilty.

What *did* matter was that he was innocent until he could be proven guilty in a court of law and his rights hadn't been protected. There would be hell to pay in the news media and a lot of static from every civil-rights organization in town.

The kid's name was Deger Harris. It was a name that would be in the headlines for quite a few days, and the brass had no choice but to suspend me and Mandola pending results of an investigation.

Harry Caribe came out better than we did. We booked him, he called a lawyer, there was a fast preliminary hearing, and a compassionate judge released him on bail. His lawyer immediately deposited him in the hospital for treatment for shock.

Mandola and I left the precinct late that afternoon, sixteen hours behind on sleep, our feet dragging.

"I don't know about you," said Mandola, "but I need a couple of drinks before I go home and sleep." He yawned. "At least we don't have to report in."

"Some vacation," I said. "No pay and the least we'll end up with is a reprimand in our files. That doesn't matter to me—I'm going nowhere—but it does mean it will be a long time before you make captain."

Mandola grinned wryly. "I'll drink to that."

We found a bar and drank in silence.

Finally Mandola said, "In all the excitement, I didn't hear anyone mention that there was no third shoe or purse in that van."

"I know," I said. "Or a sweater or a jacket."

"None of them were killed where they were found," said Mandola.

"We established that long ago. Harris must have forced them into the van before he killed them, then thrown them out in the park. Maybe this time he left the shoe and the purse behind and a wrap of some kind behind."

I ordered another round. "With the kid dead, we may never know. Unless. . ."

Mandola downed his drink. "Unless what?"

"Unless he didn't kill Edie Bolton. The cop said he had been standing there watching. He never did that before."

"We don't know that. He could have and never been noticed."

"Still. . ."

Mandola nodded. "It could have been someone else."

"I'd hate to think there's another one out there."

"Suppose the other one just wanted us to think it was done by the same person who killed the other two so he took the shoe and the purse. . ."

I shrugged. "To hell with it. We're out of it."

Mandola shook his head. "You know better. If you want to be out of it, you be out of it. I'm still in it."

"Mandola," I said, "the Commissioner himself stood there when we turned in our guns and badges—which is hardly standard operating procedure—and you saw the expression on his face. There's nothing you can do."

"Sure there is," said Mandola. "I can make a phone call to the Medical Examiner. Maybe he's turned up something interesting."

"You do that," I said. "I'll have another drink."

He went to the pay phone in the corner. I ordered another round. The lights in the bar were beginning to get a little fuzzy and I felt warm and relaxed.

Mandola came back and sat down. I looked at him expectantly.

"Would you like to know what time she was killed?" he asked.

"Why not?"

"She was killed sometime between eight and nine. We didn't find her until eleven. Also, the lividity indicates that immediately after death the body had lain for some time in a position different from the one in which we found her. Like the others."

"So Harris drove around with her in the van."

"You're forgetting—Caribe said he left her at eight-thirty and she

wasn't going out. There was no reason for her to leave the apartment until it was time to go to the club to meet him."

"All right," I said. "So maybe she wasn't killed between eight and nine. The M.E. could be an hour off. Make it between nine and ten."

"Still too early for her to be out." He played with his glass, swirling the cubes. "Suppose she never went out at all? Suppose she was killed in the apartment? That would account for the missing jacket."

I stared at him. "Are you saying that Harry—?"

"It's possible. He could have killed her, gone to the club, and come back later to pick her up and drop her in the park. He could have killed the kid to cover up."

I shook my head. "No way. I know his schedule at the club. He plays, takes a ten-minute break at the bar, and goes back to work. He doesn't leave the place at all, and if he did everybody would know it. Furthermore, he couldn't kill her. It isn't in him."

"If we believe the M.E., she had to be killed in that apartment house."

"O.K.," I said. "But not Harry. Someone else."

"Do you know of anyone?"

"No, but although Harry left her alone every night that doesn't mean she *stayed* alone. He said she sometimes went to a concert or a movie. Well, maybe she had company he didn't know about. Edie was a good-looking woman. There are plenty of men around who would be willing to step in the back door when Harry went out the front. If she had a playmate, it shouldn't be too difficult to find him. I would bet it was someone in the same building."

He spread his hands. "We should check it out."

"Not us," I said. "We're in enough trouble."

"If not us, then who?"

"Your friend and mine—Detective First Class Grundy. Let's have a few more, then a long night's sleep. You can call Grundy tomorrow."

I woke in my own bed, fully clothed except for my shoes. Mandola must have wrestled me home but I didn't remember it. The position of the sun told me it was afternoon.

I rolled to my feet and settled my pounding head under a cold shower. A half hour later, a cup of black coffee in one hand and the phone in the other, I was talking to Mandola.

"I called Grundy," he said. "They've put the whole thing under wraps and taken it out of the hands of the precinct detectives. It's now a downtown operation and he's been ordered to stay away from the case. But before that happened, Grundy had already been to the apartment house, checking on her movements. The doorman never saw her leave and the security man at the garage entrance told him Caribe drove away at his usual time, alone."

"That doesn't make sense," I said. "Someone had to see her. You can't get in or out of a building like that at night without being noticed, not with the security system they have. I'm going to wait until tonight when the same people will be on duty and I'm going over there."

"You'll get hung up by the heels if they find out."

"Look," I said. "We were drinking yesterday, just winging along, but a lot of what we said makes sense. If somebody else killed her, he's probably laughing at us and I'm too old and tired to be laughed at by anyone except myself. Those clowns from headquarters are going to ignore everything except the shooting of the suspect. We're probably the only two people in the city who care that there might be someone else involved. I was willing to let Grundy handle it, but they fixed that so I'll do it myself. No one can tell me what I can or can't do on my own time. They can't do much more than fire me and right now, I couldn't care less. I'm going to that apartment building and ask around. You stay there. You have a wife and kids to think of. I don't."

There was a long silence. "I'll meet you there," said Mandola.

I had expected him to say that.

We hadn't gone much past the doorman and a couple of tenants on Harry's floor when we knew that in addition to a half dozen people Harry and Edie had been friendly with, Edie had been seen regularly in the company of a guy named Tarrant who lived a few doors down the hall. We tapped at his door.

I expected someone with a little style and class, a good-looking guy, but I guess Edie had enough of that with Harry. Tarrant was a short man inclined toward the heavy side, with thick curly grey hair. He could have been in his forties or early fifties.

He peered through the six inches of open space the door chain allowed him. "What do you want?"

"Just a talk," said Mandola. "We're looking into the death of the woman who lived with Harry Caribe."

"I don't know anything," Tarrant started to close the door. I put out a hand and blocked it.

"You knew her well," I said.

"What difference does it make? The papers said Caribe shot the man who killed her."

"Are you ashamed of your relationship with her?"

"Ashamed?" He put a hand to his eyes. "No, I'm not ashamed." Tears glistened when the hand came down. "I loved her."

"She was Caribe's woman."

"Not for much longer. We were going to go away together."

"She was leaving Caribe?"

He nodded.

"Did Caribe know?"

"She was going to tell him last night."

"Why was she leaving?"

"Love, companionship. Call it what you want. We got along and I had time to spend with her. Caribe didn't. She was lonely."

"Did she love you?"

"I didn't care whether she did or not."

"Did you see her yesterday evening?" asked Mandola.

"No. I met her in the afternoon for a few minutes. She was going to call me after Caribe went to the club, but she didn't. I phoned the apartment about nine-thirty but there was no answer. I assumed she had gone with Caribe, perhaps looking for an opportune moment to tell him. She didn't want to hurt him any more than was necessary. The next thing I knew a late news bulletin said she was dead."

Mandola and I looked at each other. Harry had said he had left her at eight-thirty, yet she hadn't called Tarrant.

"Do you have a car?" I asked.

"I get along without one," he said.

I thanked him and let him close the door, knowing he was on the verge of breaking down.

Mandola said, "He's not it."

"No," I said. "He couldn't get the body to the park without a car."

"Caribe has a car, and if she was leaving him he had a motive."

"The security man said he left alone."

"He'd hardly have her body sitting alongside him." He looked around. "These places usually have a freight elevator."

"I've already checked that. It gets locked up every night at five and only the manager has the key."

"I'm stubborn," Mandela said. "Let's go down to the garage. Someone must have brought Caribe's car back by now. If her body was inside, there should be bloodstains."

We walked up and down the aisles of cars until we found a silver Cadillac parked in the slot marked Caribe.

Mandola opened the door and examined the interior. "Nothing here." He tossed the keys to me. "Try the trunk."

The trunk was bare and clean. I slammed the lid closed.

"Damn," said Mandela. "She left this building somehow. When Tarrant called at nine-thirty, she was either gone or dead, so she walked out or was carried out. The doorman didn't see her leave so it had to be through the garage."

A small Fiat came down the aisle and wheeled into the space alongside Harry's car, in a slot labelled *Dr. Jones*.

The driver, a tall honey-haired young woman, got out, dragging a small doctor's bag off the seat. She stared at us curiously and I had the feeling she was ready to use the bag as a weapon.

I smiled at her. "Don't be nervous. We're police officers trying to determine what time Miss Bolton left the building the other evening."

"The woman who was killed? I thought that was all settled."

"Not entirely."

"I can't tell you when she left, but I do know she was here when I arrived about eight forty-five. As I pulled in, Mr. Caribe's car was leaving. When I came down the ramp, I saw her. It appeared as though she had tried to catch Caribe and had just missed him. I parked and went to the elevator, expecting her to come back, but she didn't so I continued upstairs."

"You didn't see where she went?"

"I assumed she followed me later."

"Was there anything unusual about her?"

"No. She seemed a little upset, but that could be because she had missed him."

Mandola made a note of where she could be reached and we escorted her to the elevator. As we waited, she smiled and said, "This is

the first time I've ever felt completely safe down here. I'll be happy when they install that closed-circuit TV system they're talking about."

"I thought you had good security in this building," I said.

She waved. "Those guards at the entrance? There isn't one of them I trust. The one there now, for instance. He always has something suggestive to say. I understand that quite a few women have complained, but the manager says it isn't easy to fill the job so he keeps him on."

As the elevator doors closed behind her, Mandola said, "You take the left and I'll take the right."

I found the spots on the cement floor outside a small metal door marked *Employees Only*. I called over to Mandola.

He fingered them thoughtfully. "It could be," he said.

"I think we'd better talk to the man," I said.

We walked up the ramp to the small booth at the entrance to the garage. The young man inside, tall and slim with long hair he kept pushing away from his face, watched us advance, his face impassive.

"No one but tenants are allowed in here," he said.

"We're police," said Mandola.

He must have read something in our expressions. He took a step, whirled, and threw a punch at Mandola. Mandola ducked, catching the punch high on the head. The young man spun toward me. I hit him twice in the stomach, doubling him over, then twisted him around and locked his arm behind his back.

Mandola shook his head to clear it. "I'll call Grundy," he said.

Grundy explained it all when we saw him later.

Why Edie Bolton had run after Harry, he didn't know—perhaps she lost her nerve in the apartment when she intended to tell him she was leaving, then acquired it again. At any rate, she had ended up alone in the garage with the young night attendant. Something had turned him on and he had attacked her. She fought so hard he had killed her, then he had hidden the body in the trunk of his car until he could dispose of it. While he was waiting for an opportunity, the idea of making it look like the third of the killings had come to him, so he had removed one of her shoes, taken her body to the park, and tossed it out. The trip hadn't taken more than ten minutes and no one had even missed him.

All of which changed nothing as far as Mandola and I were concerned. We remained on suspension. And Harry would have to stand trial without a thing going for him as far as the law was concerned. He came out of the hospital, buried Edie, and, although they tried to break his contract, went back to work at the club. They backed off when they saw the crowds his notoriety brought in. To some people, Harry was a hero.

I stopped by one night. He took a break and joined me for a drink. He was a great deal thinner, his face whiter, and there were shadows under his eyes.

"I shot that kid for nothing," he said.

"The people close to the two women he killed might not agree," I said.

"Is it true Edie was leaving me?"

"We have only Tarrant's word, but he has no reason to lie."

"So I would have lost her anyway."

"People survive those things, Harry," I said. "It's over and done with. You have a trial to consider."

He smiled. "What trial?"

He went back to his piano and fingered into the blues number he sang the night I had come for him. But this time it was different. The words took hold and probed deep and you felt this was a man crying deep in his soul.

I put down my glass and walked out.

He'd been a pleasant-voiced nightclub singer for a long time, mouthing words with no understanding or feeling, but the sensitivity he'd lacked was there now, in his phrasing and in the quality of his voice.

He'd taken the lifeless melody and lyrics and given them incredible sadness.

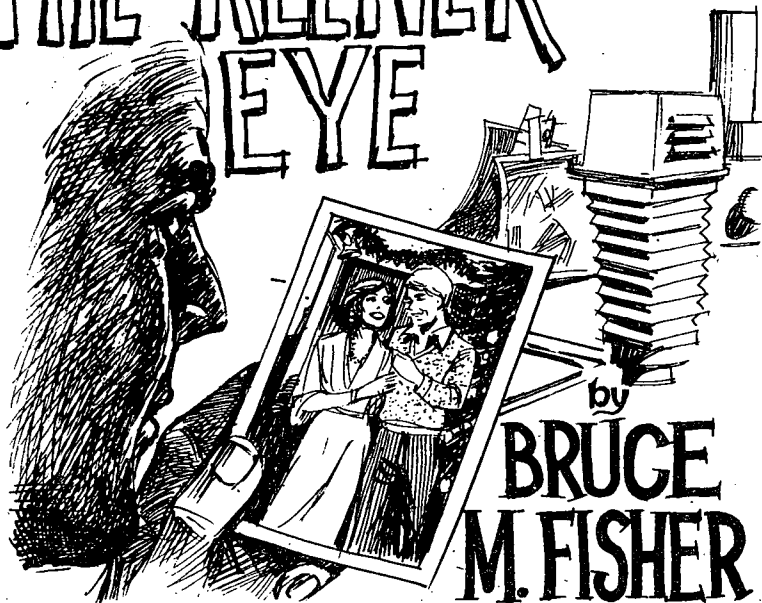
What trial? he had said. I didn't need a translation. Harry had made up his mind. Sometime tonight, tomorrow, or the next day—whenever he found the nerve—he would do what he had said he had been ready to do before he met Edie: step in front of a subway train or a truck.

There would be no suicide note. He was telling the world now in the only way he knew how.

But Harry had been background music for too long and the people at the club were more interested in their chatter and their drinks. None of them was listening to his death song.

Though it was true he was like a brother, that didn't mean he had to like him . . .

THE KEENER EYE



by
**BRUCE
M. FISHER**

"Mr. Mark Coulter? Lieutenant Harris and Constable Newcombe, Homicide. We'd like to ask you some questions."

So they'd found Arthur's body. Good. I was ready for them.

I didn't mind when Arthur Bigelow was a skinny little kid carrying the game I shot with my grandfather's ancient .22 single-shot rifle or toting the traps I set for muskrat or raccoon. But I soon found I couldn't shake him.

When I bought my first secondhand car and took Mary or Sandra for a drive he was there, perched in the backseat, eager for ice cream and cokes. If I took Nellie to a show in town, he was in the car before us. In the restaurant afterward, he dominated the cosy booth with his presence and his chatter. I could have killed him.

He was impervious to harsh words, threats, or appeals. They just didn't sink into that eager, innocent, trusting mind. When I left for the city, he wanted to quit school and come too. His parents quashed that, but he managed it four years later.

Stratton is a small city of maybe 60,000 people. I had done fairly well, rising to personnel manager in Artistic Plastics, had saved my money and bought a house in the suburbs before prices skyrocketed, had met and married my kind of girl, and was the happiest man in town.

Then Arthur came. I hardly recognized him. The skinny kid was now eighteen, a big, strong, blond, blue-eyed, smooth-cheeked Viking, but I couldn't mistake that eager, innocent, trusting expression.

I lent him money, got him a job at Morton's Steel Works, found him a nice two-room apartment above Mrs. Beale's grocery on Mansard Street, and told him firmly that he was now on his own.

It didn't work. Back he came nearly every evening to see us. Every weekend, every holiday, he intruded on our domestic lives until my teeth grated at the sight of him. Not a hamper but saw him at the picnic. Worst, he was always helping Fay with the dishes, the flower beds, and other chores.

I blew up the day I caught him trying to start the lawn mower. The explosion left me trembling with rage but it hadn't the slightest effect on him.

As time passed, I noticed an inexplicable change in Arthur Bigelow. Then, with a kind of creeping horror, I realized that he was patterning himself in my image, imperceptibly copying my traits, in action, speech, walk, gesture. Sometimes, after evening coffee, I felt that I should be the one to leave.

He was in love with Fay, of course.

There was danger behind the eager, innocent, trusting face of Arthur Bigelow. He had to go, and soon.

How was not clear until the second Friday in January, the night after

the first snowfall of the season. He had come with a box of chocolates for Fay and a question for me. "Want to go snowmobiling tomorrow, Mark?"

I said, "Might as well. Right after lunch, O.K.?"

He didn't answer. Fay was drawing the drapes, reaching up to free a stuck glide, the outline of her body revealed through her print dress against the street light. In profile, she was alluring, chin tilted, lips parted, a saucy strand of black hair begging for a man's hand to smooth it in place.

Abruptly, I went to my basement den and set up screen and slide projector, an idea tickling the back of my mind.

It grew as I looked at a photo of Arthur standing in the driveway by his apartment, two rabbits in one hand, his .22 repeating rifle in the other. He was wearing his red snowmobile suit. The outdoor stairs leading one flight up to his apartment were laden with snow.

It could have been yesterday's first snowfall of the season. But the picture had been taken the previous winter. The date was stamped on the pasteboard frame of the transparency.

If I managed things right, I could get away with murder.

I removed the slide from the projector and put it in my desk drawer. I examined my camera. Three exposures taken on the 20-exposure, 35-millimeter film. The remaining seventeen would, interspersed with a few nature shots for credibility, set the stage. Another low-pressure area over the Great Lakes was predicted to move eastward and give us sixteen inches more snow on Saturday night and Sunday. With that covering my tracks, it would appear that Arthur's killer had vanished into thin air.

I caught Arthur as he was leaving. "I'm taking my .22," I said. "Fay's getting hungry for rabbit stew."

"Good." He peered at me from the car. "Well, see you tomorrow." Snow flew from his wheels. I knew he'd bring his rifle.

The odds were against him shooting exactly two rabbits. If he shot more than two, I could throw the extra ones away. If he shot less than two, wrecking the scheme, I would, I decided, put murder forever from my mind.

Saturday morning was sunny, the leading edge of the low-pressure area grey on the western horizon. I loaded my snowmobile and put newspapers in my car. When Arthur came, mercifully wearing his red

snowmobile suit, I took a picture of him in front of the house and had him take one of me beside my snowmobile.

After lunch, we drove twelve miles out Pierce Road, past the last of the new houses, up into higher ground so rugged that realtors wouldn't touch it, and turned right into a tiny clearing in the bush.

I took many pictures of Arthur. Arthur unloading his snowmobile with mine in the background, Arthur bouncing his snowmobile down woodland paths under snow-drooped branches, Arthur whizzing through stands of graceful white birch trees.

Rifles slung over our shoulders, we emerged onto a small field framed by alder swamps and rocky outcrops. A large maple grew near its center, and tractor ruts lined the snow going into the bush and returning home.

Arthur let loose, zoomed in great circles. Once he came roaring across the field right at me. I saw him through the viewfinder—the skis looked like the horns of a charging bull—and leaped behind my machine. He swerved, and sped by in a cloud of snow.

It was something to think about when we hunted along the farmer's bush road, and I kept one pace behind him. The sky was now overcast, the temperature slightly above freezing.

A kind of nervous tension crept over me. Would he shoot two rabbits, or less? Would both our cars return to town, or mine alone? Here in the bush, with Fay in town, it no longer seemed important. I let out a gusty breath and decided to forget it.

His rifle cracked. He plunged from the lane and reappeared from cascading snow with a bloodstained rabbit kicking its last.

"One rabbit is enough," I said. "Let's call it quits and go home." I turned and he followed. My heart slowed to its normal beat. The field—and a clear conscience—was in sight.

I have wondered since: Does evil thought compel even the witless to serve in its completion? But perhaps it was just a fox that started that second rabbit circling.

Whatever it was, the rabbit came bouncing down a tamarack slope ahead and Arthur's rifle took the rhythm, up and down, up and down, moving to the left. He fired and the rabbit tumbled in a heap. Arthur picked it up, grinning, pleased with his shot.

Even then, he was safe from my hands. The madness had passed.

He forged ahead, posed with his catch at his snowmobile. "Aren't

you going to take a picture of me?"

I took one with the big maple in the background and finished the film on two aimless shots. I had just pocketed my camera when he said, "I guess I'm a better hunter than you."

It was the primeval boast of the dominant male getting meat for his mate and it brought Fay right into the field with us.

With a lightning twist, I undid the knurled nut of my single-shot rifle, dropped the stock in the snow, and bounded toward him, swinging the barrel high. With hands at receiver and rear sight, I brought it down with murderous force at the base of his skull.

He died instantly in the act of starting his snowmobile, quivering once, rabbits and rifle slipping from his lax fingers. Half a mile away beyond an intervening hill, a farmer's chain saw howled and faded, howled and faded. There was no other sound.

I hooked a gloved finger into the trigger guard of his rifle for he had been barehanded while hunting and I needed his fingerprints to hang on the wall of his apartment. The rabbits dripped redly as I returned to my snowmobile. I reassembled my rifle and drove away awkwardly, holding the rabbits aside to prevent incriminating stains.

Ten minutes later, I was driving toward town, free of Arthur Bigelow at last. But there was much to do if I were to remain free myself.

The last rays of the setting sun cast an eerie dull-red glow upon the overcast sky when I reached Arthur's apartment. He had left his door unlocked. I switched on the lights.

An empty pint beer bottle stood on one corner of the table near a cornflake-speckled bowl and spoon. I took advantage of it by opening another from a six-pack in the corner. I drank half, removed the film from my camera, and hurried two blocks to Randolph's Camera Shop.

