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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

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November 1977

Dear Reader:

Astrologers see November as the month of Scorpio, and while Scorpios have been characterized as honest, loyal, and wise, they are also described as dangerous—as men and women who often like to disguise themselves, who have poker faces and nerves of steel, and whose eyes have a hypnotic intensity.

Consider then, as you read this issue, which character or characters in each of the stories are likely to be the Scorpios, the November-born, those who, according to Linda Goodman in her popular astrological guide, *Sun Signs,* frequently instill in the rest of us awe, respect—and fear.

Speaking of which, it's time to turn to page 5 and Nedra Tyre's walloping little story, *Fear.*

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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The terror had had such an innocent origin . . .

Where did the terror come from?

Why did she feel that every step led to her annihilation?

It was just an early-morning walk that took Ellen Anderson from her cherished husband to her cherished employer.

Many women rose from the beds they shared with their husbands, dressed themselves and went to work, exactly as she did.

Her situation was commonplace. Then why did her walk to work fill

her with dread?

Fear stalked her the moment she left the apartment house. Fear was a vicious mongrel and she was a small terrified animal being tracked by it, about to be snapped in its jaws at any moment.

Her walk was rather long, about three miles, beginning two blocks from the edge of the university campus where she and her husband Victor lived. Her route was west, past substantial town houses, then south through slums, then all the way across a vast park and into a suburban area of large estates, one of which was her destination.

The first morning she had tried to reach Dr. Arnold's house by using the city transit system. But that required two transfers and long waits between connecting buses so that she didn't arrive until after nine. Dr. Arnold was an early riser and began work at seven-thirty. It pleased him that she was willing to report at seven-thirty. The early hour didn't bother her. She rose at seven, had a quick shower, dressed and had a glass of orange juice, then walked from her apartment to Dr. Arnold's office on the university campus in five minutes. But that was before Dr. Arnold's illness. Now he no longer came to the campus and Ellen walked to his house in the suburbs. She got up at six instead of seven.

She could have taken a taxi, but the taxi service in Kingborough was notoriously erratic and even more notoriously expensive, and it seemed a vast waste of money. Not that money was of any concern to her, at least if her Aunt Martha's lawyer knew what he was talking about. As a matter of fact, money wasn't of concern to her in any case since she earned as much as an associate professor in her job as executive assistant to Dr. Arnold, the president of the university.

She could have asked Victor to take her and he would have done so gladly. But he didn't go to his office until nine, and he often worked very late at night and needed his rest in the morning. Besides, it would be tactless of her to ask him to take her to Dr. Arnold's. She had given Victor her car after they were married, insisting she didn't need it at all. It had been convenient to have when she drove up on weekends to stay with her Aunt Martha in Concord, but after her aunt had died Ellen had seldom driven the car. Everything was at hand in the university complex—movies, newsstands, book shops, concert halls, supermarkets, liquor stores, dress shops, flower stalls. Victor was more than welcome to her car. Anyway, she had her two legs, and

walking was good for one. You couldn't pick up a magazine or a paper without being admonished to exercise, and walking was said to be the best exercise of all.

Perhaps if she had had to walk both ways, she might have felt imposed upon, but there were convenient bus connections in the late afternoon.

At first she hadn't felt any fear at all. On the contrary, the long walk had been stimulating. It was interesting to be out so early and to saunter past the attractive town houses.

The street lamps illuminated her progress enough so that she was warned of steep curbs or an uneven sidewalk, and every now and then she passed a paperboy flinging papers toward the dark houses or the driver of a milk truck sprinted in front of her to set containers on a porch.

Past the handsome town houses, the slums were like open wounds. Everything was laid bare. Unhinged doors gaped onto endless dark halls. There were broken windows and sagging blinds and yards blemished by trash and discarded toys, smashed liquor bottles, and buckled beer cans.