Randolph was busy arranging some of his better shots for window display. "I said, 'Hi, Jim—got a little job for you,'" and placed the film on the counter.

He straightened as much as his habitual stoop allowed. "Transparencies? Can't it wait till Monday?"

"It could. But there's a heavy snowfall coming, and you know how Arthur is. He gets one beer in him and can't wait to see how he turns out." I breathed across the counter. "Of course, if you're too busy—"

He avoided the beer fumes. "No, no. I can do them." He glanced at his watch. "Say eight o'clock?"

"Good enough." I'd known he wouldn't refuse. Show an ardent fisherman a secret lake bulging with trout and you've got him hooked.

In the apartment, I hung Arthur's rifle on the nails he'd driven into the wall. I removed my gloves and used my pocketknife to skin and dress the rabbits on newspaper on the floor. I dissected them into stew-pot chunks, put the pieces in salted water in a pan, and placed the pan in the refrigerator.

I closed my pocketknife, got a paring knife from the holder, smeared it in the bloody entrails, and put it in the sink. I placed Arthur's breakfast bowl on top. Newspaper and rabbit waste went into a half-filled garbage bag.

In all these actions, I used a dish towel guardedly to preserve Arthur's prints and leave none of mine.

I phoned Fay to tell her I'd be a bit late, that Arthur and I were having a beer. "Just a second, dear," I said. Holding the receiver away, I said, "Ask Fay if she wants a rabbit," in a fair imitation of Arthur's voice, then repeated the question in mine.

She answered crisply, "Tell him no thanks—I don't eat rodents. But tell him nicely, won't you?"

I said, "Sure will," and hung up.

Eight o'clock, Randolph had said. I sat at the table and finished the beer, staring at the empty chair by the empty beer bottle. The apartment was on a lonely street. I tried not to think.

I was home at eight-fifteen, eating roast beef, yorkshire pudding, and baked potatoes covered with rich dark gravy. Car and snowmobile were side by side in the garage. The finished slides from Randolph's were in a plastic box in my pocket. Back in Arthur's apartment the lights were out and the door locked.

The low-pressure area moved slower than predicted. It didn't start snowing until after breakfast on Sunday but then it really came down. At noon, the hedge was piled with the fluffy stuff and it was still snowing at dusk. My tracks were covered forever.

After cleaning my pocketknife and rifle, I examined the slides. Each pasteboard frame carried Randolph's name in breezy letters. They were numbered consecutively from one to twenty, each stamped with yesterday's date of processing.

Carefully, I opened the twentieth frame, removed an aimless scene of snow and bush, and inserted the transparency from my desk drawer.

A light touch of quick-drying colorless glue and a small veneer clamp closed the frame beyond detection.

Then I set up screen and projector and called Fay to see the pictures.

The first three, taken at Christmas of Arthur and me, Fay and me, and Arthur and Fay, would doubtless give the police a motive to pursue. The following sixteen, displaying our companionship on Saturday, were the buildup to the twentieth slide that would prove my innocence.

There was Arthur, safe at home, holding two rabbits in triumph with, apparently, the first snow of the season fresh on his outdoor stairs; the same two rabbits, presumably, that he'd posed with in the field; the same two, believably, that now rested in his refrigerator. Fingerprints on the tap and utensils would prove he had placed them there. Fingerprints would show how we'd finished the day with a pint of beer apiece in his apartment.

Could I help it if Arthur went snowmobiling again on Sunday and got killed by some person unknown?

And here were the two policemen on Monday evening. Lieutenant Harris was a stocky man with a disconcerting trick of looking over my shoulder as if at something beyond. Constable Newcombe, lanky and with a prominent Adam's apple, jotted notes in shorthand. Fay had been crying. I gave her a comforting hug.

A farmer, John Barker, trying to break a fresh road to his bush, had discovered Arthur's body in the knee-deep snow.

The body was now at the morgue. They had found Arthur's car and snowmobile in a small clearing off Pierce Road. His pockets had yielded his wallet with his name and address. The police had just come from Mrs. Beale's grocery on Mansard Street. She had told them, among other things, that we seemed to be Mr. Bigelow's only friends. Was that so?

"Possibly," I answered. "Arthur was extremely shy. But we were always very close. We both come from Westbrook, a small village up-country."

"You don't seem much upset by his death." Constable Newcombe's dark head was tilted in a listening attitude as if trying the tone and expression of my voice.

"I never make a public display of emotion," I said coldly. "But if it's

curiosity you want, what did he die of?"

"He was murdered," Harris said.

"Murdered! Good God!" My gasp was real enough. "He was alive, in the highest spirits, Saturday evening!"

"You saw him then? Where?"

"In his apartment. I wanted to come straight home after snowmobiling but he insisted on a beer. We had one together. I left about eight o'clock."

"Snowmobiling? Saturday? Where?"

"In the bush about twelve miles out Pierce Road."

"Were you snowmobiling in a field centered by a large maple?"

"Yes! We zipped around it a few times before we went rabbit hunting. But surely that wasn't the field where—"

"Rabbit hunting? What with?"

".22 rifles. Why?"

"I'd like to see yours."

"Mine! Good Lord, I didn't shoot Arthur!"

"I didn't say he was shot."

"You're implying it."

Newcombe made an impatient gesture. They followed me down the basement steps. I fondled my rifle. "It's quite old but I wouldn't trade it for the finest on the market today."

Harris turned it over and over in his slender hands, examining it closely, especially the stock. For cracks or breakage, I knew. "Do you always clean and oil it after use?"

"Always."

We returned upstairs.

"In your opinion," Harris asked, "would Mr. Bigelow go snowmobiling again on Sunday?"

"Yes, especially since Thursday broke our unusual scarceness of snow."

"Would he go twelve miles into high rugged country, to the same field you were in Saturday, the way it snowed yesterday, at the risk of getting bogged in?"

"He would. There are very few places to go snowmobiling now. Every road from Stratton is crammed with houses for miles. You've got to go beyond for freedom of movement. Unless you belong to a snowmobile club with governed trails and all that."

"I see." Harris stroked his chin, his odd gaze fixed somewhere over my left shoulder. "Did he have enemies?"

"None that I know of."

"Girl friends?"

"He never mentioned any. But Arthur was quiet that way."

Newcombe flipped a page. "What time did you leave the bush on Saturday?"

"About four o'clock, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"Yes, I suppose. I don't time enjoyment; it's too soon gone. It was four-thirty by Arthur's clock when we reached his apartment."

"So it took you over three hours to drink one pint of beer?"

"What of it? I'm not a guzzler. Nor was Arthur."

"They were waiting for the pictures," Fay said quietly. She had recovered her composure and was serving them coffee on a silver tray.

"Pictures?"

"Slides," I explained. "I took some shots of our excursion and was eager to see how they turned out. You know how it is when you finish a film."

"We'll take them with us," Harris said. "They may help our investigation."

"I'm sorry, I'd rather you didn't."

"Why not?"

"Thumbprints, for one thing."

"We'll take good care of them."

I shrugged. Harris put the plastic box in his pocket and stood. "If you'd identify the body,—Mr. Coulter?"

The streets were plowed, trucks and loaders busy.

When we arrived at headquarters, Newcombe asked suddenly, "Did you kill Arthur Bigelow?"

I said, "No, I didn't." And the statement rang true because I didn't feel that I had. It was more like ridding myself of a leech.

If he'd asked the same question immediately after I identified Arthur's body, he might have caught a betraying quaver. As it was, he shook his head in a puzzled manner.

They took my fingerprints "for comparison" and Newcombe drove me home.

Fay had been crying again. "He was like a brother," she wailed. "How could anyone kill a nice pleasant boy like Arthur?"

I let her cry it out. We went to bed early. She cuddled close. "I hope they find his murderer and hang him!" she whispered.

Tuesday was clear and cold, a brisk northwest wind adding to the chill. I read the local newspaper over lunch. Except for the usual phrases, there wasn't much about the murder. Judging by his picture, John Barker wished he hadn't found the body.

I was helping Fay wash the supper dishes when the detectives returned. They took the same chairs and Harris asked, "What were you doing Saturday morning?"

"Nothing much. Just waiting for Arthur. He had lunch here."

"I see." He was gazing over my shoulder again. "How many rabbits did you shoot on Saturday?"

"None, I'm afraid. Arthur had the keener eye."

"Did you help him dress them?"

"No, they were still on the floor when I left."

"What clothes were you wearing?"

"My snowmobile suit. Why?"

"Will you fetch it, please?"

I did. A chill hit the back of my neck. The front was white with hairs from skinning rabbits.

"Well, well," said Harris. "They don't brush off very easy, do they?"

"The thing is," Newcombe added, "how did they get there?"

My dislike of the man helped. "When somebody tosses a dead rabbit in your lap, what do you expect?"

"Now why should he do that?"

"For the same reason kids throw snowballs—sheer high spirits. Arthur was like that. Did you bring my slides back?"

"May we see your camera?" Harris said.

It was no idle request. "Sure." I trotted down the basement stairs.

When I noticed the camera setting of f5.6, 1/125th second, the chill hit again. The opening was too small and the speed too fast for a picture I was supposed to have taken at sundown. I thumbed it to f2.8, 1/10th second, closed the case, and returned upstairs.

"What was the last picture you took?" Harris asked mildly.

I thought back. "One of Arthur at his apartment. It was rather tricky because of the poor light."

He opened the case slowly, his gaze intensifying; he glanced at the setting and passed the camera back. His stolid face revealed nothing.

I said, "It strikes me you're asking a lot of questions."

He spread his hands. "We have to. Our men are digging everywhere. But so far we haven't come up with a single suspect other than you."

"Me! Of all the idiotic—"

Newcombe broke in. "What were you doing on Sunday?"

"Just loafing around. There was no sense shoveling snow until it quit falling."

Harris nodded. "Your neighbors across the street verify that you didn't leave your yard. If you killed Arthur Bigelow, you did it Saturday afternoon."

"Then it should be easy to prove that I didn't."

"Oh? How?" The pupils of his eyes seemed to grow larger. Newcombe stared hungrily over the tip of his pen.

"Don't you have a medical examiner or something? Somebody to state the exact time of death?"

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple. Snow chills but it also insulates. The examiner won't commit himself beyond late Saturday or midafternoon Sunday."

"Then measure the depth of snow over his snowmobile."

"Removing the body removed the snow."

"How about his car? The depth of snow on the roof should determine how long it was out there."

"Not conclusively. As for the snow under his car—"

Under his car! Once more I felt a chill on the back of my neck. I lit a cigarette to cover up.

"We don't know how much was there to begin with, or how much, if any, fell before he arrived."

And that's what it hinged on. The time of death. If they could establish that, they had me.

Until then they were confounded by the evidence in Arthur's apartment, and the slide pictures. Their instincts might not believe it but their eyes had to. They dealt in facts, and the more they fingerprinted, questioned, and observed the stronger those facts became.

But I had to be careful. These men weren't fools. They weren't telling me anything. Not a word about what Randolph had said, or Mrs.

Beale, or Arthur's co-workers, or what they'd found in the apartment, or what they thought of the slide that showed Arthur safe at home.

They were waiting, watching, and listening for me to commit myself with a careless phrase.

Harris said, "The thing is, nobody saw Mr. Bigelow go snowmobiling Sunday. Isn't that odd?"

"I don't think so. People don't notice what doesn't interest them. But it would help if somebody had seen him."

Newcombe bit his lip. "Your fingerprints were on the phone. Who did you call from his apartment?"

"Fay. To tell her I'd be a bit late. Why?"

He turned to her. "When did Mr. Coulter arrive home?"

"Shortly after eight," she answered. "I was a little annoyed because Arthur had asked Mark to ask me if I wanted a rabbit. A rabbit! When a good supper was getting cold!"

"Did you hear his voice over the phone?"

"Yes."

"You're certain it was Mr. Bigelow's voice?"

"Positive. I used to be a telephone operator and that's where you learn to identify voices, believe me."

I butted my cigarette with an air of finality. "I wish you'd explain why you consider me a suspect. There must be a reason."

"The oldest in the world," Harris said. "The eternal triangle."

"But there was no such triangle here," I said coldly.

"No?"

"No!" By the dig of her fingers into my shoulder, I knew Fay's eyes were blazing. "No, there wasn't! Arthur was like a brother to us! A big-shy younger brother without an ounce of harm or guile in him! If you're implying for one minute—"

"Hold on, girl," I said. "Lieutenant Harris—"

"Has got a dirty mind!" She was shaking.

Harris said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Coulter. I didn't mean to offend you. Possibly you were unaware of Arthur Bigelow's love for you. Your picture is on his bureau. He wrote poems dedicated to you." He switched to me. "Rather immature poems. But we also found this. It looks like a map of some kind. Can you make anything of it?"

It was a crude drawing of the secret lake we'd fished many times, the one I'd told Randolph about, much marked with dotted lines from

various points on shore. A rectangular sketch in one corner looked like the tippy pole-setting I'd once used to trap muskrats.

Put it in the middle of the lake, substitute canoe for log and man for muskrat, and you had murder by drowning. I passed it back. "Doodling, I imagine."

"Perhaps. However, three of those slides you lent us also indicated a triangle. The first three, taken here. In one, you and the deceased look like real buddies. In another, you and Mrs. Coulter appear the usual happily married couple. But the one of Mr. Bigelow and your wife, with his arm around her waist, is something else."

I stood up.

"Gentlemen, with all due respect, I must ask you to leave. Arthur is dead. Find his killer. But don't read ugliness into our lives where none existed."

Newcombe looked up sharply, then resumed scribbling.

Had he caught some fraudulent note? Some unnatural phrase? Or was it a trick to shake me?

"That's the vicious part of crime," Harris said. "You can't steal a dollar or take a life without hurting others. I wish it were otherwise."

I waved my hand. "If you've any more questions—"

"One thing bothers me," he said. "If Arthur Bigelow dressed those rabbits, as evidence indicates, why did he use a dull flexible paring knife instead of the keen stout jackknife we found in his pocket?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"And his snowmobile. Was it in good running order?"

"Very."

"You're certain?"

"Positive." I didn't get that angle but I wasn't going to ask about it.

They stood up. "Well, I guess we'd better look further afield. Thanks for your cooperation." Harris paused at the door. "Again, Mrs. Coulter, my sincere apologies."

They departed. I gave Fay a comforting hug and poured coffee for our evening talk. But it wasn't the same. There was a coldness in me, a lack of interest in her agitation. I didn't want to look at her. Yet look I must, and continue in all things as before, and play the gentle loving husband to the end of our days.

Then I knew that things would never be the same again. . .

I was compiling a list of possible night-shift workers to handle a rush order when Harris phoned the office Wednesday morning. A thought had struck him in the middle of the night and he had asked the farmer to check it out. Barker had done so. Could I come with them?

I got into the back seat of the cruiser beside a police photographer. Harris nodded from the front seat. When Newcombe turned onto Pierce Road, my mind raced like a squirrel. What did it mean? What had they found? When I looked at the gigantic furrows the snowplow had turned out, I knew they had found nothing. It was impossible to find anything under sixteen inches of snow. It was a trick of some kind. Maybe they hoped I'd break at the scene of the crime.

We were soon there, breathing the icy air. A plume of wood smoke from the chimney cast a waving blue shadow on the snow-heaped lawn. Barker, lean, dark, younger than I expected, came from the house, dressed like a lumberjack. He nodded. "This way," he said and strode off.

He'd plowed his lane with a snowblade on his tractor, but it was difficult walking against the glare of sun and snow. He became a shimmering silhouette through the bright steam of my breath, the rapid blinking of my slitted eyes. And the silence! The silence was immense.

We walked through the dazzling whiteness until the silhouette stopped suddenly and said, "There." Just the one word and a pointing finger.

We halted and turned sideways to the sun. And all the ice in that frigid desolation seemed to gather in my veins.

I had seen the likes a hundred times before. I knew that when a low-pressure area passes, clearing winds sweep in from the north and west. I should have anticipated it. But who with murder on his mind thinks of weather's aftermath?

Tuesday's gusts had whipped the field almost clear of snow—whirled it into the bush. The fringing alders were buried under twelve-foot drifts. But the weight-compacted snow had not shifted. There, in bas-relief, around and around the field, were the ribbonlike trails of Arthur's snowmobile.

It was all there, our firmed footprints retained and raised by the cut-away action of the wind. Tiny, inverted icicles, pink and wind-

cleansed, where rabbit blood had dripped into the snow and frozen. Worse was a pinkish footprint beside the marks of my snowmobile. Worst was the faint but unmistakable outline where I had dropped my rifle stock in instinctive fear of breakage.

"Well, well," said Harris.

The click of the photographer's camera sounded like a cap pistol in the hands of a wasteful child.

"We thought," Harris said, "that you somehow disabled his machine to decoy him out here after he skinned and dressed those rabbits. You had time while Randolph was developing those slides. It seemed the only way. But this tells the truth of the matter."

I nodded. He'd have puzzled it out sooner or later anyway. Now the lab boys would take that twentieth slide apart.

"The wind," I said steadily. "You might consider it the breath of God."

For the first time, Harris looked squarely into my eyes. "I never thought of it that way," he said. "Before."

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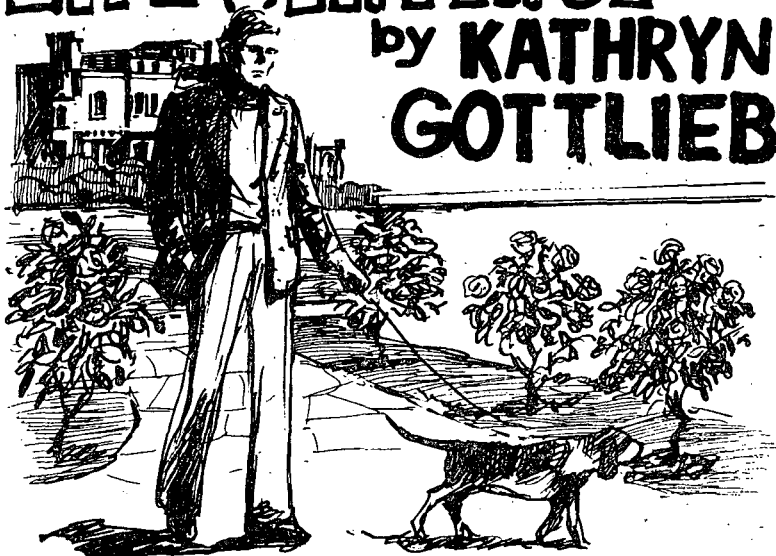
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The sentence he'd pronounced on himself had been unmercifully extended . . .

LIFE SENTENCE

by **KATHRYN
GOTTLIEB**



I read in the paper this morning that a man living up in Litchfield, Connecticut, died yesterday at the age of one hundred and two, and for the first time I felt I couldn't go on. All these years, no matter how bad things have been, I've never felt that; that there was no point in it, no point in eating lunch, no point in going on into the afternoon. If the man had been, say, a Peruvian Indian, I could have told myself, well, they don't really know when he was born, it's all just guesswork and it

makes a good story. But, Litchfield, Connecticut, that's different. It's all down in the records of some little white clapboard church with a pointed steeple. You have to believe that.

Garrett Eskell would have been one hundred years old next month if he had not died on that winter afternoon in 1932. One hundred years old, on the twelfth, at noon. I have Garrett's word for the time.

I am Garrett's grandson. I bear the twin burdens of his name and of his money. As far as the money's concerned, I've put it to good use—I'll come to that presently—and as for the rest, I've kept this house, *his* house, as a monument to him and I have lived my life as a monument to him. I don't see what else I could have done.

I was ten years old when I killed Garrett, deliberately and from the best of motives, and although nothing worked out as I had expected it to it was not until many years later that a tidal wave of regret and remorse transformed my own life into a facsimile of his, a substitute for it. At the time I killed him I suffered nothing worse than fright, briefly, and, for a while, dreams of Garrett going over, over, over the edge.

On that much later day when, as deliberately as I had killed him I vowed to live my life as a replacement for his, I set the duration of my sentence: it was to run for what I estimated his natural life span would likely have been. And one hundred years seemed reasonable to me until I read this morning's paper. Very few people live to be a hundred, of course, and you might think eighty or eighty-five would have been enough, but I was determined to play fair. Otherwise my penance would have had no meaning. And there's no way I can be sure that he would have been carried off earlier than a hundred. He wasn't the kind of man who dies. He didn't drink, didn't smoke, and, as for an accident, he never put his foot in a plane and said he never would. Although, of course, if he had lived he might have changed his mind.

You will want to know what kind of a man he was to inspire a sane and loving child to murder.

Garrett on the last day of his life, Garrett standing in his garden: a tall handsome man with a ruddy-faced outdoor look, blue eyes, a bold gaze. (My eyes are like his, but without the force.) Thick white hair whipped about by the wind that never stopped blowing up there on the mountain. Not smiling. (Garrett rarely smiled. He had a boisterous laugh, a hearty attractive sound. Practical jokes amused him as did his

own cruel wit, of which my parents were the chief target. There was no escaping it. All the little we had he gave us, and the petty cruelties were his way of taking it all back.)

Garrett had struck it very rich when he was still a very young man. The money came from the patent of an industrial device. Cleverly designed and shrewdly marketed, it brought him a fortune. Very young, very rich, he built himself a fortresslike red sandstone mansion at a high point along the ridge line of the Watchung Mountains in New Jersey. The house has turrets, a parapet, a half acre of slate roof, and appears to rise from the living rock. At no time in the history of architecture could it have been considered fashionable or in good taste, but Garrett loved every stone of it. The view is eastward to the skyline of Manhattan twenty miles away. From Manhattan, say from the twentieth floor on up of the office building at Number One Wall Street or from any upper floor of the World Trade Center, you can look westward over New Jersey and see Garrett's house cutting into the skyline at the edge of the view.

Did my grandmother love the place? I've no idea. She died not long after the place was completed. I don't remember her, and I never heard Garrett talk about her. Whether that indicates that he never thought about her or that he thought about her all the time, I don't know.

We all went to live with Garrett shortly after I was born. It's the only home I remember. My mother was Garrett's daughter. Her dark-blue eyes and her intensity of gaze were his. I remember her with dark smooth hair, cut short. She was sharp-tongued, funny, kind to me, helpless and hopeless—she drank like a fish. My father was a handsome boyish man who had apparently majored in drinking at Dartmouth. He had been born to money, never held a job, and lost his inheritance in bad investments. Like my mother, he was an alcoholic. Garrett, triumphantly sober, watched over them.

"A nice pair of drunks, your parents are," I remember his saying to me. His tone was mild. He never raised his voice. With Garrett, it was the words that did the damage:

Fairly, of course, my parents deserved the charge. Human empties, you could call them, stranded high, not dry; full of booze, empty of everything else. All the same, he shouldn't have talked that way to me.

They *all* talked to me as though I were a man of forty, and a callous

one at that. "The bastard," my mother used to say to me, "it wouldn't hurt him to let us have a little freedom"—meaning cash in the hand, I suppose. "We don't want much to pull us through," she said to me, and maybe it was true. But then, after talking like that she'd give me a funny little push on the head and laugh again: "Oh, my dear," she'd say. It was an expression of hers. I loved her. And I hated those times when she'd say that Garrett was right; that she and my father were finished and deserved nothing.

I felt old, as though I were my parents' parent.

Garrett said I was his future. He liked to wave his hand in a wide gesture, embracing the house and its trappings, the unreachable money, and tell me that he was conserving it all for me. "The power and the glory. It's yours," he'd say, "for what it's worth." And I'd think, it's worth plenty. It makes all the difference.

The rose garden was built out on a ledge just below the east face of the house, and why Garrett's roses flourish on that open, windy shelf I've never understood. The best time of day out there is the late afternoon when the east face of the mountain is shadowed and the sunset light flares up in the windows of the tall building at the horizon. The edge of the garden is rimmed off from the cliff with a low wall of roughcut sandstone blocks. A narrow opening in the wall at the upper end of the garden led onto a steeply angled track. (The cliff wall takes an almost vertical plunge for the first hundred feet or so below the garden, then ends in a pile of rockfall and similar debris. Beyond that, as my father used to say—his whisky breath cradling the words—lies civilization. Visible beneath massive tops of red oak are the massive slate and tile roofs of the 1920's building boom.) The path was dangerous, eroded by time and weather to a shallow tracing in the rock. I was forbidden to set foot on it.

I killed Garrett on a sunny January day when he went down into the garden to fix up the winter wrappings on a couple of tree roses he had planted the previous spring. He never bothered about burlap on the other roses, just those two. The rest were what he called Vanderbilt sub-freezing roses. I have tried to fill them in as they've died over the years, but I don't know where he got them and one by one they've gone. I've used standard varieties as replacements, but keep pretty much to Garrett's color scheme. He liked the very dark reds. Not my

favorites. I've been looking over the catalogs lately, with a view to replacing them. I'd enjoy some of the newer yellow and apricot tones.

To get back. I was bundled up against the cold and out in the garden with Garrett. He had insisted that I come away from the story I was reading ("You've had your nose in that book long enough!"), so there I was. I remember the cutting edge of the wind and how it whipped Garrett's hair up above his forehead. I remember as though it were yesterday that he straightened up the supports for one of the burlapped roses that had been blown to one side; it was the one nearest the wall. And then Garrett stared out toward Manhattan and said for the last time, "The power and the glory. It's all yours when I go."

I knelt by the gap in the wall and braced myself against the rough stone blocks. I said, "I hear Cassie crying down there." Cassie was Garrett's pet beagle, a waddling old bitch. Garrett was a lot fonder of Cassie than of his family, with the exception of myself. "I do," I said, "I hear Cassie crying."

"Nonsense," he said. But he looked uneasy. "It can't be."

"I can hear her, Grandpa." I leaned forward into the gap and peered down into the rocks below. "Listen," I said. "She's crying." I can recall the detestable sound of my voice and my words to this day. I remember feeling clever and sly. I hitched my shoulders forward a bit; my knees stayed where they were.

Garrett commanded me to stop where I was. Then he maneuvered himself forward very carefully into the gap. There was a slick of ice over the ground.

"I see her, Gran!" I said. "Way down. She's hurt! I-know she's hurt!"

"How the dickens did she get out?" Garrett edged forward, beyond me, and when he was well into the gap I wrapped an arm around a stout trunk of the ivy and threw my weight against him. He shouted, "Ho!" as though I'd knocked the wind out of him, his arm flailed out, trying for a hold on the ice-covered wall, and he was gone.

I ran back into the house, screaming that Garrett had fallen. "Wishful thinking," said my mother.

"You damned little liar," my father said. "Stop your yammering. Is this your idea of a joke?"

"He slipped!" I said. I was sobbing. "He's dead! We were going to

rescue Cassie." I had begun to feel very odd. My heart was pounding.

"But Cassie's in the house," said my mother. "You know that. You shut her in." Suddenly she stood up. She looked very white. "Edward," she said, "I think we'd better see what's happened." She looked at me hard, but only for a second, and then she turned away.

My parents were never talkative people, but following Garrett's death they seemed wrapped in a deep, deep silence. Inexplicably, my mother appeared to be grieving. I had expected them to be happy! I missed Garrett myself, in a way—his noise, his brute presence. But I would not have called him back. They had hated and feared him, hadn't they? He was a tyrant, they'd said. A tyrant.

One afternoon my mother asked me, in the tone of one politely addressing a stranger, to sit down, there was something she had to tell me.

"The money's left in trust," she informed me. "All for you, little one." She stared at me for some moments as though she were wondering about something and then went on. "He loved you. But you know that." I nodded. She kept looking at me as if she were going to tell me something very important and then she got up and went out of the room.

Within the year she was dead—at the wheel of her car.

"Your mother killed herself," my father told me. "She was a bad driver. She never should have been behind the wheel. We can be glad she didn't take anyone with her."

Less than two years later he was dead himself, of a kind of alcoholic starvation. After she was gone, he just stopped eating. Before, they had taken care of each other in a way, coaxing lunches and dinners into each other.

Garrett's lawyer was named my guardian. I was sent to boarding school, and was reasonably happy. I lived in the present—the studies, the sports, the friendships of the moment. And then, between one day of that placid life and the next, remorse welled out of my bones and filled me like a second self. I was eighteen, I was expected the following week at Yale—I was packing, sorting socks, something like that. I didn't recognize it as remorse. I only knew that I was in the grip of a malaise so profound that almost literally I couldn't move. For something like a quarter of an hour I sat in perfect stillness on my bed, and

there and then I abandoned my life or perhaps my life abandoned me. Quite clearly I heard my mother's voice: "He loved you. But you know that."

I left my registration fees at Yale and joined the Army. Why the Army? I don't know why I did anything that I did at that time. Perhaps I wanted to wash myself clean in the great blood bath.

When I came out of the Army I married a girl I met out on the Coast and brought her home with me to Garrett's house. She was a sweet girl, pleased and excited to be coming home to this place with me. I had described it to her: its majesty, the noble view, the garden. It was a clear December day when we arrived. I turned the key in the lock and we walked into the hall and then into that great room with its battery of windows looking out to the east and she said to me, "Garrett, you can't be serious! It's right out of the silent movies. The tapestries! And those paintings! And the furniture! Garrett!" She was laughing and looking horrified at the same time, running from one room to another like a destructive little animal let into the house by mistake, saying We'll do this and we'll tear that down and we'll change this and the rubbishmen can take that away—until I grabbed her by the arm and said, "We'll change nothing."

I remember the look she gave me, and also the way she looked at me the day she left me. She had never reminded me all that much of my mother, except for her coloring, but there was something in her expression that I'd seen a long time before.

"I've given it a year," she said sadly. "I don't want you to be unhappy, but I don't think you will be. Not because I'm leaving you, at any rate. I don't know what's on your mind and I've worn myself out trying to get at it. I can't live here with you this way, in this house, any more." There was a lot more along the same lines. When she finished, she waited for me to say something. Then in a different tone, as if up to then she had hoped for something, "It won't matter to you one way or the other what I do. You've got no human feelings. None." And still she waited, standing in the doorway with the door flung open and the wind filling the hall. What was I to say? (I heard Garrett's voice: "Get in or out but *shut the door.*" But I held my tongue. So I am capable of kindness after all.)

She left; walked out that door and never came back. (She married again a long time ago.)

As for Garrett's money, I've set up the Garrett Eskell Foundation for the Study of Alcoholism, and I have endowed it with Garrett's entire fortune. I serve as its Director at a modest salary, enough to keep this place in good repair. As to the furnishings, I've touched nothing yet. The things *she* sneered at are worth a great deal today, but I'm not about to sell them. I think Garrett would have kept them, although of course his taste might have changed. How can I know? I've tried to concentrate, to plunge myself into his mind. But it's hard to be someone else. You can never be sure you're doing the right thing.

I've thought a great deal about my life and my character, needless to say. I have certain qualities. As I pointed out, I can be kind. I was as kind to my wife as circumstances permitted, but I could not explain myself to her, nor would it have made her happier to understand me.

I understand myself. I know this: I know that the things we do when we're ten years old we do knowingly. Children are not incomplete people. They are simply without experience. Their essential nature has been formed at ten. I accept that, I always have. The generous child is a generous adult, the talented child is a talented adult.

And I am what I am.

I've paid the price of my action, though nothing was asked of me. Contrary to my wife's expressed belief, *I am human*. I have been able to endure the self-imposed constraints of this life because I have always told myself that someday they would end, and end before I did; that a day of freedom would come and I would walk away from this place or, at the very least, plant yellow roses in the garden. It doesn't seem much to ask. I have thought that someday I would marry again, but I am not such a fool as to think that I could have brought another woman here.

I had believed, until this morning, that with Garrett's ghost approaching the century mark, I should very shortly be free.

And now? Must I wait again? There is no one to tell me what to do. I can continue to take care of Garrett's roses. They, at least, are living things. The burlap coverings ought to be looked at. Last night was windy, and the thermometer was down to ten above. It will be cold out there, but the fresh air will do me good. I burlap all the roses now; the old hardy varieties are hard to find. Sub-zero, that's what he called them. Sub-zero.

He should never have kept on at me like that, about the power and

the glory. Didn't he know what he was doing? It was his fault, from start to finish.

The condemned man will now take care of his garden. And I'll take Cassie with me. (I've always kept a "Cassie" with me—I've done that too. They've been company for me.) We'll take our walk together.

And, lest you are thinking of the obvious, I assure you there will be no symmetry in this affair. Many years ago I mended the famous gap in the wall. The ivy's grown over the patch, and last year it bore its first clusters of tiny blue-black berries, thrust out from the wall in beautiful sprays. A bitter fruit, handsomely offered.



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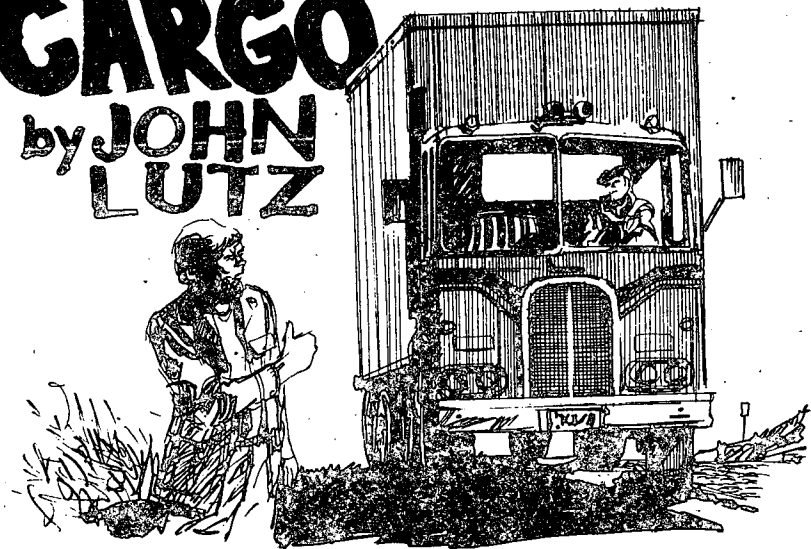
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There's no one so tough he can't meet someone tougher . . .

EXPLOSIVE CARGO

by JOHN
LUTZ



It don't matter a whit to me. Nothing does. I wasn't supposed to be hauling that load. The schedule had me bobtailing my Kenworth tractor back to Saint Louis instead of pulling 60,000 pounds in a new trailer on a special run to Philadelphia. It's all the same to me. The trucking company knows it and that's why they gave me the unscheduled run. Because I don't live by any schedule or set of rules. They say Ruddy Kane don't give a damn if the sun drifts away like a

red balloon, that he don't care for anything or anybody, including himself. They're pure right.

A big flatbed hauling steel pipe in the opposite direction on the divided highway had told me over the CB that it was clear of bears over his shoulder all the way to Allenville, so I was cutting a fat path, holding the big Kenworth well over the legal limit and damn near pushing the pesky four-wheelers into the slow lane where they belonged so I could pass. You get no argument out of anyone you outweigh by over thirty tons.

Just past the Route Nineteen cloverleaf I saw the hitchhiker, standing well up on a grade that I had to gear down to climb. He was a square-shouldered guy with a blondish beard, wearing a long-sleeved old army fatigue jacket despite the eighty-plus heat. One of his feet was propped up on a beat-looking black suitcase painted red at the corners. As I passed, he braced himself against the coming backwash of the big truck and made a sweeping motion with his thumb, already looking past me for the next vehicle. The company's got a rule against picking up hitchhikers. I pulled two quick blasts out of the air horn and let the grade help me slow so I could steer onto the shoulder and wait.

He had almost a half a mile to run with the old suitcase, and I sat watching him in the right-hand mirror. A string of four-wheelers swished by me on the left and headed like bright-colored darts toward the crest of the rise. The big Diesel under the hood rumbled like it wanted to give chase.

The hitchhiker was breathing hard when he reached the truck. Even over the rumble of the Diesel I could hear him panting as he opened the passenger-side door and hoisted his suitcase up onto the floor. The cab's seat was higher than he'd thought, and I reached over and grabbed him by the wrist to help him in. He seemed to resent that as he pulled the door shut with a slam and settled back in the upholstery. I dropped the Kenworth into low range and steered back onto the highway, working through the gears as I took the rest of the grade.

"Ruddy Kane," I said by way of introduction. "Where you headed?"

"Far as you're goin' in this direction."

He hadn't given me his name. That should have clued me. Up close he was a scruffy-looking little guy with a twice-broke nose and a U-shaped scar on his forehead. Too bad he couldn't grow that beard

over the rest of his face.

"I'll be turnin' north at Seventy-seven," I told him.

"My name's Brogan," he said, as if he'd thought it over. I nodded like Brogan was everybody's name. "I'm headin' east to get a job."

"What do you do?"

"Most anything."

What he was best at was being vague. I caught a faint mildewed odor from his wrinkled fatigue jacket and faded denim Levis, and I recognized what that scent might mean. I'd slept outside on the ground before.

The hell with it. None of my business.

"You had supper yet?" I asked Brogan.

He looked sharply at me and shook his head no.

"Place up there around the next curve I usually stop at," I told him.

"Dale's Speed Grill. They serve top hamburgers fast and so are the waitresses."

Brogan said nothing, dug his hands into the baggy pockets of his jacket.

We took the curve and I saw the big neon hamburger on the roof of Dale's, bright red and green in the fast-fading light. The restaurant was small and kind of dumpy-looking, but it was neat and clean inside, and almost everyone who traveled this highway regularly made it their meal stop if they were in the area.

I slowed the Kenworth, waited for a station wagon to pass, and edged into the right lane. There were half a dozen road rigs parked in Dale's big graveled lot, and a Highway Patrol car nosed up against the side of the low building.

Brogan's hands came out of his jacket pockets. The right one held a revolver. I couldn't say I was surprised.

"Keep right on drivin'," Brogan said.

I hit the accelerator and glanced at him as I shifted gears. "To where?"

"Wherever I tell you."

He pressed the barrel of the gun into my ribs to show me he was sincere. I saw Dale's bright neon hamburger fall away and disappear in the right outside mirror.

"The law on you?" I asked.

Brogan looked at me from beneath the curved scar on his forehead.

You could've chilled beer with his eyes. "You don't need to know nothin' except how to drive this hunk of iron."

I made high range and considered. "And when you don't need me for that any more, you don't need me at all."

He held the gun out where it would attract my eyes. "You scared, Mr. Driver?"

"Some." I concentrated on my driving with half my mind while the other half wondered just who this mildewed little desperado thought he was.

"Stick to the speed limit!" he ordered, purposely working the pistol barrel on my ribs to produce pain. I edged back to within the law.

"Somethin' you oughta know," I told him. "I'm haulin' explosives. Quick-dry cement and blasting powder for a big engineering project in Pennsylvania."

Brogan shrugged. "If it wasn't safe, you wouldn't be haulin' it."

"It's safe as long as I'm on smooth highway. Otherwise it could blow a fifty-foot crater in the ground. I thought you should know that in case you got plans to take this rig anywhere it's not supposed to go."

Brogan's grin was yellow in the glare of oncoming headlights, crooked in contrast to his pale level eyes. "I'll tell you when it's time for you to know my plans. This thing got plenty of fuel?"

"I topped the tanks just before I picked you up," I told him. "That should add to the explosion if anything goes wrong."

He ignored me, still grinning, and settled back in his seat with the gun still pointed at me.

We drove for almost an hour that way, without talking. When we reached the Route Twenty-two intersection I veered gently right and downshifted for a steep grade. Brogan didn't move beside me. He might have been sleeping, sitting the way he was with the back of his head against the upholstery. I got the impression maybe he wanted me to think he might be asleep so I'd try to get tricky.

Now that the sun was down the evening was cool, so I cut the air-conditioner and rolled down a window. That caused Brogan to stir, nothing more.

The Highway Patrol weigh station was ahead on the right. As we approached I saw that the barrier arm was up and the station was open. There were two rigs waiting to drive onto the scale, where a trooper we called Rock Face Evans would be waiting to record their axle

weights to make sure they weren't beyond the legal limits. I didn't slack speed as I went past.

We'd gone another four miles before I heard the siren.

Brogan sat up straight, swiveled his head. He couldn't see behind us from where he sat, but I could see the flashing red lights in my rear-view mirror.

"State Patrol," I said. "Want me to stop?"

The gun barrel raked down my ribs. "I want you to drive," Brogan snarled, "like you never drove before!" He was some pumpkin.

I worked the gears and took us up to seventy. Wind screamed around the mirrors and Diesel stacks and Brogan looked a little alarmed. I checked the mirror and saw that we were being pursued by two cars now. They were half a mile back and closing.

"No way to outrun 'em," I said. The sirens continued to wail behind us over the sound of the wind. I took us up to eighty. Brogan began to squirm in his seat.

"If you don't want to get caught," I told him, "there's only one thing to do."

I yanked on the wheel and we were off the pavement, bouncing across the wide grass median toward the other two lanes of the divided highway.

"Get us back on the road!" Brogan shouted. "The explosives!" He jabbed with the gun.

The truck hit a grassy rise, jounced to the side, wind and sirens still screaming at us. There were some small trees along the center of the median. Brogan's eyes were as wide as his gaping mouth as we mowed down the trees, picking up speed. Dust and a few leaves swirled inside the cab. "They can't follow us!" I yelled as the truck bounced back onto cement and we roared easy in the westbound lane with the right wheels on the shoulder. I took us up over ninety. The Diesel howled.

"Gawdalmighty!" Brogan screamed.

Oncoming headlights flashed past us at a combined speed of a hundred and fifty. Brogan was staring straight ahead, sitting so stiffly pigeons might have lit on him. I looked over at him and spit on his gun hand, holding the wheel firm as the side of the truck shot sparks as we scraped the concrete rail of an overpass.

We both saw the roadblock ahead, two cars with flashing lights, parked to block the highway, distant small figures running in the

shadowed red glare. On either side of the highway at that point the ground sloped up at close to a forty-five-degree angle.

"We can go around 'em!" I called over the wind and the roar of the Diesel.

Brogan was shaking now, the gun forgotten. I laughed at him. The world's Brogans don't like being laughed at, but who does?

"It's a roadblock!" he screamed. "You're crazy!"

"Let's crash it!"

His eyes were wide and straining, his mouth working so that his beard bobbed up and down as if his teeth were chattering. Maybe they were.

"Don't worry about flippin' on that hill!" I shouted.

"We'll turn over! Stop this thing!"

I paid no attention to him and swept to the side of the v'd Highway Patrol cars. We heard shots.

"Please!" Brogan screamed.

I stamped on the accelerator. The trailer was whipping behind us and I wrestled the wheel as we jolted and tilted to the left so far that Brogan's limp body slammed against me, then back to the right so he flew to the other side of the cab and slumped against the door.

I braked the rig to a slow, hissing stop.

They were coming on foot and by car behind me. I sat and watched them in the mirror. The passenger-side door was yanked open and Brogan would have fallen out if two troopers hadn't caught him and lowered him to the ground. One of them eased the revolver from his hand.

My door was pulled open. More guns.

"Hey, crazy man!" Rock Face yelled at me. "What in the hell was this all about?"

"He had a gun on me," I said, climbing down on rubbery legs, "made me drive him where he wanted to go."

"This is Dennison!" one of the troopers said, as a handcuffed and staggering Brogan was led around the side of the truck. "He's wanted for three drug murders in Saint Louis!"

I stared. "He told me his name was Brogan. I picked him up hitchhiking."

"You should have known better," Rock Face said.

"I should have," I agreed.

Rock Face squinted at Brogan-Dennison from under the wide brim of his trooper's hat. "What did you do to him?"

"I told him I was hauling explosives. Guess it wore on his nerves. And all I've got is a load of foam insulation."

Rock Face shook his head, then chuckled.

I chuckled along with him. Then he laughed aloud and I laughed.