When the derelict houses were behind Ellen, she entered the park—at a vulnerable and unprotected time. Used to crowds of people, designed for the pleasure of many, it had an aloofness, even arrogance, when it was trespassed by a person all alone. And yet Ellen was sure it could never be more beautiful. She walked along the paths that led past the two lakes. The empty park held magic. As the sharp wind struck her, she felt as if she were a child again, living in the fantasy of a fairy story. She was Red Riding Hood on the way to visit her grandmother, she was Goldilocks about to arrive at the house of the three bears, or perhaps the woods and briars would close in upon her and she would be Sleeping Beauty dreaming away the decades until the prince came to wake her.

From the cinder and stone walks of the park she crossed over to the solid squares of pavement leading past houses that seemed as vacant and forbidding as mansions in gothic romances, but must be lived in by ordinary people to exhibit such well trimmed lawns and symmetrical hedges.

And as she became more accustomed to her route, the distance seemed shorter. Sometimes she hurried the last quarter mile in her

eagerness to reach Dr. Arnold and begin work. She rang the bell to the side entrance. Mrs. Greene, Dr. Arnold's housekeeper, admitted her. The two women had coffee together and after they had rinsed their cups in the sink, Ellen went upstairs to Dr. Arnold's study. Though she had been away from him for only a short time, it shocked her to look at him. The night had robbed him of whatever frail strength he had. His will power was keeping him alive so that he could finish his history of the university, and he was depending on her help. She must not disappoint him.

What was best about her walks in the brisk biting cold was the welcome time they gave her to assimilate the astonishing events that had so recently changed her life.

First her beloved Aunt Martha had died. Ellen's parents had died when she was fifteen, and afterward Ellen and her aunt had been very close. But Aunt Martha had a talent for closeness. It sometimes seemed to Ellen when she visited her aunt's house in Concord that Aunt Martha was close to everyone in the town and county. Her house buzzed with guests and callers. There were no secrets between the two women and Ellen knew that her aunt had very little money with which to dispense her hospitality, but she loved entertaining people and had a knack for stretching food and drink. No one ever left her house unsatisfied.

"Darling," she often said to Ellen, "if only I had something to leave you besides this big barn of a place and all these worthless acres."

And she had contrived to make Ellen an heiress. A few days before her sudden death from a heart attack, Aunt Martha had disposed of her property. The house and its surrounding land were to be made into a suburban shopping center and the area around the lake would be converted into a resort. But for all Ellen knew, the settlement might require years.

Dr. Arnold had told Ellen to take all the time she needed when her aunt died, and when she returned to Kingborough she learned that he was in the hospital. She rushed to see him and he appeared forlorn and stranded on his tall, narrow bed surrounded by stiff, formal bouquets and screens and walls plastered with get-well cards.

She had cried when he told her he had terminal cancer. Her tears made him angry. He had never been angry with her before. "Damn it, Ellen, you shame me with your sentimentality. I've had a wonderful

life. I've had everything I wanted. I've been president of the university my forebears founded, and I've got a fine son to carry on after me. I've just one last wish and with your help I can make it come true. I want to finish my history of the university."

Her tears increased from a discreet trickle to uncontrolled splashes.

"A man has to die of something," he said sternly.

Once he was out of the hospital, he moved from the president's house on the campus to his suburban estate, and Ellen left his suite of offices in the Administration Building to work with him in his upstairs study. They were astonished at how well the history went away from the constant telephone calls and faculty meetings, campus crises and continuous visitors.

Before fear snatched her quiet contemplation during her morning walks, Ellen had thought even more of Victor than of her aunt and Dr. Arnold. How little she knew Victor in comparison with them. Yet her commitment to him was deeper and stronger. She wanted to learn everything about him from his first memory as a child to the day of their marriage. At the moment nothing mattered except that she was in love with him.

Their meeting had been commonplace enough. It had occurred while Dr. Arnold was still in the hospital. Victor had telephoned to say how sorry he was to learn about her Aunt Martha, whom he'd known when he was a law student in Concord and later when he worked there for a development concern. He wondered if she remembered that they had met at her aunt's. He'd recently found a job as associate with a law firm in Kingborough.