More patrol cars arrived. The questions and answers began.

They didn't hold me long, and soon I was back on the road, feeling the numbing beat of the wind through the rolled-down window. When I looked at my watch I saw that I wasn't too far off schedule.

There was a steep grade ahead and I built up speed so the weight I was hauling wouldn't slow me too much as the truck climbed. Cement and blasting powder was what I was hauling, not foam insulation. But I couldn't tell that to Rock Face.

I was overweight on both axles. I couldn't have stopped for that scale.



Henry naturally wondered why the case reminded Ralph of Poe . . .

BOX IN A BOX

by JACK RITCHIE



When Ralph and I reached the scene, the large bedroom was noisy with uniformed policemen, technicians, medics, and photographers fussing around the perimeter of the body.

Ralph put two fingers into his mouth and whistled.

Damn, I thought, I've never been able to do that.

A silence of sorts ensued and then a short round man in his early fifties spoke up. "I'm innocent. I've been framed."

I regarded him sternly. "You will have your opportunity to speak later."

"What's wrong with right now?"

I conceded the point. "Very well, who are you?"

"The murderer." He quickly amended that. "I mean everybody *thinks* that I murdered my wife Hermione but I didn't. My name is Eustis Crawford."

Ralph and I took Eustis Crawford into an adjoining room where we found a tall thin man wearing a hearing aid and a dark-haired woman in her thirties waiting.

The tall thin man made the introductions. "I am Oglethorpe Weson. And this is my sister Genevieve." He regarded Eustis Crawford coldly. "Eustis murdered his wife, who is, or rather was, our aunt. He and Hermione were the only people in their bedroom when she died. The windows and the doors were bolted from the inside. When Genevieve and I finally succeeded in entering, we found Hermione dead on the floor and Eustis unconscious on the floor beside her with a revolver in his hand. Obviously he had fainted after he shot her."

"I did not faint," Eustis Crawford said stiffly. "I definitely did not faint."

Oglethorpe snorted. "You're always fainting, Eustis. Last week you passed out in the garden when you thought you'd been stung by a bee. And yesterday, when you tweaked your finger in the liquor-cabinet door. You faint whenever you are under any kind of stress and I submit that murder is a shock to the nervous system, even that of the murderer's."

Eustis's eyes were reflective. "The last thing I remember is sitting up in bed reading and listening to my tape recorder. And then for some reason I found myself on the floor beside Hermione with Oglethorpe shaking me awake." He stifled a yawn. "Very possibly I simply dozed off and fell out of bed."

"Nonsense," Oglethorpe said. "If you had fallen out of bed, surely your thud on the floor would have wakened you. And furthermore, you were at least twelve feet from the bed when I found you. Face it, Eustis, you shot Hermione and then fainted."

I turned to Genevieve. "You heard the shot?"

She nodded. "We were just outside their bedroom door. Oglethorpe and I had finished listening to the ten o'clock TV news and we were in

the hallway going to our respective rooms when we heard the shot. We knocked at the door and asked if there was anything wrong, but we received no answer. We tried the doorknob, but the door was bolted."

"How did you get in?"

Oglethorpe touched his hearing aid for a moment. "We went through my bedroom out onto the balcony till we got to the French doors, but they were bolted from the inside."

Genevieve corroborated that. "Oglethorpe finally had to take one of the balcony chairs and break a glass pane in one of the doors. He reached inside and unbolted it."

"Are you positive that *all* of the French doors were bolted from the inside?"

"Positive," Genevieve said. "And the bedroom door to the hallway was bolted from the inside too."

I nodded thoughtfully. "You and your brother spent the evening watching television?"

"No," Oglethorpe said. "Frankly, I don't care for television except for the news programs. I was downstairs in my workshop turning table legs most of the evening."

I turned to Eustis. "Did you have a quarrel with your wife?"

He put his right hand over his heart. "We were happily married for nearly eight months. We never exchanged so much as a harsh word."

Genevieve reluctantly agreed. "Come to think of it, Eustis never *did* quarrel with Hermione. I think that's a little unnatural."

"If we should rule out murder as the result of a quarrel," I said, "would there be any other reason Mr. Crawford would want to murder his wife?"

Oglethorpe adjusted something on his hearing aid. "For her money, of course. Hermione was rather wealthy, in a lower-upper-class sort of way, and she kept Eustis on a strict allowance."

I drew Ralph to one side, "Well, Ralph, we've finally got one."

"Got one what?"

"A closed-room murder mystery."

"There's no mystery about it. Eustis shot his wife. He's the only one who could have done it. The room was locked from the inside."

"Exactly," I said. "But, Ralph, if Eustis was going to murder his wife—especially for money—would he have arranged to lock himself in the same room with her body?"

"All right, maybe it wasn't for money. They just had their first spat, he lost his temper, and shot her. Then he fainted."

"Ralph," I said. "This is a rather large house and it has many rooms. Doesn't it strike you as rather a coincidence that Oglethorpe and Genevieve should just *happen* to have been outside the door at the exact moment the shot was fired?"

We drew Genevieve Wesson to a private corner of the room. "You say your Aunt Hermione had quite a bit of money?" I asked.

"Quite a bit."

"And Eustis?"

"Nothing, really. Eustis was the chief accountant at the Performing Arts Center. Hermione was on the Board of Sponsors and she met Eustis when she came to him to discuss the financial arrangements for an appearance of the Bulgarian National Ballet Company. One thing led to another and they were married."

"Ah," I said. "And after she married Eustis, did she not change her will so that he would get the major portion of her estate in the event of her death?"

"Hermione never made out a will in her life. She was one of those people who believe they will die immediately if they do."

"If Hermione had died of natural causes, her husband would have gotten her estate?"

"I suppose that's what would have happened."

"However, your aunt did not die of natural causes, did she? And so if Eustis is convicted of her murder he cannot inherit any part of her estate, since a murderer may not profit from his crime."

Genevieve smiled. "I'm counting on that."

I returned to Eustis who had yawned again and now appeared to be looking for a place to sit down. "Could you give me your version of this unfortunate incident?"

He sighed. "Well, there really isn't much to tell. Hermione and I went upstairs at about ten. We usually read in bed for a while before turning out the light. The last thing I remember is reading Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* and listening to the *Pavan for a Dead Princess* on my tape recorder." He frowned in thought. "Or did I play *The Pines of Rome*? For some reason I keep confusing the two compositions."

"Mr. Crawford," I said, "do you take pills—I mean sleeping pills?"

"Goodness no. I have no trouble at all getting to sleep once I close my eyes."

"Before you and your wife went up to your bedroom, did you have anything to eat or drink?"

"I had a brandy and soda downstairs. I usually do before I go to sleep. It helps me to relax."

"Who made the drink for you?"

"I made it myself."

"Who owns the revolver used to kill your wife?"

"I really don't know. I never saw it before in my life."

Ralph and I took Eustis back to the bedroom where the murder had been committed. I spoke to Dr. Tanner, the chief medic. "I'd like you to take a sample of this man's blood."

Tanner nodded. "Am I supposed to look for anything in particular?"

"Barbiturates," I said. "Or anything in the sleep-inducing category."

I left Eustis with Tanner and took Ralph to one side. "We've got to examine this room thoroughly, Ralph. I want to be absolutely certain that this was indeed a locked chamber at the time of the murder. Search for any openings, no matter how small. Hot-air registers, bell ropes."

"Bell ropes?"

"Those things used for summoning servants. Snakes have been known to crawl up and down bell ropes and fatally bite people."

Ralph looked at the ceiling. "Well, now, Henry, snakes and bell ropes are tricky things. Personally, I think that if a snake started down from the top of a bell rope, he'd just lose his grip and flop down and maybe fracture a vertebra. And if he tried to get back up, I don't think he could make it either. Bell ropes are just too vertical, Henry. Now if you could find one that's off-center about forty-five degrees, maybe, just maybe—"

"Ralph," I said patiently, "why must you rattle on about the prehensility and gripping strength of vipers? Hermione Crawford was shot. Not bitten by a snake." I rubbed my hands. "Now let us examine the room for any apertures."

After fifteen minutes, we rejoined each other.

"Not one damn aperture, Henry. No bell ropes or hot-air registers. The room is heated by radiant baseboard. As far as I can see, this place was airtight when Hermione Crawford was shot and Eustis was alone

with her when it happened."

"Ralph," I said, "look at this tape recorder on the nightstand."

He looked. "So?"

"It doesn't have any tape in it," I said.

"It's right next to the recorder, Henry."

"I know. But it shouldn't be." I inserted the tape, turned on the recorder, and listened. Was it *The Pines of Rome* or the *Pavan for a Dead Princess*? I shrugged and turned it off.

I went back to Eustis Crawford, who was now having his hands tested for the presence of gunpowder grains. "Mr. Crawford, you say that the last thing you remember is being in bed with your wife and reading while listening to your tape recorder?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear out the tape to the end and then remove it from the tape recorder?"

"No. I fell asleep while it was playing."

I left Eustis yawning and took Ralph to the French doors. "Look at this, Ralph. Each of these panes of glass is held into place by four small slats of wood." I pointed to the frame which had been broken to gain access to the room. "You will notice that there are some light scratches here, as though perhaps a screwdriver had been used to remove the slats at one time."

Ralph peered closer and said, "Hm."

I nodded. "I must speculate to some degree, but I believe I have the answer to this entire riddle. We will start from the beginning. This evening someone in this household slipped barbiturates into Eustis Crawford's bottle of brandy. Unless the bottle has been destroyed or hidden, I think that we'll find it in the liquor cabinet downstairs. And after consuming his drink, Eustis went upstairs with his wife."

Ralph rubbed his jaw. "And once they got inside, they bolted the bedroom door and also the French doors?"

"Not necessarily, Ralph, though it's possible. But they did get into bed and Eustis picked up a book and turned on his tape recorder. Meanwhile, the murderer waited somewhere out in the darkness of the balcony until he saw Eustis lapse into his drugged sleep."

"Murderer?"

"Or murderess. I will use the word murderer merely for convenience at the moment. And once Eustis was asleep, the murderer en-

tered the room via the French doors. Or, if they were bolted, all he had to do was tap on the glass to gain Hermione's attention, smile sweetly, and ask to be let in because he wanted to talk with her for a moment. And since the person she saw was either her nephew or her niece, she had no reason to suspect foul play. But when Hermione let him in, he produced the revolver and shot her.

"He then dragged the unconscious Eustis out of his bed and placed him beside his dead wife. He replaced the cartridge he had fired with another one and then formed Eustis's hand around the revolver. He fired the gun again, this time through the open French door and into the night. He did that so that we would be certain of finding gunpowder grains on Eustis's hand."

"How come nobody heard the shots, Henry?"

"Because the murderer used a silencer."

Ralph thought about it. "In that case, though, shouldn't the murderer have powder grains on his hand too?"

"I doubt it. If he knew enough about powder grains to put them on Eustis's hand, then surely he must have been intelligent enough to take pains that none of them appeared on his own person. Very likely he wore gloves and some other protective device to prevent the powder grains from getting on his hands or clothing."

I noticed that Eustis had fallen asleep in his chair. "And then the murderer removed the *Pavan for a Dead Princess*—or whatever—from Eustis's tape recorder and substituted a tape of his own. This tape was entirely blank, except for the sound of one pistol shot."

Ralph raised an interested eyebrow.

I nodded. "Timing was incredibly important here, of course. He knew the precise moment the tape would reach the point of the shot, which would be within a minute or two of ten-forty. He turned on the recorder, with the volume undoubtedly high, and then bolted the bedroom door from the inside—if it was not bolted already. And then, probably with a screwdriver, he removed one of the panes from a French door—the one which we now see broken."

"He stepped out onto the balcony, closed the door after him, reached back inside, and ran the bolt home. Then he replaced the windowpane and the slats, went down to the drawing room, and remained there listening to the ten o'clock news. At ten-thirty, as usual, Oglethorpe and Genevieve went upstairs, putting them in the

vicinity of Hermione's bedroom door at the moment the tape reached the sound of the shot. When the murderer gained access to the room from the balcony later, it was a simple matter to slip the tape back into his pocket—he has probably managed to dispose of it by now."

Ralph scratched his neck speculatively. "Who's your candidate for the murder? Oglethorpe or Genevieve?"

"Oglethorpe."

"Why Oglethorpe?"

"Because of the hearing aid."

"What does the hearing aid have to do with it?"

"I haven't quite pinpointed that yet, but it's probably the key to this entire case. Every time I've looked at Oglethorpe, he's been fiddling with that hearing aid. That's got to be significant somehow."

"Why?"

"Ralph," I said, "do you remember the Gillingham murder case? One of our prime suspects, Elmer Bjornson, appeared to be confined to a wheelchair, but we discovered that he could really walk. That taught me to always be suspicious of murder suspects in wheelchairs and by extension I think I can safely apply that to people who wear hearing aids."

"Henry," Ralph said, "it's true that Bjornson could walk, but that didn't have anything to do with the murder of Gillingham. We just stumbled across that before we arrested the real murderer."

I rubbed my jaw. "You mean that Oglethorpe's hearing aid has *nothing* to do with this murder?"

"I'm afraid not, Henry."

I pulled myself together. "Ah well, nailing the true murderer in this case is just a matter of perseverance. We will come up with the culprit or culpritness soon. But at least, for the time being, we have succeeded in preventing an innocent man from being sent to prison." I smiled modestly. "Actually, I suppose almost any reasonably competent detective would eventually have come up with all the glaring inconsistencies in this case."

Ralph nodded. "That's right, Henry."

There was a rather long silence and I began to feel uneasy. "What is it, Ralph?"

He sighed. "This case reminds me of the purloined letter."

"How does it remind you of the purloined letter?"

"Henry, the best place to hide a murder is inside a murder. Suppose you want to kill your wife for her money. No matter how cleverly you plan the thing, you know that you will still be the most logical suspect. The police would dig and dig and the chances are good that they would come up with something that would trip you up. So you decide to take the bull by the horns. Since you are going to be suspected anyway, why not go all out? Make it seem at first glance that only you could possibly have killed her."

I closed my eyes.

Ralph continued. "When you go upstairs with your wife, you shoot her, using a silencer on the gun. Then you leave the room and get rid of the silencer and the spent cartridge and replace it with a fresh one. You return to the room and wait until you hear Oglethorpe and Genevieve coming up the stairs. You let them get just outside the door and then you fire the pistol out of the open French door into the night air.

"And while Oglethorpe and Genevieve are knocking at the bedroom door, you simply close and bolt the French doors—one of whose window frames you have previously tampered with. Then you swallow a few barbiturates and lie down beside your dead wife. You pretend that you are unconscious when Genevieve and Oglethorpe break into the room and that is that."

Ralph sighed again. "You then sit back and let the police do their work. They will realize that the situation is just *too* pat, *too* overwhelming. Point by point, they will unravel the frame-up and feel noble while they are doing it. Even if, by some remote chance, you are actually brought to trial, any good lawyer could point out the holes in the case and get you an acquittal."

I stared at Eustis, asleep in his chair with a smile on his face.

Damn, I thought, Ralph's right. And he's going to get away with it.

We carried Eustis to headquarters, but without any great optimism.

Then Ralph and I dropped in at the nearest tavern.

The bartender recognized me. "What'll it be, sergeant? Tomato juice or sherry?"

"Sherry."

"Oh?" he said. "That bad a day?"

I nodded glumly. "That bad a day."

He filled my glass to the brim and gave me water for a chaser.

Even the most innocent-seeming habit can be nasty . . .

THE GARAGE SALE HABIT by TONITA S. GARDNER



It all started in our old neighborhood a couple of years ago. Some of the neighbors were shocked and most were indifferent, but two weeks after Dolly Fallsby passed away in her sleep her husband Ben sold the house, held a huge garage sale, and married a lonely divorcee with a big expensive house in another town.

Even though Arthur and I were busily involved in going through our own move to a new neighborhood and a smaller house, my suspi-

cions were aroused. "Arthur," I said, "I don't mean to sound melodramatic, but I bet there was foul play involved. After all, Ben's younger brother is a doctor. And since Ben put him through medical school, it's logical that Jerry would do anything to pay him back—including signing Dolly's death certificate."

"It could be," answered Arthur with an affectionate pat. "But it's more likely that the foul play is in that overactive imagination of yours."

I had to smile. Arthur couldn't admit that anyone might have an ulterior motive for anything. That's what makes him such a dear, sweet human being. Ever since we settled here in Lakeville, Arthur's been semi-retired. He still keeps up with the stock market for a few of his old brokerage customers, but most of the time he likes to putter around the house and yard and look after all the little chores that need looking after. While I, out of habit and out of love for the man, like to look after him. Not to mention that I also do it out of necessity. In our suburb, there are widows and divorcees by the dozen—many with homes to maintain without the help of a man. Unless they can persuade someone else's man to help them repair a leaky faucet, change a balky circuit breaker, or perform the kind of service that can best be performed by a strong healthy male as vigorous and handsome as Arthur.

Of course if I were younger, I mightn't be so concerned. But the truth is that Arthur, with his thick silver hair and smooth ruddy skin, gets better-looking with each birthday, while I—well, you know how it is—a few too many pounds, a few more wrinkles.

Unfortunately, none of this has been lost on Selena, a slim-hipped, fine-complexioned blonde of indeterminate age. Since the beginning of the year, Selena, twice divorced, has lived next door. Which is why since the beginning of the year I've had to be so vigilant about Arthur.

Don't get me wrong. During the week, while Selena was at her daily bridge game, I found plenty of time for other things, like working toward a degree and making new friends. This last semester, while attending my Abnormal Psych class, I met a youthful widow named Maribeth who'd just moved to a small slate-roofed colonial a few miles away. Well-fixed but with no money to waste, dainty little Maribeth had enrolled at the local college with an eye to getting first a degree and then a job. In the meantime, she was in the process of fixing up

her new home.

"I need some furniture for the living room and the guest room," she told me. "After Hal died I sold everything. I couldn't bear to live with all those things we'd picked out together without him being there with me."

Yes, Maribeth was sweet. I took to her immediately. She was as shy and reserved as some of the other women I know are bold and pushy.

"If you want to finish decorating and not spend a fortune," I told Maribeth, "why not keep a lookout for the local garage sales?"

"I've never been to one," she said.

"They're fun," I informed her, "and once you've been to a few of them it's a habit that's hard to break." I went on to explain how I'd furnished half my house with other people's discards because most of our 30-year-old furniture was too massive for our new split level. "And believe me, I saved us lots of money."

Not needing to convince Maribeth any further, that week in the *Lakeville Pennysaver* I checked off what looked like several interesting garage-sale ads.

At the first house, a cement-colored Cape Cod with an attached two-car garage, Maribeth bought a cunning little padded footstool whose top lifted off to reveal a fitted sewing box. That got her hooked at once. Stepping briskly across the garage floor from table to laden table, she fingered dime-store vases, hefted brass-plated paperweights, and peeked beneath a delicately embossed cup and saucer to see if they were real china. (They were; she bought the set.)

"Look, Edna, all those beautiful pictures!" she exclaimed, pointing to the rear of the garage, on whose nail-studded walls appeared to be a collection of primitive Haitian art in bright kindergarten hues, but which, on closer inspection, proved to be a series of tacky imitations, still wet around the edges and obviously painted just for the sale.

"You can't be too careful, hon," I warned her as we drove to our next destination.

But Maribeth was like a child who'd discovered a new branch of F.A.O. Schwarz. In this case, her treasure-trove was an immense side-entry garage, where the owners, a middle-aged couple wearing sneakers on their feet and sour expressions on their faces, watched carefully to make sure that no one walked off without paying.

"Edna, that mirror will fit in perfectly in the foyer. And—" she

whispered out of the corner of her mouth "—it's only fifteen dollars."

"Twelve," I whispered back. "But offer them ten. They're the type who expect you to bargain as long as they get the last word."

Maribeth got the mirror for twelve dollars.

"Edna," she told me, "you're a genius!"

"No, hon," I replied, "just a little more experienced than you."

Nevertheless, I must admit that I enjoyed the role Maribeth had assigned to me—confidante, adviser, and friend. So I kept explaining all the do's and don't's of garage sales and she became such an enthusiast—even subscribing to a handful of out-of-town papers—that every time an advertisement looked promising she called and asked me to go with her. In the meantime I, finding myself spending more and more time acting as a bulwark between my vulnerable Arthur and a Selena who'd suddenly given up her daily bridge game, needed the occasional break to keep from going stir crazy.

Which brings us to the garage sale that proved to be Maribeth's undoing.

You see, she'd found this ad in the *Dorset Gazette*: "Garage Sale. Entire contents of fine house." The ad went on to list such items as a dry sink and a cherrywood dresser, both of which Maribeth was looking to buy.

So of course I made an appointment to go with her. At the last minute, seeing my shapely neighbor sunbathing by the back fence, I was tempted to cancel out on Maribeth, but I gritted my teeth and announced to Arthur that I'd be back in a half hour, even though I knew it would be more like an hour and a half.

The house was an impressive Early American colonial. Three teen-aged boys were running the sale in the garage and out on the driveway. "We'd like to see the dry sink and cherrywood dresser," Maribeth said to one of them.

"The furniture is inside," he said and led us through an entryway into the dining room.

Maribeth measured the dimensions of the dry sink. "Edna," she said, "it's perfect." She turned to the boy. "May we see the dresser?"

"Sure thing." He went to the stairs and hollered up toward the landing, "Some customers are here to see the dresser," and a man's voice called back to send us up.

we reached the landing, the boy signaled us to wait on a man's bench in the spacious hall. "My uncle'll be right with you," he said as a couple emerged from a room carrying a pair of endtables.

While the boy was escorting them downstairs, the uncle's voice announced his presence. "Good morning," he said. "May I help you?"

Maribeth was on her feet, blocking my view. "I'm interested in the cherrywood dresser," she said—and moved aside.

And a sudden cold shiver jolted my memory.

Ben Fallsby.

But there was no sign of recognition as his piercing blue eyes swept past me and fastened onto Maribeth.

"If you'll step this way," he said and showed her into a large bedroom, while I trailed along.

"Genuine cherrywood," he announced, patting the dresser.

"I can see that," said Maribeth, her eyes glowing as softly as the polished wood. "My husband always wanted one," she added poignantly.

With an impatient frown, Ben consulted his watch. "You couldn't buy a finer specimen," he said. "Your husband will love it."

Maribeth shook her head. "I'm a widow."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Ben. But even though his expression was properly somber, he seemed to relax. "I know how you must feel. My wife just passed away."

What a coincidence, I said to myself, while Maribeth looked as if she were about to cry.

After that, Ben Fallsby couldn't do enough for Maribeth. Not only did he sell her both pieces at a ridiculously low price, but he offered to deliver them himself.

"It's no trouble at all," he said. "I have a station wagon, and my nephews can help me load it."

I couldn't wait to get Maribeth out of there.

"Listen, hon," I said to her as soon as we were in the car, "I know that man. He and his first wife used to live around the corner from Arthur and me. Until," I added pointedly, "Dolly went to bed one night and never woke up."

"He must feel jinxed," she said.

At which point I remembered Arthur's joshing me about my active imagination and decided not to pursue the matter any further.

But oh, was I tempted. Especially when Maribeth confided that when Ben Fallsby delivered her furniture, he also invited her out to dinner. "I haven't had a real date since Hal died," she said wistfully.

"If you want to go out with him, fine," I said. "But *don't* get involved. He's already had two wives, and—"

"Yes," she interrupted, "he told me that both died in their sleep. He's not trying to hide anything, Edna."

I bit my tongue and prayed for the best.

That first dinner-for-two led to another the very next day, and before the week was over Maribeth and Ben Fallsby had become a steady duo. Then, equally fast, they set the wedding date. To me, Ben was more suitable as a case study for our Abnormal Psych class than as Maribeth's future husband. Again I tried to dissuade her.

"Why not wait a while?" I pleaded. "You hardly know him."

"Oh, Edna," she admonished, "you're wrong about Ben and his wives. I appreciate your concern, but lightning *can* strike twice. Can't you change your mind about him? You've been such a good friend I'd hate to lose you because of this."

Upset that I'd nearly ruined a valuable friendship, I determined that I'd try to be more tolerant of Ben. Luckily school was almost out, and as soon as it was I talked Arthur into driving west for a lengthy camping trip before going to San Francisco to see our son and daughter-in-law. Not only did I want to put some distance between Arthur and Selena, but I needed an excuse to miss Maribeth's July 4th wedding to Ben Fallsby.

So off we went, Arthur and I.

But all good times have to end, and after Labor Day we returned to Lakeville.

"How about a little welcome-home drink?" said Arthur, unpacking the suitcases and camping gear.

"I'll second that," I told him, and as he strode off to the kitchen, I gathered up the mail that had accumulated on the hall floor.

Among the usual bills and brochures, I came across a letter from Maribeth—a thank-you note for the wedding gift I'd sent before we left. Deciding to let her know that we were back, I reached for the phone on the hall table and dialed the familiar number.

There was no answer.

A worry began to nibble at the back of my mind. I called her next-

door neighbor, an arthritic old lady who seldom left her house. Identifying myself, I explained that I was trying to contact Mrs. Fallsby.

"Oh dear," came the reply, followed by a long pause. "I'm so sorry, but Mrs. Fallsby has passed away."

"My God!" I gasped. "What happened?"

"She died in her sleep. Two weeks ago. Her poor husband was so upset that his brother, who's a doctor, had to keep him sedated right up until the funeral."

"He was that upset." I croaked out the words.

"Yes indeed," she went on. "He seemed to be very much in love with her. That's why he's selling the house and everything in it. He's going to move as soon as he can."

"But meanwhile he's still living there?"

"Yes, he's been getting ready to give a garage sale."

"When, Mrs. Hopkins, do you know?"

"It's going on right now. It's just started, as a matter of fact—that's probably why he didn't hear the phone."

I thanked her, said goodbye, and pressed the receiver button. But as I lifted it again to call the police (this time even Arthur couldn't tell me it was my imagination), my hands started shaking so that I couldn't dial. Feeling more than a little guilty for what had happened, I went to the kitchen to break the news to Arthur, hoping that the drink he'd mixed for me would steady my hands as well as my nerves. But before I could reach either the kitchen or my drink, there was a knock on the side door, and in breezed Selena.

"Arthur—" her smile was as bright as her freshly washed hair "—welcome home!"

"It's nice to be home," he greeted her.

Noticing my apricot sour on the counter, she reached for it. "Ummm, that looks good," she said, and clinking it against Arthur's martini she took a small sip. "Actually, when I saw your car pull up I decided to invite the two of you for lunch, but I'm afraid I have to give you a raincheck."

"That's very nice of you," said Arthur.

"I'm really embarrassed," said Selena. "You see, I plugged in my vacuum cleaner to tidy up the rug, and the stupid old thing just sputtered and blew dirt all over the living room. And now—" she gestured helplessly "—with the cleaning woman coming in on Wednesday, I

have to decide if I should have it fixed or buy a new one."

"You're probably better off with a new one," said Arthur. "Unless you can find a good second-hand machine."

"New ones are so expensive," she pouted, "but I wouldn't know where to look for a used one." She grabbed both his hands and squeezed them. "If you can just tell me if it's worth fixing, Arthur, I'd be forever grateful."

"No need to be," said Arthur. "I'm always glad to help a lady with a problem," and off they went, Arthur calling over his shoulder that we'd have our drinks as soon as he got back.

Naturally I was seething. At her, at him, and at myself. She wanted a man, did she? And Arthur was the most convenient one around, was he? Well, that didn't mean I had to let her have her way.

I poured the remainder of the apricot sour down the drain, rinsed the glass in boiling-hot water, and as I did I noticed that my hands were no longer shaking. Hurrying back to the phone in the hall, I mentally contrasted the scheming Selena with the Maribeth I'd never see again. And that's when I decided that the police could wait. After all, they couldn't bring Maribeth back, could they?

I thumbed through the latest *Pennysaver*. The ad I was looking for was on page 6: "Huge Garage Sale"—and tucked in among a multitude of listed items (dry sink, cherrywood dresser) was the one item I was hoping to find: "Rug-Mate, excellent condition."

I picked up the phone again and dialed as rapidly as I could.

"Selena, it's Edna. Listen," I said to her, "don't even bother with that old vacuum cleaner of yours. I know where you can buy a slightly used Rug-Mate for a very good price. But since it's a garage sale, you'd better hurry over before it's sold."

Allowing her no time to think up a suitable refusal, I volunteered to drive her there myself, even though our two-seater could never hold a big vacuum cleaner. But from past experience, I figured that wouldn't be a problem. After all, when Ben Fallsby found out that Selena was unattached, he'd be only too happy to deliver the machine in person.

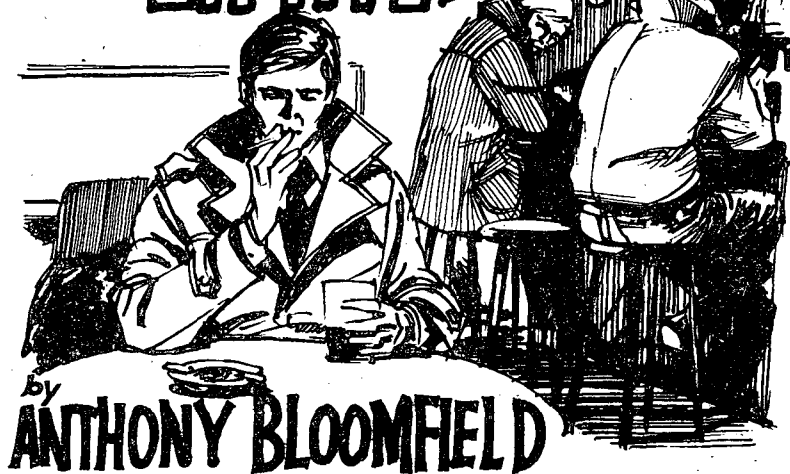
I hurried out to start the car. Selena joined me.

"It's so nice of you to do this, Edna. I just hope you're not wasting your time."

"Selena—" I smiled as I put my foot down on the accelerator "—if you get what you're looking for, that's good enough for me!"

It was a cash transaction, all very businesslike . . .

RETRIBUTION LIMITED



by
ANTHONY BLOOMFIELD

Dialling, I read the number off the old envelope he'd slipped in my hand. "This is ———," a female voice repeated it, like an answering-machine.

I hadn't prepared myself as I should, the call was a spur-of-the-moment decision. "I'd like to make an appointment."

"Commercial, or personal services?"

I thought it might be a wrong number or even that I could have

been conned. "Are you—" I started, but somehow couldn't bring myself to pronounce it, though nowadays even the most ordinary concerns have adopted these weird and wonderful titles.

"Commercial is evictions, debt collection, that side of the business."

"No," I said, "in that case, it's personal."

"Hang on, please." There was a click on the line.

I tried to concentrate my thoughts, sharpen up a bit. It could be crucial. The phone was just by the Gents. Someone opened the door, and a pungent smell of urine and Lysol gusted out. The pips started, and I put another coin in.

"Can you come this afternoon?" The voice in my ear startled me.

"Yes."

"Will four o'clock be all right?"

"Yes, all right."

"Mr. Barton will see you at four o'clock. What name shall I say?"

I nearly made a mistake. "Hunt," I said.

"All right, Mr. Hunt."

"Hang on," I said quickly. "What's the address?"

"You don't have our address?"

Brilliant deduction, Miss Mastermind. "I don't believe you're in the directory."

"No," she said. "That's correct, we are not."

I added the address to the envelope, then decided I should memorize it, and I tore up the envelope and flushed it away in the bog.

It was in Bayswater, just off Queensway, an entrance between a news agent's and a Greek restaurant. Respectable, needless to say. The nameplates belonged to an accountant's, an employment agency, and the like. The office I was seeking was on the top floor. An unlisted number and then this outlandish name attracting attention in my experience was typical of a certain mentality. Twisted.

I'd got there early and walked past three or four times. A woman came out and a man went in, but they could have been calling at any of the offices. I tried to decide on my approach, but my information was so scanty I was obliged to play it off the cuff. By four o'clock the light in the street had started draining away.

The outer office was little larger than your average bathroom. The

girl typing at the desk apparently doubled as secretary and receptionist. I said I had an appointment with Mr. Barton.

She made a show of consulting a list. I don't know whether it was the same girl I'd spoken to but she had a similar answering-machine voice. "Just a moment, please, Mr. Hunt." She got up and edged through a door to the side, which she shut behind her. Although she was young and quite attractive, there was something antiseptic about her for my taste.

When she came back she avoided looking at me, which wasn't easy in so small a space. "Mr. Barton will see you now." Her impersonality was rather degrading, as I'm sure it was intended to be.

A standard sort of office room, say fifteen by twelve. There were blinds over the windows, with this hard strip-lighting which eliminates shadows. Mr. Barton—I didn't imagine that was his real name, any more than mine was Hunt—sat at a bare medium-sized desk. He stood up as I entered and smiled without showing his teeth. He invited me to the chair in front of the desk, then sat down again, giving me a somewhat wider smile, though it wasn't any more congenial. "Before we start talking business, Mr. Hunt, we must be sure we understand each other. . . ." A nondescript sort of accent, the kind that's called classless.

"Yes," I said, "of course."

"It is the personal side of our operation which interests you. The personal, not the commercial. You do understand the difference?"

I nodded emphatically. He was a dark-haired man, larger than the norm, with a broad heavy face. Expensively tanned. In his late thirties or thereabouts, I estimated. Anyway, a little younger than myself. He wore a blue suit, with a matching shirt and tie. For an instant I had thought I recognized him, then I realized he resembled an actor who appeared in a television police series. A poor actor, I'd always considered.

"Tell me how you came to hear about us, Mr. Hunt. We don't advertise our services extensively."

"Well, I get around a bit," I said. "Pubs, clubs, places like that. I sort of began hearing whispers." Stick to the truth where possible, I've always found it safer. "Then I happened to meet someone who gave me your number."

"A satisfied client, perhaps?"

I didn't comment—sometimes that's also sound policy.

"Quite right. I wouldn't dream of asking you the name. In this office we have a mental block on names."

"Very understandable," I said.

"Yes." His smile seemed sarcastic. He was sitting in one of those flexible executive-type chairs. He tilted it back, and I could feel the set speech coming.

"We like to think that in this organization we perform a necessary social function. We fill a gap. In the old days, in less sophisticated times, people had a different outlook. It used to be a case of leave it to God. Leave it to God, that was the common attitude. But nowadays everyone agrees God doesn't exist . . ." His pause gave me an opportunity, but I'd no inclination to argue. He pursed his lips, like someone spitting out a shred of tobacco. "God doesn't exist. And the meek, poor bastards will never inherit the bloody earth."

I nodded again because I thought it was expected of me.

"There's no natural justice. Bad buggers prosper. The swill rises to the top of the stream. And that's where we come in—redressing the balance, so to speak. Also, I wouldn't deny, it's a business proposition. And business, I'm happy to say, is booming." He leaned over the table. "Cash, of course. No checks. It has to be a cash transaction."

"I don't actually have the money on me," I muttered.

"There's a regular scale of charges, based on the client's requirements. That is to say, whether the contract specifies just a few bumps, or an arm or a leg, or a hospital job. A minor hospital job, or the full works. One thing I must emphasize though—" He paused to give it weight. "We never ever deal in terminations."

"Terminations?"

Extending his forefinger, he slashed his hand across his throat.

"Oh, I see. Well, actually, I didn't have in mind anything so drastic as—"

"Half down in advance. The balance on completion of the contract. It works out between five hundred and a thousand. All in. Depending. And used notes, please. How soon can you have it together?"

"The banks are closed now."

"How about tomorrow?"

I nodded.

"Tomorrow night then. You don't come here. I'll give you the

address. No, no, don't write it down—"

He got to his feet and I did likewise. "Until tomorrow night, Mr. Hunt. You'll give me the name then, plus the relevant details." He held out his hand. "And Retribution Limited will do the rest."

I find it entertaining to play with names, letting them run through my mind, the way you might make up a collection of the women you lust after. I was sitting in a pub just back of Queensway Station. It was warm and cozy.

Surprising the number I came up with, deserving candidates for retribution. I don't consider I'm any more ill-disposed by nature than the next man. There must be a great deal of animosity lying around though, which is not usually acknowledged. Incidentally, I think it's on the increase—you can feel it in the air—and no doubt that's why Retribution Limited was booming.

Not all the names that sprang into my mind made the same impact. There were virtual strangers, people who'd irritated me on occasion or been offensive. When you start thinking along these lines, a lot of unpleasant or humiliating episodes recur. It was different, of course, with the names at the top of the list—they'd all been close at one time or another. Too close, possibly. I kept reminding myself this selection process wasn't real, just an academic exercise, so to speak. All the same, the mere pretense aroused a sort of exhilaration, a sense of opportunity.

I bought myself another Scotch. When I got back to my seat I couldn't recapture my previous excitement. It had given way to a feeling of frustration. This, I supposed, was because the whole set-up seemed so unreal. But then, when I started to consider, I suddenly saw the logic. They had begun semi-legitimate, recovering debts, kicking out tenants who wouldn't pay, persuading—that brand of strong-arm operation. It was only a small step, if you think of it objectively, to move on to the personal level. And punishment instead of persuasion. What's more, it was almost fireproof—so long as they stayed clear of "terminations." Mr. Barton had managed to make his objection a matter of righteousness, but I didn't believe that. He wasn't the type to let morality weigh.

For my part, anyway, I could never understand why you should wish anyone else dead. Out of pure hatred, I mean. Obviously it's different

if there's money concerned or a person's standing in your way. But someone you've got it in for, someone you want to hurt, there wouldn't be nearly enough suffering. Death is a release. By speeding up the process, all you achieve is saving them from moldering away in some crummy old people's home.

George Roberts, for instance, or Sylvia—"termination" would be much too merciful.

I remember that's the way my mind was working when I spotted these two characters at the bar. Fifteen feet between them, but glances were passing. One, in a sheepskin coat, was a husky young yobbo, touch of the tarbrush. The other, with a red face and a white moustache, I had the idea he was ex-Regular Army, a warrant officer type.

There was this heavy ashtray on the table. I caught it with my elbow and it crashed to the floor. The bar being quiet, everyone looked round—except my two. They were smart as that, but, like the saying goes, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

There's also a saying about overlooking what's under your nose. It was obvious they would follow me. To see I was safe, not some snooper. On top of that, there was the second half of the fee. They'd want to know where to find me in case I was the bilking kind.

Finishing my drink at leisure, I strolled outside. It was starting to spit with rain. I turned into Queensway, which was chock-ablock, pedestrians as well as the traffic. I went into a chemist's, and when I came out the young one was reading the menu outside a curry-house while his mate stood on the curb like a spare part. The problem was not how to drop them, but to avoid it appearing deliberate.

Easy enough, as it happened. As I walked up Queensway the rain got heavier. Everyone was dashing about. All I had to do was wait until the last minute, put my head down, and run—and I jumped on this 88 bus just as it started off.

They would have a car somewhere presumably, in case I had. But even if they got to it quick enough, at Marble Arch I was down into the subway, and there were all these exits to choose from, they hadn't a cat in hell's. As for me, I was just going home, wasn't I? Wherever my home might happen to be.

Mr. so-called Barton would not be pleased, but that was his rotten luck. It must have happened before though—it's not easy tailing

anyone in a stinking antheap like London. He would not, however, go ahead with the contract until he knew where to collect. I realized I should have to do something about that. That was just one of the problems I had to work on.

The address he'd given me was in Kilburn. I checked it out first thing in the morning, a flyblown café next to a betting-shop, a bingo-hall across the street. I couldn't see much through the windows, they were all steamed up.

I fixed up a place for myself, one of those old houses in West Hampstead they let off in furnished rooms, with a floating population of layabouts. I stuck my name with those alongside the bell-pushes, rubbing up the card so it didn't appear conspicuous. Looking round the room, with its peeling paint and matchbox furniture, I thought it wasn't much of a place for a man with a thousand pounds to spare, but if someone wants a thing desperately enough money's little object. There are always ways and means, I've noticed, and I hoped they had experienced the same phenomenon.

When the banks opened I got the cash. It just about cleaned me out. I can't say why I decided to do it that way, except to save the fuss. I wasn't in the mood for explanations and all the tedious paperwork. I'm sure that must have been my reasoning.

Only one problem remained, and that was the chief one. Although in a way I'd been pondering all the time, I still hadn't decided on a name.

It had started again in bed the night before, before I'd dropped off to sleep. I'd found myself—just like in the pub, only more intensely—thinking of certain people, thinking of certain incidents, remembering. It seemed more than just an exercise.

I thought of how George Roberts had bullied me and cheated me, frustrating my career at every turn. Just out of spite, because he knew I knew he'd got where he was only by lies and bluff and arse-licking. George Roberts deserved all Barton could do to him, and then again.

So did Sylvia. I thought I'd settled with her when I kicked her out and took the kid away from her. But it didn't work out like that. The poison was still in my veins.

As well as Sylvia, that greasy lover of hers, long-haired lecherous bastard. He'd howl like a pig when they got him in a dark alley.

And all the others—their faces seemed to float up out of nowhere, though really I suppose from my subconscious mind. Lingered over them, the names and the faces, was a bit like indulging myself in erotic fantasies. There was the same total power, but the same dissatisfaction because I was always aware it wasn't the true article.

I tried hard to forget they were only fantasies, but for one reason or another I couldn't quite bring it off. For a moment I nearly made it work with Sylvia. I heard myself giving Barton her name, and I could almost see those two thugs of his closing in on her.

With George Roberts, though, it was quite hopeless, even if he was the strongest candidate, my favorite for retribution. It was a matter of verisimilitude. It was too fanciful to suppose they would dare to accept a contract on a police officer:

This section I'm in now they call the social-crime unit. I don't know what it means. I thought all crime was anti-social by definition—though you might not reckon so, seeing some of the muck that gets away with it and honored by society.

If it wasn't for George Roberts, I'd be at the Home Office now, and probably Chief Inspector.

All the same, this isn't such a bad number. You get a pretty free hand, which suits my disposition as I'm something of a lone wolf by nature. It's mostly round the pubs and clubs, sniffing things out. That's how I got onto Retribution Limited. It fell in my lap. I kept hearing whispers, and then this little rummy turns up out of the blue with the number. He wasn't one of my regular snouts, either, I didn't know why he'd chosen me. Such lucky chances come up sometimes, though. The thing is to be ready for them. Accessible.

I spent the afternoon in my hired room. Dump as it was, it made a change from the station-house, where I'd lived ever since I got rid of Sylvia. I held that against her too, though last I heard they were living pretty rough themselves. She didn't get a penny out of me, of course, and I'd had her Casanova kicked out of his job.

The room was on the ground floor, at the back, with French windows onto a narrow terrace and a jungle of a garden that hadn't been touched for years. Not that there was any inducement to go out there with the rain lashing down.

I took a taxi to Kilburn. Crossing over from the bingo-hall I got

half-soaked. The café was almost empty, but I hadn't really time to take it in. Soon as I pushed open the door, some hairy young throw-back came up and said, "The club, guv, it's down the stairs."

At the bottom of the stairs there was a plain padded door, which opened as I began lifting my hand. The room was quite large, broken up by couches and tables and banks of chairs. The lighting was as murky as it usually is in these sort of places.

Barton was standing waiting for me. Quick as a flash, he started patting me all over. "You've got wet, Mr. Hunt," he said, but if it hadn't been raining he would have found some other reason, or wouldn't have bothered with any excuse.

I took off my mac, and we sat facing each other across a small table. He asked me if I'd like a drink, and I said Scotch. I was letting him mark the card. There was a subtle change in his manner from his office: still polite, but there was this knowingness, this presumption. I'd seen it before, they like to think they've got you down to their own rotten level.