He invited Ellen to dinner. She didn't remember having met him in Concord but it would have been rude to say so. He was pleasant, and quite tall and handsome—the only thing that irked her was that he carried a cane with a silver handle, which she felt made him appear a bit of an Edwardian dandy. Then she saw that he limped and that the cane must be necessary to his balance, and she was ashamed of having been annoyed by it. But Victor never referred to his disability—even after they were married. Often in the morning the bedclothes were pulled away from his feet and she was appalled at how crippled his left foot was. At first glance, his shoes appeared to be of standard make, but on closer inspection she saw a difference in the left one and she realized

that a miracle of shoemaking had gone into contriving such an artful support for such a mangled foot.

One night she asked him about it. His answer was matter-of-fact. He had been driving back to law school after an emergency visit home to attend his father's funeral. He had dozed and was startled awake when his car smashed into a tree. "I'm lucky to be alive," he said. "It delayed me a year in finishing my law degree. But it gave me time to decide what I wanted out of life and how to get it."

She was lucky. She was the most fortunate woman in the world to divide her days between two such remarkable men as Dr. Arnold and Victor.

Victor was truly ambitious. It was a pity he was a lawyer with Kingborough so overpopulated with them, but thank God he had settled in Kingborough or they wouldn't be married. Perhaps rather than discourage him, the number of lawyers acted as a challenge. He had the same glint in his eye she had noticed in certain students and professors and politicians and directors who frequented the campus. That glint spelled success. Raw ambition was distasteful to her. But Victor was different. There was nothing about him that didn't please and delight her.

The fear had such an innocent origin.

At least as far as Ellen could trace its beginning, it came from Mrs. Greene's concern for her safety.

That morning, as usual, Ellen had eased from bed so as not to disturb Victor. After her glass of orange juice, she had set out food to make it easy for Victor to prepare his breakfast. She split an English muffin and put the two pieces in the toaster. She measured coffee for the percolator and placed two eggs on the counter. She had written a note to Victor—"Enjoy your breakfast, darling. I love you." Leaning the note against the jar of strawberry preserves, she had put on her coat, gathered up her tote bag, and walked out into the dark.

By the time she reached the park, a mean penetrating rain began to fall. She grappled for the flimsy rainhat in her bag and put it on, but it was no shield against such a downpour. By the time she reached Dr. Arnold's she was drenched.

"You look like a drowned rat," Mrs. Greene said when she let Ellen in.

She took Ellen's sodden coat and hung it up. She gave Ellen a towel for her hair and some slippers, and then she served the customary coffee. "I don't see how you could get so wet just walking from the bus stop."

"I walked all the way. I walk every morning."

Her news stunned Mrs. Greene.

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard of. Don't you know it's dangerous? You could be mugged or murdered or raped."

"It's dark. Nobody can see me. It's barely daylight by the time I reach the park. Nobody is out so early."

"The time doesn't have a thing to do with it. There's no time, day or night, when it's safe to be alone on the streets of Kingborough. Don't you read the papers? Good lord, haven't you got eyes in your head?"

After her drenching, Ellen put a folding umbrella and boots in her tote bag to protect herself against unpredicted rain. But a strange fear began to possess her during her morning walk, and the distance between her apartment house and Dr. Arnold's estate seemed to stretch itself. The park was endless and its pathways became sinister curves and turnings that led nowhere. The length she covered became a treadmill and no matter how fast she walked the space between her and Dr. Arnold's increased. When she finally arrived, she had to collect herself before she rang the bell.

Mrs. Greene seemed equally apprehensive. "Thank God you're here," she said.

The house in which Ellen and Victor lived was neatly kept. No trash littered the halls and the mailboxes glistened from regular polishing. Morning papers outside the apartment doors were comforting proof of ordinary domesticity and the wide lobby was bright and innocent of intruders. But when she opened the front door and went down the short walkway to the sidewalk she found herself stopping. She couldn't make herself go farther. She wanted to rush back to Victor.