"Happy days." He lifted his glass. I expect it was a signal, as the jukebox came on straight away. I don't know what the decibel-level was, but it was loud enough to start the glasses, ashtrays, and everything loose rattling like in a hurricane. It was loud enough that if I'd had a bug he hadn't spotted in his rub-down to render it inoperable.

"You've got the cash?"

"In fives. Used notes."

"Half down, half, like I said, when the contract's been fulfilled."

To hear each other we were almost screaming, our faces inches apart. I didn't think he was being particularly suspicious: the drill was too pat. Standard procedure.

"And the total sum depends on . . ." He went through it all again. I felt his spit on my face. Such a bloody awful racket, it was impossible to think straight.

Even at this late juncture, I still hadn't decided on the name.

Soon as I was outside again, I dashed into the first pub. It was a big Irish house, the piano going, and singing, almost as rowdy as the basement. I had two quick ones standing, then I walked down the street until I found another place, quieter, where I could sit and think.

They'd be tailing me again, naturally. I didn't bother to look. It

didn't matter.

I thought, there's ample time. I was going to deliver a warning, no question. Besides, there wasn't any real danger. I'd be on the stake-out myself to see that no harm came. That was the whole object, wasn't it? Catch them in the act. Before the act. Before they could do any damage.

I hadn't planned to give that name. Somehow, it just forced itself out. If I'd been able to think clearly I would have invented a name, then laid on a decoy, that would have been customary procedure. I was sure though that it must have made it far more convincing, the name of someone I really truly hated.

It was still pouring with rain, one of those nights you're so wet already it doesn't matter any more. Not a sign of a taxi. I got the Underground to Swiss Cottage. I had an idea I saw the ex-Army type in the next carriage. They had to be sure of the rest of their money. After the job was done. I hadn't ordered a big job, not a hospital job.

And then into another pub. You get used to drinking in my work with all the waiting and sniffing around. Though it's usually just a glass of beer. The whisky affected my perceptions, sharpening them in some areas, in others softening, blurring, like a dream. I remember thinking, when I first wake up in the morning I won't be certain it wasn't a dream.

If I'd had any liquor in the room, I dare say I should have drunk myself into a stupor. Not that that would have made any difference.

I slung my wet clothes in a heap and fell naked into bed. I can't say what time I woke up—in that strange bed, in that strange room, with the alcohol in my bloodstream, everything was disconnected. But it wasn't like a dream. And it wasn't morning. The room was pitch-dark.

The noises at the window, at first I thought it was the rain. Then I recognized the click, because I've often done the same thing myself. And the second click as the lock snags back. What the hell, was my first thought, they know I'm here! Why do they have to see me in bloody bed?

Then I heard another noise, a scuffling outside the door, and I understood. It all came together practically at once—the telephone number dropped in my lap, how I had identified myself, the way they'd got me to move from the station-house. I realized with dismay

that I'd overlooked the obvious once more. I wasn't immediately frightened, not yet, my mind was still too busy sorting out the pieces. The master stroke was my incrimination, so even a contract on a police officer became perfectly safe.

Panic arrived when I reached for the light switch and I couldn't remember if it was behind my head, on the right-hand side or on the left. I flailed about like a blind man.

The light came on independently. It was the yobbo at the door. The Army type stood inside the windows. They both carried sticks of some sort. I didn't know how far they'd go, whether it was to be a hospital job. I didn't know who'd given the contract. If it was Sylvia.

And I thought that the most obvious factor I had overlooked, right under my nose the whole time, was that my feelings could not be unique, someone was absolutely bound to feel the same about me. It was only natural, and the days we live in.

As the two of them closed with their sticks, I was all at once ridiculously conscious that under the blankets I'd clutched round me I was stark naked.



Molly Dodd's eviction would not pass unnoticed . . .

THE PIONEER STRAIN

by
**LOREN D.
ESTLEMAN**



"A rifle!" Vernon Thickett stared up at his fellow deputy from behind a steaming hot bowl of Maud Baxter's notorious Red River Chili and cursed.

Earl Briggs nodded. He was a lean country boy, leaner even than Thickett, and with his shock of unruly wheat-colored hair and freckle-spattered face he looked far too young to be wearing a star on his buff shirt. "That's what I said, Verne," he affirmed. "She's got a rifle and

Lord knows how many cartridges up there and she threatened to blow a hole in her nephew's nice tailor-made suit if he didn't clear off her land."

"Did he take her advice?"

A quick grin flashed across the younger deputy's face. "You know Leroy, Verne. What do you think?"

"I think he took her advice. Where is he now?"

"Out on Route Forty-four. He called the office from one of those free telephones the Highway Department put in last spring."

"Madder'n a half-squashed bee, I expect." Thickett made a face at his untouched meal and pushed himself reluctantly to his feet. He towered over Earl by a full head. "Get in touch with Luke and Dan and tell 'em to get over to Molly's place on the double and wait for me. No sirens—we don't want any state troopers in on this one. Then bring my car around in front of the office while I grab a gun. That's the only thing the old girl understands." When Earl had left to carry out his orders, Thickett snatched a slice of bread from the table, spooned a quantity of chili onto it, slapped another slice on top of that, and, nodding to hefty Maud Baxter behind the counter, strode toward the door of the diner with the sandwich in his mouth.

He didn't say a word to Earl all the way out to Molly's place. Verne Thickett was not the law in Schuylerville, Oklahoma, but as long as Sheriff Willis was in the hospital recuperating from a gall bladder operation he was the next best thing. Until now his biggest headache had been the kids who kept stealing the outhouse from behind Guy Dawson's place and hauling it up onto the roof of whatever schoolteacher happened to be the target of their hostilities that week. As for Molly Dodd, she was trouble enough at any time, but the kind of trouble she usually caused seldom involved the law. Molly Dodd armed with a rifle was one problem he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy.

For the past two years she and her nephew, Leroy Cooper, had been engaged in a bitter legal battle with each other over the ownership of the 160 acres she lived on up in the Osage Hills. The Great Midwestern Bank and Trust Company, of which Leroy was the Schuylerville branch manager, claimed the land in lieu of payment on a loan it had made to Molly's late husband Clyde back in 1969, while she

maintained that he had paid it off shortly before his death in 1973. Molly, now in her late seventies, had been part of Schuylerville for so long that most of the town had sided with her throughout the complex legal maneuvering, but that had come to an end three weeks before when the county court of appeals found in favor of the bank and issued an order for Molly Dodd's eviction.

Thickett berated himself for not having anticipated the present situation. The pioneer strain in Molly was too strong to allow her to give in easily. He remembered the story his father had told him of the time she had come home early from a visit to find the house dark and her best friend's flivver parked in the driveway. Instead of going in and shooting Clyde and his lover—which, according to the moral code of the time, would have seemed the natural thing to do—she had simply climbed into the shiny new car, driven it into the next county, and sold it. The story had it that Clyde ended the affair soon afterward, and there was no record in the sheriff's office of a car being stolen that year. True or not, the account was worthy of Molly's reputation for audacity and ingenuity. It was certainly a funnier story than the desperate one currently unfolding up in the hills.

Leroy Cooper's sedan was parked at the side of the private road that led to the house at the top of the hill. A pair of scout cars were parked across from it at different angles. Earl ground the car to a dusty halt behind the civilian vehicle and they got out.

Cooper separated himself from the two deputies with whom he had been conversing and came forward. "I want the woman arrested, Deputy!" he exclaimed shrilly. "Do you know she actually threatened to shoot me? I barely got out of there with my life!"

"Take it easy, Leroy." Thickett slid his stetson to the back of his head with a casual movement of his right hand. "Do you mind telling me what you were doing up there in the first place?"

"I merely reminded her to vacate the premises before midnight tonight. That's the deadline set by the court. The bulldozers come in tomorrow."

"That's our job, Leroy. Why didn't you call us first?"

The banker looked as if Thickett had just asked him to scrub out a spittoon with his monogrammed shirt. "This is a family matter, Deputy. There seemed no reason to involve the law."

"It's a little late for that, isn't it? —What've we got, Luke?"

Luke Madden, the older of the two deputies already on the scene, was a big man with a bulldog jaw and hair the color of dull steel. He had been a deputy when Wilbur Underhill stormed through the area in 1933, and his prized possession was a framed newspaper clipping which described his inconclusive shoot-out with the outlaw. He spoke with a Blue Diamond matchstick clamped between his teeth. "That cabin's bunted smack up against the side of the hill," he told Thickett. "There's only one way in or out by car, and this here's it. If you and Earl and Dan can keep her busy in front, Verne, I can sneak around the long way and take her from behind."

"How are you going to get in? Through the chimney?" The chief deputy squinted up at the gabled structure atop the hill. "I reckon we'll just go on up and give her the chance to surrender."

The four-car caravan took off with Earl and Thickett in the lead and Leroy Cooper timidly bringing up the rear in his gleaming sedan. They were rounding the final turn before the house when a shot rang out and a bullet starred the windshield between the two deputies in front. Earl yanked the wheel hard to the right. The unmarked cruiser jumped the bank and came to a jarring stop in a bed of weeds at the side of the road. They both spilled out Thickett's side of the car and crouched there, guns drawn.

"Verne! Earl! You guys all right?" The voice was Luke Madden's, shouting from behind his car parked perpendicularly across the road. The way beyond it was completely blocked by the other two vehicles.

"We're fine!" Thickett shouted back. "Stay down!"

"She means business," said Earl. "Maybe I ought to radio the state troopers."

"No need. If Molly had meant to hit us, she would have hit us. I've seen her pick nails off a fence post at thirty yards. She's just trying to scare us."

"She's awful good at it."

No more shots accompanied the first one, and for a long time the only sound was that of an occasional breeze humming through the upper branches of the towering pines that surrounded the house on three sides. The dwelling itself appeared deserted. All but one of the tall front windows were shaded, the exception being the wide open one to the left of the front door. Five full minutes passed before a voice like a bull's bellow called out through the open window.

"You boys just get back into your automobiles and drive on out of here," it said. "I don't want to hurt nobody, but I will if I have to!"

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Thickett shouted: "Molly, this here's Vernon Thickett! Put down that rifle and let us come in! You're not a criminal! Don't act like one!"

There was a short silence. Then, from the house: "I've knowed you since you was a baby, Vernon, and you know I don't want to hurt you! But you know I will if it means keepin' what's mine!"

"That's what I want to talk to you about, Molly! I—" Vernon had started to rise when another shot sounded, the bullet zinging along the roof of the unmarked scout car, missing his right ear by a couple of inches. He dove to the ground. "I can see this is going to take more than just words," he said to Earl after a moment.

A series of six more reports followed in rapid succession, and Thickett turned his head as Luke Madden ran toward him in a crouch, bullets kicking up dirt at his heels. "Luke, what in *hell* do you think you're doing?" he demanded when the older deputy was sprawled beside him, panting heavily. "I thought I told you to stay put!"

"Look," said the other, once he'd caught his breath. "If I can get around to the other side of the hill without her seeing me, I can drop down onto the roof and climb in through one of those gabled windows. With you laying down a steady pattern of fire out here she won't suspect a thing until I grab her and take away the rifle."

"No! There's no telling what she'll do if you startle her! Go back. I'll call you when I need you."

"Verne—"

"You heard me! Get back there and help Dan keep an eye on Leroy in case he tries anything dumb."

The other muttered something unintelligible and sprinted back to his car as more shots sounded from the house.

Earl turned a pair of frank blue eyes on Vernon. "He might be right, you know. That may be the only way to get her out of there without bloodshed."

"Forget it," snapped Thickett. "The trouble with Luke Madden is he can't forget he's the one who almost got Wilbur Underhill. I'm not going to let him play hero at the expense of that frightened old woman."

"Have you got a better plan?"

Thickett thought. Suddenly he turned to his companion. "What's the name of that salesman from Tulsa, the one who retired and came here to live about five years ago? You know, the one Molly's sweet on?"

"Luther Briscoe?"

"Right. Ever since Clyde's death nobody's seen 'em apart, not even when she went to court. They do everything together. There's that telephone down by the highway; get hold of him and see if you can get him up here. If anybody can talk her out of there, Briscoe can."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"He left town yesterday to visit his sister in Kansas. He asked me to keep an eye on his house while he was gone. Said he wouldn't be back until Monday."

"Damn! Well, that just leaves Plan B." Thickett jammed his pistol into its holster and began unbuckling the belt.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going in." He laid the gunbelt on the ground.

"You're *what*?"

"I'm counting on our friendship to keep her from shooting me."

"Now who's playing hero? You can't be sure of—"

"Hold your fire, Molly!" Thickett shouted through cupped hands. "I'm coming in and I'm unarmed!"

"Don't, Vernon!" The answering bellow held a desperate edge. "I mean what I say! I'll scatter your brains all over these hills!"

"I don't think you will, Molly." Slowly he rose to his feet. A bullet spanged against the roof of the scout car.

Thickett signaled the other deputies to hold their fire and stepped clear of the car. He could see Molly's rifle barrel pointing through the window. Cautiously he took a step forward.

The second shot snatched his hat off his head. He hesitated, then moved on. A third slug whined past his left ear but he kept walking. The next three shots were snapped off so rapidly they sounded as if they had come from a machine-gun. They struck the ground at his feet and spat gravel onto his pantlegs. By this time he was almost to the door. Two more steps and he was inside, where he closed the door behind him...

It was a moment before his eyes adjusted themselves to the dim light inside the house. When they had, his first thought was that the

interior had not changed since he was a boy. The Victorian clutter, from the overstuffed rockers festooned with doilies to the glass-fronted china cabinets and papered walls upon which hung framed and faded prints of every conceivable shape and size, was the same as he remembered it. The only difference was the pile of cartridges on the pedestal table beside the door. Beyond it, Molly Dodd stood in the shadows at the open front window, her dark eyes glittering above the stock of the 30-year-old carbine she held braced against her shoulder. Thickett was looking right down its bore.

"Say your piece and get out." Her voice was taut. Small but wiry, she wore her black hair pulled straight back into a tight bun. Although her eyes were small above her hooked nose, they had a remarkable depth of expression. Her mouth was wide and turned down at the corners in a permanent scowl. Her print dress looked new, as did the sweater she wore buttoned at the neck like a cape. The firearm remained steady in her hands.

"Why don't you give me the gun, Molly?" Vernon asked quietly. "You aren't going to shoot anyone."

"When it comes to protectin' my property I'd shoot my own son if I had one," she snapped.

"You want to tell me about it?"

There was an almost indiscernible change in the expression of her eyes. "This place is mine," she said. "I know what the courts said, but they was wrong. They didn't see the record that proved Clyde paid off that loan because it don't exist no more. Not after that slippery nephew of mine got rid of it."

"Why would Leroy do that?" Thickett began to breathe a little more easily. He had her talking now.

"Why do you think? He knows there's oil on this land just like everybody else. If he can grab it for his bank he'll make hisself a big man and maybe they'll forget about checkin' his books like they been threatenin'."

"His books?"

She nodded curtly. Her eyes were black diamonds behind the peep-sight of the rifle. "He's been stealin' money from his accounts for years. You seen that car he drives, the clothes he wears. He can't afford them on his salary. I was in the bank once and overheard a man threatenin' to take his books to the main branch in Oklahoma City to

have 'em checked out. Leroy fell all over hisself tryin' to talk him out of it."

Thickett found himself growing interested in spite of the situation. "You say he destroyed the record that proved Clyde repaid the loan? Don't you have any proof of your own? What about a receipt?"

"Clyde never told me what he done with it. I been all over the house. It ain't here."

"What did you hope to gain by barricading yourself in the house?"

She smiled then, a bitter upturn of her cracked and pleated lips. "I wanted to see that squirrel's face when I stuck this here carbine under his nose. I never meant to drag you boys into it, Vernon."

"Don't you think it's gone far enough? Come on, Molly. We're old friends. Give me the piece."

She hesitated. Slowly the hard glitter faded from her eyes. Now she was just a tired old woman. At length she lowered the rifle and handed it to him.

Now that the danger was over, the deputy felt no triumph. For a long moment he regarded Molly with compassionate eyes. "What are your plans?" he asked.

"I sent my luggage on to Mexico this morning."

"Mexico? Why Mexico?"

"That's where Clyde and me spent our honeymoon. I got a reservation on a plane leavin' tonight from Tulsa. Don't suppose I'll make it now."

"Not if Leroy decides to press charges."

"That squirrel? Don't worry, he won't do nothin' that might attract the wrong kind of attention." She looked at him apologetically. "I sure am sorry about that busted windshield."

He laughed good-naturedly. "You're good for it, Molly. Besides, the experience was almost worth it." There was an embarrassed silence. Then: "What about Luther Briscoe? What was he going to think when he got back from Kansas and found you gone?"

"That's his business, I expect."

Thickett chose not to press the point. "Well," he drawled, "I'm faced with a decision. I can either put you in jail or drive you into Tulsa in time to catch your plane. Since my duty is to the citizens of Schuylerville, I think I'd be acting in their best interests if I saved them the expense of your room and board and took you into Tulsa."

She placed an affectionate hand on his arm. "You're a good boy, Vernon. I always said that."

It was dusk when Thickett eased the scout car he had borrowed from Luke Madden into the parking slot in front of the sheriff's office and went in. After the long drive back from Tulsa, it felt good to be using his legs again.

Earl Briggs, on his feet behind Thickett's desk, was hanging up the telephone as the chief deputy entered.

"I'm glad you're still here, Earl," Thickett said. "First thing tomorrow morning I want you to get in touch with the Great Midwestern Bank and Trust Company in Oklahoma City and — what is it?"

The look on the boy's face sent a wave of electricity through Thickett's weary limbs.

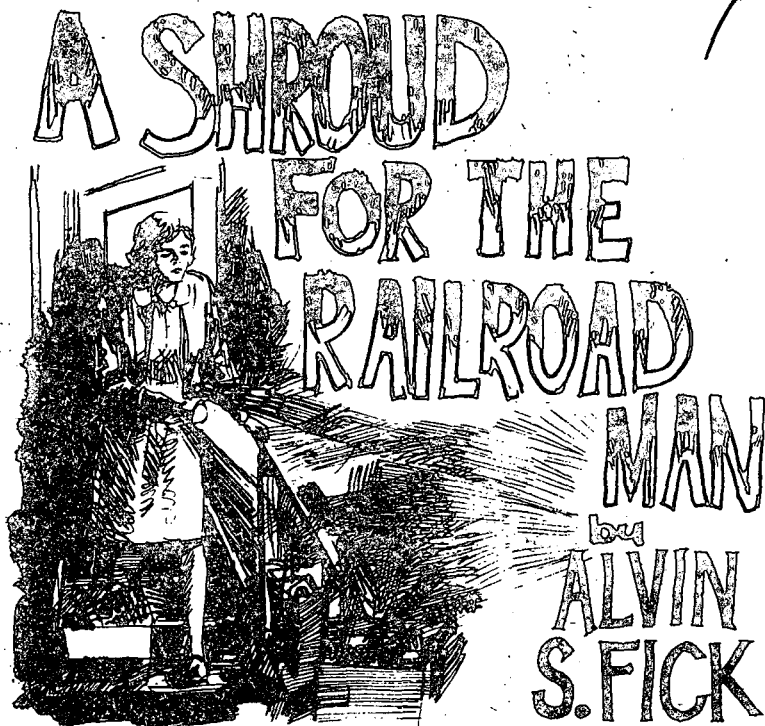
"That was Leroy Cooper," said Earl, inclining his head toward the telephone. "He just got back to find his head cashier tied up and gagged and the rest of his employees locked in the vault. Seems the bank was held up for a quarter of a million dollars while we were all out at Molly's place. You'll never guess who he says did it."

Thickett felt a sinking sensation as the pieces fell into place. He tightened his grip on the doorknob. "Luther Briscoe."

Earl stared at him. "How on earth did you know that?" he said.



It wasn't realism, he insisted, it was reality . . .



When she stopped to think about it, Minerva Ackroyd realized that what she considered the disintegration of her husband had been a long slow process, unrecognized by her for years. It had masqueraded behind the acceptable façade of a hobby.

She sat in the living room of the old two-story house on St. Gauden Street, looking around at the battered furniture, the throw rugs worn through to the jute backing, the pictures cut from magazines hanging

in pitted and cracked secondhand frames. She sighed over the latter, one of her attempts to bring brightness into an atmosphere grown shabbier year by year.

As she rocked she could hear the faint whirrings, the small engine sounds, and now and again a whistle interspersed with vague music. She looked at the eight-day Seth Thomas on the mantel over the false fireplace. It was five o'clock and Ben would be putting on the traffic-noise tape. As soon as his people were home from the factories she might be able to get him to come up to spend twenty minutes hunched over the meal she had heating.

She went out to the kitchen where she took a flashlight from a cupboard. She went down the stairs carefully, picking her way past boxes of discarded track and abandoned rolling stock.

There was a dim, indefinable glow in the cellar from the indirect lighting her husband had installed three years back. He had blocked off all the cellar windows and wired a dimmer switch to the control panel. He had the lights turned to so deep a twilight she could barely make out his form huddled in front of the panel. She paused at the foot of the stairs, turning off the flashlight.

She saw that the street lights were on; and warm yellow light from the windows of most of the homes in the village of Packet bathed trees, shrubbery, and sidewalks. From the light on the back of the school she could see that some kids were playing basketball in the yard. A small girl was still on one of the swings. Minnie caught herself thinking, That's the Jenner girl. She should be home for supper.

Ben Ackroyd, his back to the stairs, was unaware of his wife's presence. He reached out to the panel to convert the cellar to full night. Then he turned his attention to the engine he had unhooked from the freight train now standing on a siding in the Packet yards. He worked controls and switches at the panel until he had backed the engine into the roundhouse. He punched a button which activated a tape recorder in the recesses of the cellar. Traffic noise rose faintly in Packet, swelled in the song of tires on pavement, the acceleration of engines at the three traffic lights in town, and the horn of an impatient driver, then gradually subsided to the sound of an occasional car.

Minnie Ackroyd could feel gooseflesh rising on her arms. Although she had seen her husband's obsession grow from a small layout on a four-by-eight sheet of plywood to this miniature world which com-

pletely filled the cellar of their home, the additions he had made in the past few months heightened the realism to the point of eeriness.

"Ben," she called, "supper's on."

She did not wait for his answer. As she went up the stairs, skirting the cartons which half-blocked the steps, she could hear the rustle of water over the rocks in Devil's Gorge, and the splash of the falls at its mouth.

That night they ate in the silence that had become the one thing they shared fully. Neither anticipated the eruption over finances that shattered that calm.

"That's three times we've had cabbage this week," Ben complained.

"You're lucky."

The bitterness in her voice made him raise his head from his coffee cup. He stared across the table at his wife, who was tearing her paper napkin into small pieces. She placed each piece in a neat pile in the center of her plate.

"Give some thought to how much money you give me to run the house. Think about how much money you have squandered in the cellar. How many steaks could I have bought with what it cost to turn the back bedroom into a utility room so you could have the furnace moved out of the cellar?"

As Minnie Ackroyd piled each piece of napkin on her plate she ticked off another entry in her catalogue of complaints.

After a long pause she said, "I've had half a mind not to tell you how long the taxes have been due. But in spite of the way you've poured money into your hobby and let this house go to ruin, it's still better than sleeping in the street. You'd better give me something for the checking account."

Ben rubbed the side of his jaw with the back of his hand. To his wife he seemed to have shrunk over the years, until now at sixty-three he stood barely to her shoulder. Probably that was from bending over his infernal control panel, she thought, or the hours of scrooching down with his nose to the workbench building railroad cars, houses, and factories. Maybe he was deformed from crawling around in the thicket of legs and braces which supported his scale miles of track and scenery.

She studied his gnomelike face, waiting for his response. Her pulse fluttered like a wild thing in her throat at the sudden thought that he might lose his job. Certainly he was no longer the impressive figure he

was before he was demoted step by step from foreman to sweeper in the knit-goods plant in Culver.

"One thing more." Minnie thrust her chin forward. "The payment is due on your life insurance."

When Ben Ackroyd finally spoke, what he said had no connection with what his wife had been discussing. But that, too, was so typical she scarcely noticed.

"I need an old teaspoon."

"All we have are old ones. What's it for? You making some more plaster-of-paris mountains?" The edge of her tone was blunted against his dreamy calm.

"Old Tim Wakefield died yesterday. The funeral is tomorrow." Ben spoke slowly, pausing and choosing his words like a man crossing a stream and trying to stay on the rocks. "There's real dirt in the Congregational churchyard and I have to dig a grave."

"Tim Wakefield?"

"Tim. He worked on the Blanding and Harriman Railroad as a brakeman for thirty-seven years. He was retired. Used to come down to the village square and sit on one of the benches until it was time for the 7:10 to come through. Then he'd walk down by the station to watch it pass."

Ben brushed the back of his hand over his face. His wife saw a hint of moisture in his eyes.

"I'll miss him," he said. "Now which spoon do you want me to use?"

"Ben, you're carrying this too far. I can understand your desire for realism, but a mock funeral is something else. I . . ."

"Reality, Minnie," he interrupted. "Not realism. Reality."

"There's a real world upstairs here too," she said. "You should start paying some attention to it before it falls in on our heads. Do you realize, Ben Ackroyd, that you have spent enough on engines alone in the past couple of years to put a new roof on this house? But then I suppose it's more important to put a new roof on widow Barth's house in Packet than it is to patch a real roof on your own home. Reality! Why don't you go live in Packet and be done with it?"

"I've thought of it." His soft answer startled her as would a sudden and unexpected thunderclap. He picked up a teaspoon from the table and turned away toward the cellar door.

"After the boys on the night gang unload those freight cars from the

lumberyard, I'll be making up a train for Mason City. Got to pick up seven gondolas at the mine head there. Then I have to. . .” His voice faded as he went down the stairs.

While Minnie Ackroyd stood at the kitchen sink washing supper dishes she could faintly hear organ music and voices raised in a familiar hymn through the open cellar door. It was Wednesday and midweek services were being held in Packet's Congregational Church. In a little while, she knew, the voice of Reverend Doland would rise, exhorting his flock to love of the Lord and fellowman. She wondered if Ben would shut down his track operation to listen while his own voice read one of the several sermons he had written and recorded to give variety to the church services.

Later that evening when she was writing checks to pay the most pressing bills, Minnie mused over the one for \$76.85 to cover the quarterly payment on Ben's \$20,000 life insurance. Maybe if she were honest with herself she would reduce the coverage to match Ben's current value to her. Didn't they do that with cars? She knew you could never collect more than replacement cost, and over the years Ben had shrunk in her eyes from new Cadillac Eldorado to 1950 Nash Metropolitan coupe—both in value and physical stature. She wondered if a person could think himself right off the face of the earth.

On an impulse she brought out a carton from a shelf in the bedroom closet. She spread out on the table old checkbooks going back to her husband's first venture into model railroading. After two hours she felt some ironic satisfaction in a total she wrote on a slip of paper: \$14,834.17.

“Add another four or five thousand for the things he paid for in cash—” She found small solace in saying it aloud. “That's just about the insurance coverage on him,” she mused.

Three weeks later Minnie Ackroyd had a particularly bad day. The toaster erupted in a sizzling blaze of crumbs lodged in its interior and henceforth refused to function. There was no spare fuse to replace the one it blew, although Ben promised to pick up a couple on his way home from work. At ten o'clock the neighborhood grocery informed her they were cutting off credit until the bill was paid in full, and the phone company called and threatened to disconnect the phone.

When she signed for the package delivered by United Parcel Service

at five o'clock Ben was already home from work and in the cellar. He had forgotten the fuses. Had she noticed that the return address was Ben's usual West Coast supplier of expensive super-detailed engines from Japan, she would have refused to accept delivery and sent the neat figure in brown back to his clean brown truck with it.

While she prepared supper, she seethed over the small package on the counter. After fumbling in a cupboard with a flashlight in the growing dusk, she brought in a floor lamp on a long lead from the living room. Ben had not yet switched fuses from an upstairs circuit as she had asked.

Occasionally she heard him moving about in the cellar among his toys, but when she went to the open cellar door all she heard was the small sounds of an HO-scale train running.

She was grateful for the fresh batteries she had stored on a shelf. As she descended the stairs to pry Ben loose from his other life in Packet, she marveled over his ability to move about with so little light. And why, she wondered, was it almost always twilight or nighttime in Packet?

She stopped at the foot of the stairs, the answer coming to her for the first time. The small shielded bulb hung from a floor joist in a far part of the cellar looked precisely like the moon. Its light, combined with the lights in Packet, was not enough to reveal those structural parts of the cellar Ben had not yet camouflaged. It was a master stroke in his process of turning the unreal to real, making the intangible and inanimate come to life.

Usually Ben grumbled when she waved her flashlight about, destroying the mood he nurtured so carefully. She pointed her light to the panel, but he was not there at his customary perch on the high stool. She called twice. All she heard was the tape with its muted music of an elderly Baldwin engine pulling on a long grade in the mountains. Now and again as the train wound through Ben's labyrinth of tunnels, bridges, and crossings, the tape vented the lonesome sound of a steam whistle calling back the past. She tried to follow the light of the engine and lighted cars on their meandering path through the countryside.

It wasn't like Ben to leave the train running while he was away from the panel. She got down on her knees and threaded the flashlight beam slowly through the web of two-by-fours, braces, and wires which gave the world above support and life. Probably he was down there

somewhere fixing a switch, or maybe he was up through one of the trapdoors adjusting scenery. When he did not answer her third call she became alarmed and began to crawl into the warren of wood and wires.

She picked her way carefully, recoiling from cobwebs that brushed her face and became entangled in her hair. Finally she found one of Ben's trapdoors, an access point to trackage. She raised it slowly, playing the beam of light on the miniature world surrounding her. She crouched in fascination as she heard the train approaching from the southeastern corner of the cellar. She switched off her light to watch it pass at eye level.

The cars were lighted. Many of the seats were occupied by tiny passengers. In the aisle of the first car behind the engine a tiny conductor stood as if punching tickets. And in the center of the car she saw Ben's face at a window—shrunk to HO scale, but the half smile unmistakable beneath the unruly thatch of grey hair.

Minnie Ackroyd stared in open-mouthed shock, disbelief, and mounting anger as the train rolled slowly past.

She lowered the trapdoor with a thud. She scuffed along on hands and knees through the maze of wood, twice bumping her head before she emerged near the control panel.

She tried to still her trembling as she sat on Ben's stool. She turned the flashlight on each of the cellar windows with the thought that Ben might have crawled out a window in some weird charade designed to upset her. Although the pieces of plywood were all in place, the thought that her husband was playing tricks on her fueled her anger, an emotion she welcomed to replace the nameless apprehension his disappearance caused.

She turned her flashlight on a tangle of wires fastened to a board above the panel. The light fell on a note taped to a knife switch:

"I have gone for a ride. I'll be coming in on the 7:10. Ben."

"Damn you!" Minnie Ackroyd shouted over the muted sounds of the tape deck. All the frustrations and deprivation of the past years were welded into her anger as she began to click switches and turn dials on the panel. Nothing she did in her fury seemed to change the placid journey of the train through rocky mountain passes, past grassy bottomlands and lonely farmhouses.

Suddenly she remembered a broom stored beneath the stairs. The trembling and uncertainty were submerged beneath new focus and de-

termination as she worked her way between the wall and the huge layout. At last she could reach the area of Devil's Gorge with the broom handle. She dislodged the bridge over the gorge and pushed it aside, muttering, "Four hundred and eighty-three dollars for the fiberglass, the wiring, the plumbing, and the recirculating pump!"

It was with a cold calmness that she returned to the control panel. Under the flashlight beam she began to read the label-tape identification on the toggle switches. Then she found a large knob whose marking was unmistakable. She turned it to the right.

The train speeded up and the stereo tape deck beneath the scenery erupted at full volume.

She covered her ears as the cellar boomed with the sounds of a steam engine in a full voice, its drivers pounding and clanking, the hiss of live steam and clacking wheels nearly lost under the piercing wail of its whistle. Still, she was not prepared for the rending, deafening noise of steel on steel, the rumbling crash which submerged the dying whistle. After a seemingly endless reverberation of wrenched metal and broken glass, there was a sigh of escaping steam.

The tape stopped.

She uncovered her ears and got down from the stool to fumble in the dark for the flashlight she had dropped. At first it would not light, but a sharp rap against the stool brought it to life.

The train was no longer running.

She turned her light to the trestle over Devil's Gorge. As she watched she saw a lone car teeter on the brink of the gorge, then fall into its depths. She could hear water running—running.

Minnie Ackroyd turned off the flashlight. She looked out across the cellar where the moon was shining down on hayfields and wooded slopes. It touched the mountain peaks in the west. The rails gleamed cold silver in its light. In Packet the house lights shed their warm glow, the traffic lights winked from green to amber to red.

Patrolman Deming and Lieutenant Vasey looked around the cellar a last time.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," said Deming.

"Funny what people do with their money," said the lieutenant. He played his flashlight on the braces beneath the world of Packet.

"That must have been some tumble the old gent took coming down

those cellar stairs, to have rolled way under there. No wonder he fell. Look at the boxes and junk on those steps," Vasey added.

"He was sure busted up. Did the coroner say it was a broken neck?"

"He said multiple injuries, including a broken neck. Just like he was in a bad auto accident—or a train wreck."

"What was that she kept saying about a teaspoon when the ambulance took her to the hospital?" Deming asked.

"I guess this thing tipped her over the edge. She wanted a teaspoon to bury her husband. Decently, she said, in the Packet Congregational Churchyard, wherever that is. I wonder what she meant when she said you can't collect \$20,000 for a corpse an inch and a half tall. As batty as she is now, I don't suppose we'll ever know."

After they had locked the house, they sat a few minutes in the patrol car. Lieutenant Vasey chewed on a stub of unlit cigar. "Did you go around and thank the neighbors for calling like I told you?"

Deming nodded. "The doc said yesterday when they took her away she might have sat there forever if somebody hadn't heard that stereo racket."

"Funny thing," Vasey said as Deming started the engine, "what the coroner said about finding traces of water in Ackroyd's lungs. Not enough to cause death, but he can't figure out how it got there."



There was a tax on evil, and T. C. Brock was the devil's own collector . . .

PAINT THE TOWN GREEN

by
ROBERT COLBY



When the plane set down at L.A. International, Brock rented a car and drove to the Beverly Hills Hotel, a rambling cloistered structure in the lush money-green suburbs. By nine o'clock he was checked into one of the private bungalows on the grounds, and within an hour he was placing an ad in the *Los Angeles Times*:

**LARGE CASH SUMS OFFERED
FOR QUICK, SURE PROFITS**

*Out-of-state speculator
with heavy capital reserve
considering unique, exciting
ventures with instant profit
potential. No fast-buck deal
too adventurous.*

*Calls accepted daily between
noon and 2 p.m. only. Ask for
Mr. T. C. Brock.*

At the bottom of the ad he wrote the phone number and paid for a one-week run. Then he checked into another hotel, a towering structure in the heart of L.A. He took a splendid room overlooking the city on the floor just below the top of the building, which was occupied by a skyview restaurant. To this room he brought the fine custom suitcase containing his clothing and other belongings, having left a cheap over-nighter and an attaché case, both weighted with old magazines, at the bungalow. Long experience had taught him that when trouble developed, as it often did, it was best to conduct business in one place and sleep in another.

The next day at noon Brock was in the bungalow screening calls from the hustlers who had read his ad in the paper. Most of the shell-game propositions to take the rich dude from out of town were obvious frauds. There were offers of ready-to-soar mining stocks—gold, diamond, or uranium, take your choice. Land that was fairly bubbling with oil could be leased for a bargain price. The scoop on a fixed horserace was for sale, and there was a matchless opportunity to back a self-proclaimed card shark in a game of high-stakes poker. A map guaranteed to pinpoint the location of buried treasure on an island in the South Pacific was a steal at fifty grand.

Brock wasted no time on these: they were small-time cons with nothing that suited his purpose. He needed the perfect combination.

In the first three days he took only two calls that were intriguing enough to arouse his interest. The first call was from a man with just a hint of Spanish accent. He spoke softly and with soothing charm, in the formal, nearly stilted manner of one who has learned his English in the

old country.

"My name is Carlos," he said. "The last name is difficult and of no importance. The only importance, sir, is the extent of your interest to purchase a quantity of, uh, not so legal items that can be instantly exchanged for a profit ratio in the near vicinity of eight-and-one-half to one."

"Are you going to tell me what you're talking about, or do you want me to guess?"

"On the phone, Mr. Brock, it is not possible to be so very much definite. But let me say further that the items I will exhibit to you for your approval are green in color and of a size to fit the wallet. They are of a quality not to be believed. In fact, without a tiresome study, they cannot be told from the genuine article. Yes?"

"Yes. I'll take a look and decide for myself. Meet me here at my bungalow on the hotel grounds—number fourteen. If you're not here within the hour, I'll be gone."

"I am not far removed," said Carlos. "Half an hour will be sufficient."

The second offer that seemed worthy of at least a look came just a few minutes later. The woman had a cultured, weary way of speaking, as if she had done it all and had it all long ago. Her name was Mila—they rarely gave last names—and she was forced to part with a fabulous diamond ring worth six hundred thousand for a paltry four hundred grand. The ring had been a gift from her husband and she had told him that she had lost it. Though he was an extremely rich man he refused to give her more than a meager amount of money to spend, and this was her way of getting the cash she needed to cover some pressing personal debts.

The story was probably a fabrication, but diamonds never lie to people who understand them and, telling the lady to stop by with the gem in exactly two hours, he put down the phone and began a regal lunch, delivered complete with a frosty martini, by room service.

A wiry man of medium height, Brock seemed always a bit wide-eyed, his expression slightly startled, as if he were a visitor in an alien land which he found full of curious and entertaining surprises. His manner of dress, though somewhat excessive, was grand. Against the background of a midnight-blue suit, he wore a pearl-grey tie that was fastened with an emerald-studded pin. His gold wristwatch was embel-

lished by a dial of ruby chips, and his outsized diamond ring had the wink of superb quality.

Carlos arrived just as a waiter was removing the debris of Brock's lunch. A small neat man with a small neat mustache, he had jet-dark hair, mild coffee-colored eyes and an apologetic smile. He was impeccable in a beige gabardine suit with stitched lapels and leather-trimmed pockets. He said he came from Bogota, and there was about him the quiet, well-mannered air of Latin aristocracy. Chatting easily, in no apparent haste to transact his business, he told Brock he had once been in partnership with his father, an exporter of coffee to the U.S. and other countries.

"For a long time," said Carlos with one of his apologetic smiles, "my father's business of exporting the coffee was truly magnificent. Then it became very bad, you see. And my father, he began to export in secret a few drugs—the heavy stuff—you know? He was soon caught and sent to prison where, sadly I must tell you, he died."

Carlos smiled in a way that was appropriately sad. "I was not used to poverty, could not abide with it," he continued. "So now I make my living where you find the much greener pastures, on the other side of the fence." With a twinkle he lowered his head in a mock attitude of shame.

Probably, thought Brock, the superfluous charm and small-talk concealed as wily a rascal as could be found anywhere. "All right," he said, "let's see what you're selling."

"Pardon?"

"Did you bring it with you—the funny-money?"

"Funny-money?" Carlos presented a face of round-eyed innocence.

"Carlos, don't waste my time with games."

"Very well. But how do I know you are not the police?"

"Counterfeiting comes under the jurisdiction of the Secret Service. And the boys of the S.S. don't usually advertise to catch criminals."

Carlos nodded. "Yes, I suppose not. In any case, I have brought nothing with me to sell, only samples."

He removed three bills from an envelope he took from his pocket and handed them over. There was a twenty, a fifty, and a hundred. The texture of the paper was excellent. It was aged just enough to give it the authentic feel of usage. More, the color of the ink was exact, and with the naked eye Brock could not find the least imperfection in the

engraving of the bills. Only after he examined them minutely with a pocket magnifying glass under a strong light did he spot the single flaw—the absence of red and blue fibers in the paper.

"Well, what do you think?" said Carlos. "Are they not beautiful?"

"They appear to be quite good," Brock said carefully, though he had never seen better and doubtless they would be accepted by anyone but an expert who had been forewarned. "Where did you get them?"

Carlos shrugged. "The details, no. But I will tell you this much: the bills were shipped from my country where we have some of the world's finest paper and inks—and a retired engraver who fashioned plates for the U.S. government before he entered our service."

"A former U.S. engraver, huh?" Brock snorted. "And how much can you deliver?"

"At once, three hundred thousand. More in a week or two."

"Mmm. And what is your price?"

"Fifteen percent of face value. Forty-five thousand for the three hundred grand."

It was a good price. Fakes of that quality were so rare that Carlos could ask and get twenty percent. But to test him, Brock shook his head. "Too much. Ten percent—thirty thousand for three hundred of the bogus."

Carlos looked wounded. "But surely, Mr. Brock, you will not haggle with me over bills of such perfection. They will pass anywhere, even in the banks. No, fifteen percent is entirely fair and I will stand firm."

"You're right," said Brock. "I shouldn't haggle with you, and I won't."

Carlos beamed.

"So I'll just say once more—thirty thousand. That's my final offer." He stood and fastened Carlos with the unblinking gaze of relentless decision.

Carlos went through the motions. He groaned, sighed, pursed his lips, and made a pretense of calculation with his fingers. Then, clucking, his face agonized, he slowly nodded and said, "You are a hard man, sir. You leave me just the small margin of profit. But yes, because I have many obligations at this time, I will deal with you on your terms. Thirty thousand it is."

Brock shook his hand and said, "Bring the phonies here tonight at nine. If they're identical to these samples, we'll make the exchange."

"What you ask is impossible, sir," Carlos said, plucking the samples from Brock's fingers and tucking them into his pocket. "Even when we are most sure, as with a man of your distinction, we never take chances. No, you will come to us, and if we are certain you are entirely alone the transaction will be completed."

"Well, I have little time for such nonsense, but the bills seem good enough to warrant some inconvenience."

Carlos handed him a typewritten slip of paper. "At nine tonight, then."

Brock glanced at the address and nodded. "At nine."

"And the thirty thousand in U.S. legal? You will have it with you?"

"Naturally."

With a fine show of teeth Carlos stepped to the door, flipped a salute, and went out.

Brock ordered another martini from room service. Sipping it as he waited for "Mila," the lady with the diamond, he reflected on his dialogue with Carlos. Since the bills were incredibly good imitations, he would never let them go for ten percent of face value. Therefore, he must be working some sort of flim-flam. Well, each to his own game. And his own reward.

Mila was on time. Her knock had the sound of delicate intrigue. A slender young woman with a dainty kind of elegance, she had tawny hair parted in the middle and gathered to one side. Her sleepy eyes and dreamy smile made him wonder if she might be flying on something with narcotic wings. She wore an expensively tailored grey suit that seemed incongruously severe.

"Are you Mr. Brock? My name is Mila." Her speech was over-polished, as if by years of exposure to people of quality and education.

"Come in," he said, and she entered a bit wearily, or timidly—she wasn't an easy person to read. She floated across the room to a chair, her delicate shoulders curved in a languid slouch.

"Would you like something—a cocktail?"

"No, thank you, I don't drink."

"Well, for some people that's wise, I think." He sat facing her.

She toyed with the clasp of her gun-metal leather purse. "I don't usually answer ads of any sort, Mr. Brock. But yours was irresistible. And quite providential under the circumstances."

"I imagine."

Her drowsy eyes wandered over him. "What sort of business are you in?"

"Various investments, speculations."

"I gathered that from your ad. Would you care to be more specific?"

"No."

"I see. Well, I mean, if you're serious about buying the—"

"Mila—if I wanted seriously to buy a costly ring at Tiffany's, what would they require of me?"

She smiled. "Maybe they would extend credit."

"Will you?"

She shook her head. "Naturally, I must have cash."

"Then it's that simple. You want to sell and I have the cash."

Nodding, she opened her purse and handed him a black-velvet box. He lifted the lid and removed the ring, a large pear-shaped stone of fiery brilliance and exquisite cut. Fingering it, finding it cool to the touch, he carried it to the window and drew it across the pane, leaving a sharp clear line where the stone cut the glass. As he studied the impression the diamond had left, he caught sight of two young men who were standing together in front of the opposite bungalow. Dressed in sportcoats and slacks, they seemed merely guests making idle conversation. But Brock's nearly infallible instinct told him they were stationed there as guards to be sure he didn't try to grab the ring, and that likely they were carrying weapons.

Now, with his own diamond, Brock tried to scratch Mila's stone. It was impossible. Inserting a piece of white notepaper beneath the gem, he peered into its center with a magnifying glass, checking color and purity. Then, as he held the ring in the palm of his hand feeling the weight of it and discounting the setting, he decided that the stone was probably worth the four hundred thousand she was asking, and a good deal more. Certainly it was the most beautiful diamond he had ever examined at close range, and there had been many.

"Of course, I don't have enough magnification to be certain," he said as he sank back into his chair and gazed appreciatively at the ring, "but it seems a nearly flawless blue brilliant. Very nice."

"My husband bought it in Europe," she said. "It should be worth more in this country. It weighs nearly fifty carats."

"Well, I don't have the instruments to check it, so I would have to get it appraised."

She looked dismayed.

"Really, you wouldn't expect me to invest that kind of money without an appraisal," he said.

She nodded. "But I can't possibly let the ring out of my sight."

"No, that would be foolish." He considered. "There's a jeweler right here in the hotel. Why don't we take a little walk and see if he can give us an evaluation."

She thought about it, anxious-eyed, biting her lip. "Well, all right—yes, we could do that."

He stood and gave her the ring. "Shall we go then?"

They left the bungalow. The two young men in sportjackets, lean-bodied, hard-faced, were now head-to-head, studying what seemed a racing form. As they gestured and made comments, one of them darted a glance at him. He wondered if they were hired guards or accomplices. In any case, they were sure to follow.

Mila walked beside him in silence, her tension almost palpable. They entered the hotel. He sensed the watchdogs behind him but did not turn. They went down a flight of stairs to the arcade, following it past assorted shops to the jewelry store.

Mila spoke to the clerk and handed over the ring. For a few seconds he gave it a cursory examination through his loupe. When he removed the eyepiece, his expression was one of contained awe. He flicked a calculating glance at Mila as if trying to match the royal quality of the diamond with the woman who owned it. But then his face became bland and he said, "I'm not prepared to give you a formal appraisal, just an estimate."

Mila looked at Brock, who nodded and said, "For now that would do."

The jeweler removed the stone from its setting and inspected it at length under intense light. He measured it with calipers and weighed it on a scale, jotting figures on a scrap of paper. After pondering over his notations, he returned the gem to its setting and came back with the ring.

"It's a beauty," he said with an approving shake of his head. "I'd say somewhere between six and seven hundred thousand. Call it six-fifty, roughly."

As she carefully tucked the ring back into the velvet box, Mila looked at Brock with an I-told-you-so expression.

Back outside, he spotted her protectors. Not far removed, they stood gazing into a shop window, faking an enthusiastic discussion of the items on display.

"You've got a deal," Brock said. "It's only a matter of price."

"You don't like the price!" She looked indignant. "Mr. Brock, didn't you just hear the man say—"

"I heard him, yes."

"Well, then—isn't it an absolute *steal* at four hundred thousand?"

"A steal, yes. No doubt. Then why do you come to me? Why don't you sell it to a commercial buyer of diamonds at four hundred, or even better?"

Her face sagged. "You know very well that I can't. They ask questions. For a ring worth more than half a million, they want proof of ownership. And only my husband could give them that."

"Exactly."

"So you're ready to take advantage."

"I'm in business to take advantage."

She sighed. "How much, then?"

"Let me think about it. Phone me here at nine in the morning. That will give me time to make arrangements with the bank."

Her lips tightened. "Well, I won't come down much, I'll tell you that. And it must be cash, no checks of any kind."

"Cash, of course."

"Very well, I'll phone you at nine sharp."

"If you don't mind, I won't see you out. I want to stop off at the barber shop."

"Goodbye, Mr. Brock."

Her dreamy expression gone a bit sour, she turned and walked off, clipping past the bodyguards. As Brock went into the barber shop and sneaked a look, they lost interest in the window display and sauntered after her.

He lingered a minute and followed, heading for the lobby. It was a lucky guess. They were there, the three of them huddled in a corner, conversing. Anticipating their departure, he ducked out a side door, found his car in the parking area, and drove it up near the exit. Folded down behind the wheel, two cars in front screening him, he saw them come out, separately—Mila first, her boys behind. The boys went off in a white Ford sedan, she left in a taxi.

He tailed the cab cautiously to the estates of Bel-Air and hung well back as it climbed a road embowered by huge old trees, hemming the houses of the rich and the mansions of the very rich. He could see Mila through the back window of the cab. She didn't turn once to look back, though probably in the unfamiliar car and wearing his sun glasses she wouldn't have recognized him.

Soon the taxi wheeled left into a private driveway, and he braked to wait. When the cab returned, he drove on, taking a look at the house as he passed. It was a great library of a place, barely visible from the road. High and square and formal, it sat atop a knoll, neatly combed grounds spilling green around it.

Just beyond, he maneuvered about and parked. As he sat thinking what to do next, a gardening truck slid out of the drive that had swallowed the cab and came toward him. He got out and flagged it down. The driver was an old guy with a craggy pleasant face. Brock asked him if he worked for the people in the library-type mansion. He said yes, but only once a week. He was an itinerant gardener with other customers in the neighborhood. He had a crew and a couple of his men were on a job down the road. He was on his way to pick them up. Yes, he knew all about the people up there on the knoll, but he was in a hurry. Brock asked him if twenty bucks would buy about ten minutes. He grinned and cut the motor, then motioned for Brock to sit on the seat beside him.

The lady who owned the place was a Mrs. Alberta Wilmont. Before he died, her husband ran a shipping company—freighters. He left her millions. No, the young woman who just arrived in a taxi was not Mrs. Wilmont, she was Marian Ainsworth, a kind of secretary-companion who was distantly related to Alberta Wilmont.

"Did Mrs. Wilmont ever own a diamond ring that was stolen?"

"You bet she did! The ring was worth a fortune. About a month ago, while everyone was away from the house, burglars broke in. How they did it without tripping the alarm system nobody can figure. The thieves drilled the safe, swiped the ring and some less valuable jewelry, and a few hundred in cash. It was front-page stuff in the paper."

Brock asked a few more questions, gave the gardener the twenty, and twenty more to keep his mouth shut. Then he hustled away to the newspaper office and combed back issues until he found the account of

the burglary. This done, he made a number of calls and finally hit what could be the jackpot.

Shortly before nine that evening, with just a few magazines locked in his attaché case, he drove toward the address Carlos had given him. It was an apartment house in an old section of Hollywood on a narrow street above Franklin. The building was large and might once have been magnificent, but now its crusty façade cried neglect and despair, most of the windows dark, the entrance bleakly lighted.

He found an alley that led to a subterranean garage below the apartment house and drove down the ramp. He was in a gloomy dungeon of pillared space, empty but for a pair of junkyard heaps in a corner, squatting beside a late-model black Cadillac. Parking next to the Cadillac he climbed out cautiously with the attaché case. Clutching the grip of a holstered .38 revolver, one of several weapons he had collected from a long string of bad boys, he stood motionless, listening. The silence was so dense within the cavernous garage he could hear a distant murmur of traffic, the bleating of a horn.

Peering inside the Cadillac he circled quietly to the front and reached under it to test the radiator. It was warm, almost hot. Someone had arrived not long before.

On rubber-soled shoes he crossed the garage and came to the mouth of a dim corridor. Pausing again to listen, he moved on—past the doorways of a shadowy boiler room and a gutted laundry to an elevator. The car was somewhere above but there was no indicator to show its location.

He pressed the button and heard the creak and whine of the elevator's descent. In the wan light the scabby cement walls displayed a nearly endless scrawl of graffiti. Cobwebs nestled in corners, a light fixture dangled, the rank odor of urine invaded the torpid air.

When the approaching mutter of the car told him it was near, he stepped aside, out of range. But when it opened, the elevator was empty. Brock thumbed the "7" button, though Carlos' slip of paper designated apartment 8E.

The elevator rattled slowly up to the seventh floor and stopped. He was greeted by a dark, fetid corridor of doors flung wide open upon vacant apartments. Gaping in wonder, he crossed the threadbare remnant of a carpet, found the stairway, and mounted soundlessly to the eighth. Here he cracked the door and peeked out.

Under the subdued light from overhead fixtures, the eighth and top floor seemed clean and tidy enough, the carpet in good repair, the brown doors to the apartments sealed. Puzzling it, Brock concluded that the rest of the building was probably abandoned. As he stopped to consider his strategy, he saw Carlos hurry around a bend in the corridor and come to stand, head inclined, at the elevator.

He looked so foolishly ineffectual and unfrightening that Brock wanted to laugh out loud. Instead he moved quietly up behind him and dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Carlos snapped around, wild-eyed, his jaw dropping in terror.

"Looking for me, Carlos?" Brock grinned.

Carlos groaned. "What the hell you doing, man! I thought you were—"

"An undercover agent of the S.S. Right, Carlos?"

He nodded. "Yeah, something like that. I am looking to see why you don't show," he said.

"I couldn't find 8E," Brock said. "I must've been going the wrong way."

"Ah, well—no problem," Carlos answered. "Come—" He had been staring with fascination at Brock's case and as they moved down the hallway he asked nervously, "You have brought the money?"

Brock gave the case an affectionate pat. "Thirty big ones. And you have the queers?"

"The queers?" His expression flickered, brightened. "The phonies, ah yes, of course!" He gave a dental exhibition. "They are in the apartment, where we shall make the exchange."

He led Brock to the rear of the building and turned into a narrow passage. It terminated at the point where the doors to apartments 8E and 8F faced each other across a faded strip of carpet. The hall, lit by a single naked bulb, was dim. The air had a musty smell, tainted with something indefinable, like molding garbage.

They were at the door to 8E, Carlos bringing out a set of keys, Brock telling himself that he would not go into the apartment unless he entered with an arm locked about Carlos' neck, the .38 visibly pressing his head, when he sensed a movement and turned swiftly. Behind him, the door to 8F had been opened and an enormous Latin towered above him, grimacing fiercely as he hoisted a baseball bat and slammed it down.

Brock had begun to duck out of range or the blow would have crushed his skull. Instead, it glanced thunderously off the back of his head, dropping him to the floor.

Vaguely focused, his eyes opened upon a hazy scene. He was floating above a shimmering landscape. There was a blur of twinkling buildings and streets while below, dim and far away, a pool of white circled and tilted. It appeared to grow toward him, then recede, as if seen through binoculars that would not adjust. And he could feel the hard thrust of something against his chest.

In the background voices drifted to him, as from a radio badly tuned. Carlos was pleading with someone called Mario, saying it wasn't necessary to kill the man, just take his money and run. But Mario said no, it was too risky. "No, Carlos, this mama is gonna commit suicide. He's gonna fly down from that window and—squash!—you got a bird who sings no songs!"

Brock got the message. And fear jabbing him to life, he brought it all into focus. He was draped over a window sill, gazing down a perpendicular wall to a moon-washed court eight stories below. The tilting, spinning face of the court, composed of unrelenting cement, winked at him.

But even as this understanding jolted and sickened him, Mario reached down and scooped him up with ridiculous ease. Poising himself, aiming Brock at the open mouth of the window, he did not notice that while one of Brock's hands dangled limply the other was under his jacket, bending the barrel of the .38 toward the great mass of his chest.

Brock squeezed the trigger—once, twice, and again, knowing that while the big ones may fall harder, they do not always fall faster. No doubt the first bullet was an incredible surprise, for Mario simply stood rooted, as if considering the impossibility of it, his eyes dilating with astonishment. The second shot caused him to stumble backward, and the third buckled him slowly to the floor. Only then, with a mortal sigh, did he liberate Brock from the clutch of his arms.

Carlos tried to run, but Brock caught him at the door and ordered him at gun point to empty Mario's pockets and bring him the contents. The dead man was carrying \$6,700 in hundred-dollar bills that proved, after close examination, to be genuine U.S. green. Carlos, on the other hand, was in possession of only ninety dollars.

"Carlos," Brock said sternly as he pocketed the bills, "I've been thinking seriously of killing you, and this doesn't help your cause."

Seated on the floor, hands laced behind his neck, Carlos had been watching with resignation, as one who hopes for nothing but to survive. His face flashing alarm, he said tremulously, "I have little money because in the organization of the counterfeiting I am only a passer of the bills. Mario was in charge of the passers and the money in his wallet was to pay us our humble percentage."

Brock made a clucking sound. "How sad." Gingerly, he felt the lump on the back of his head. "You may lower your hands now, Carlos, and you may smoke. A condemned man is always entitled to a last cigarette."

Carlos gave him a look of such gaping horror that Brock decided to ease off a bit. "However," he added, "if you can find some way to repay me for this night of treachery, I might be persuaded to change my mind."

"Anything—anything at all that you wish," Carlos said feverishly.

"What did you do with my case, Carlos?"

He pointed. "Over there in the closet. It is locked and we could not open it."

"And where is the three hundred thousand in bogus?"

Carlos hesitated and Brock leveled the .38. "Hurry, Carlos, I'm aching to kill you!"

"No, no! The bills are down in the trunk of Mario's Cadillac. He was supposed to distribute them to the passers later tonight."

Brock reached for a set of keys resting on the floor with the assorted items Carlos had taken from Mario. "You'd better not be lying," he warned. "Let's go and see."

Toting his attaché case, he descended with Carlos to the garage. One of Mario's keys opened the trunk of the Cadillac, and when the lid was raised there was indeed a carton holding three hundred grand in bogus bills. Brock ordered Carlos to transfer the carton to the trunk of his rented sedan. When this was done he locked the attaché case in with the counterfeits and gave Carlos the keys to the Cadillac.

"Because you tried to prevent Mario from killing me," he told Carlos, "I'll make you a present of his car. You're a pussycat in a jungle and I'd advise you to get out of this racket and into plumbing, or some-

thing equally suited to your talents. At heart, Carlos, you're not a bad little fellow, and in fact I've become rather fond of you."

"You are fond of me? Truly?"

"Truly." Brock nodded solemnly. He opened the door of his rental, climbed in, and wound the motor.

"You are a strange man," said Carlos. "Most remarkable. But really, who are you, sir?"

"There's a tax on evil, and I'm the devil's own collector," Brock answered with a wisp of a smile. He backed and drove off.

Marian Ainsworth, alias Mila, phoned him the next morning on the dot of nine. "Three hundred thousand," he said.

"No."

"In cash."

"Well—"

"It'll take time for the bank to get that much money together. Be here at four this afternoon."

"I can't make it until eight this evening."

"At eight sharp, then." He cut the connection.

She was a few minutes early. When he opened the door and she stepped in, he spied her accomplices lingering in the shadows. A hundred to one they were the burglars who stole the ring—with her blueprint of the alarm system, and at a time when she told them the mansion would be empty.

She was wearing a black-lace cocktail dress. She looked stunning. Was there to be a little party to celebrate the split of a hundred grand apiece?

She stood fidgeting at the center of the room, her eyes screaming her haste.

Enjoying it, he said, "A little drink? To toast our transaction?"

"I told you, I don't drink!" she snapped.

"Ah, that's right. Too bad."

"Have you got the cash?"

"Have you got the ring?"

She dipped into her black-beaded evening bag and passed him the velvet box. It was the same diamond, he determined that immediately, but pretending to suspect otherwise he tested and inspected it with even more care than he had the first time.

"The money is in that overnighter," he told her finally, pointing to the chair where he had left it. "You may keep the bag—I'll toss it in as a bonus."

Counting the cash, she was intensely concentrated, her face taking on a feral quality. Before she began, she selected several bills from random stacks and examined them closely. But, apparently satisfied, she went on to count the bills with furious speed, then nodded and said with a hectic smile, "Well, it seems to be all here!"

She picked up the bag and all but bolted for the door, where she turned and said, "Now you own a diamond valued at more than half a million dollars, Mr. Brock. All you have to do is find someone to buy it. Mmm?"

She went out.

She was right, of course. It would be difficult to find anyone who would buy the ring at full price, no questions asked. But then, he had never intended to sell it. The diamond in his pocket, he hurried to the desk and paid his bill. He hunted his rental in the parking area, found it, backed, and turned to drive away.

Just then Marian Ainsworth's accomplices loomed up out of the darkness. One at each side of the car, they aimed pistols at him. "O.K., buddy, let's have the ring!" barked the one at his window.

"Don't get nervous, boys," he soothed. "I've got it right here in my pocket."

It was suicide to reach for his gun so he brought the box out and started to hand it over. But then, with a trembling hand, he faked dropping the box to the floor. Bending to recover it, he rammed the pedal and gunned off blindly. They both fired at him, almost together. But they were too late.

He sat up just in time. The car was veering off toward a tree as it raced down the drive to the street. He straightened the wheel, braked a bit, and glanced into the rearview mirror. They were jockeying the white Ford out of a parking slot, coming after him. He cut north into a cloistered residential section of fine old houses, squealing around a series of corners.

It was no use. They were trailing him through every turn, hardly a block behind. He thought of braking suddenly and leaping out with his gun to fire at them but changed his mind when, losing them for a moment as he wheeled around a tight curve, he spotted the tip of a

driveway that vanished between a gateway of tall hedges. He swung into it at reckless speed, yawing dangerously, correcting, erasing his lights, slowing as he climbed and swept around to the house, a pillared old colonial.

There was a garage with its door open and a vacant space inside. He slid into it, cut the motor, and listened. Nothing. He had lost them. But now, from a window somewhere above, came the shrill voice of a woman calling, "Is that you, Walter?"

He was seated at a partitioned booth in a secluded corner of the restaurant atop the hotel where he had his getaway room. He had told the hostess that a Mr. Arnold Bevis would be looking for him shortly, and now he was sipping a Manhattan, winding down, feeling good.

He had just ordered another when a plump little man with a Vandyke beard bustled over at the heels of the hostess. "I'm Arnold Bevis," he said, and flashed a smile. They shook hands and Bevis squeezed in across the table, setting a briefcase on the cushion beside him. The waitress delivered Brock's second Manhattan and he asked, "Will you have one with me, Mr. Bevis?"

Bevis shook his head. "No, thanks. I have an appointment with Alberta Wilmont and there isn't time."

The waitress departed and Brock said, "You told Mrs. Wilmont you've recovered the ring?"

"I told her we *thought* we had recovered it. And now, if you will, Mr. Brock, let's see if we have."

Brock produced the velvet box, opened it, and slid it across to Bevis, who brought implements from his briefcase and, after testing to be sure the diamond was genuine, removed it from its setting, weighed, and measured it. "Did you know, Mr. Brock," he said, "that like fingerprints no two diamonds are alike? When we insure a diamond, we chart all of its individual characteristics. That way, there can be no mistake about its identity."

He wrote figures in a notebook, fixed a loupe to his eye, and, studying the diamond in the light from the table lamp, continued to make notes. Finally, he took an insurance appraisal form from his case and compared it with his notations.

Nodding, he said, "Yes, this is our baby all right." He returned the stone to its setting, put his tools away, and stared curiously at Brock.

"I looked up your ad in the *Times* and I can see how it would attract those two who stole the ring. But how did you get it away from them without giving them the money?"

"That's a trade secret, Mr. Bevis. But I'll say this much—I had to do some fast shuffling to escape them. And if I didn't have the devil's own luck, I wouldn't be sitting here waiting for you to bless me with the reward."

Bevis took a check from his case and passed it to Brock with a release form. "Fifty thousand is a very large sum. We seldom pay rewards in excess of five percent and I had a tough time getting approval from my company—especially since you were in a hurry."

Brock looked at the check and signed the release. "I'm always in a hurry, Mr. Bevis. The coals are hot and I have to jump fast."

"And so do I. I'm running late." Sealing the ring and the release in his briefcase, Bevis eased himself from the booth. "You know, I never will understand how the burglars were able to silence a complex alarm system and break in at the precise time when everyone was out. It makes me wonder if somebody was feeding them information."

"That's possible," said Brock.

"You'll give a description of those hoods to the police, won't you?"

"Of course," Brock lied.

Bevis shook his hand and disappeared.

Brock sipped his Manhattan and gazed out through the wall of glass at the gaudy splash of the night city. Let the cops uncover Marian Ainsworth if they could. She was a crook and her choice of playmates was atrocious. But she was a beauty with plenty of style. Under other circumstances. . . .

He shook his head. In the morning he would fly to Alaska. As the foreman of a welding crew working the pipeline he would be on leave in Fairbanks with great wads of accumulated pay to spend. The hustlers of that amoral outpost in the wilderness would be lurking there, just waiting for a sucker like him. And his rewards would be extravagant.

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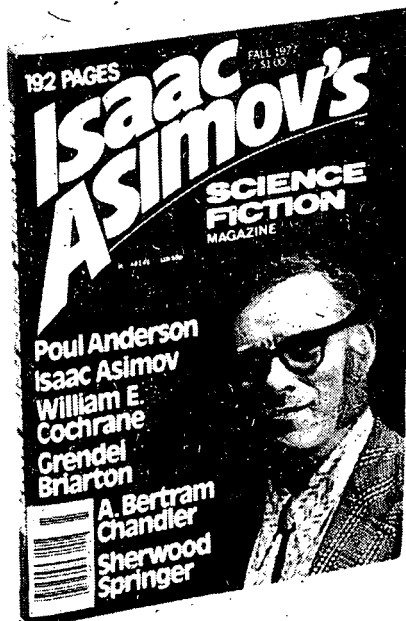
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