But Dr. Arnold needed her. Whatever the cost, she must reach him.

During her morning walks, she no longer thought about the loss of her aunt or of the approaching death of Dr. Arnold or of her love for Victor. Her anxiety killed the composure she needed to think of them.

Her fear made her feel that she was walking in quicksand. Sometimes she was sure that her heart would burst from the extreme effort

of putting one foot in front of the other. Yet she must go on.

Once she saw the shadow of her pursuer, and then realized it was her own shadow changing shape as she walked from one street lamp to the next.

Or there were footsteps behind her—someone was about to grab her throat. Somehow she dared to turn around to see a paperboy throwing a paper on a stoop.

During those sieges of terror she longed to die. She had read of persons who were so terrified of death that they killed themselves, and she had been astonished, but it surprised her no longer.

Mrs. Greene's warning had aroused in her a morbid interest. Previously she had barely skimmed newspaper accounts of crime. Now she tracked down every reference to murder, assault, and robbery in Kingborough, taking particular note of where the crimes had occurred and learning that the route she walked was the scene of many offenses. But she learned that she had been right to insist to Mrs. Greene that no one dangerous was about as early in the morning as she. Her route was a no man's land for criminals at that hour. Their violence occurred later in the day or in the dark of night. In conforming to Dr. Arnold's working hours, she had chanced upon the magic time when Kingborough was safest.

Even so, her fear didn't lessen. Instead, her apprehension convinced her that her luck couldn't last, and she was most terrified in a place where no crime had ever been committed, and that was in the area at the edge of the park, just before she crossed to the sidewalks that led past the large old estates.

There was one morning when she faltered at the edge of the park, and she could not make herself take the few steps necessary to reach the safety of the sidewalk that would lead her to Dr. Arnold's. She looked around her and was surprised to see that crocuses were beginning to bloom. They were especially profuse in the spot that threatened her, and their unexpected beauty helped to ease her terror.

That afternoon, when Dr. Arnold and Ellen assembled the various sections of the history, they realized it was all but finished. Some minor revisions were necessary, and the index and acknowledgments must be written, and the final selection of photographs and engravings had to be made, but it was work anyone could do.

Dr. Arnold embraced Ellen and called down to Mrs. Greene to bring up a bottle of champagne. They all toasted each other, and Dr. Arnold said he couldn't have managed without either Ellen or Mrs. Greene.

The next morning Ellen had entered the park before she realized that she hadn't felt any fear at all during her walk. It astonished her. Perhaps the end to fear was like the end to pain, so unaccountable that one wasn't aware of the exact moment of relief. She saw with pleasure that there were more crocuses. She hoped it would be an early spring and that before she returned to work on campus, the violets and azaleas for which the park was famous would bloom.

She felt buoyant. What had lifted her fear? Had she been afraid that something might happen to her before Dr. Arnold finished the history and now that it was finished she need no longer be concerned?

All that day she and Dr. Arnold worked hard and joyously and her exhilaration hadn't ebbed when she arrived home and checked the mailbox. There was only one letter. It was from her Aunt Martha's lawyer and his message was brief. Final settlement had been made of her aunt's property and the cash was available. The lawyer suggested that Ellen would want to confer with her own attorney and/or financial adviser about investment and disposition.

Ellen had never needed an attorney before. How nice that she had married one. She hoped Victor would be pleased about the money. She was sure he would be stern and spartan and say he would never touch a penny of it. She wondered if it might dampen his ambition to learn how large the legacy was. Maybe she shouldn't mention it. But there really wasn't any choice. She couldn't keep a secret of such an amount of money.

Ellen read the letter again. It was a shame that all those serene acres that had belonged to Aunt Martha and many generations of the family were now to be converted. The rambling and gracious house would be destroyed by persons unknown. Well, they were hardly unknown—their name was right in the letter. The Martin Development Company. She had heard of them before. Were they benefactors of the university? Her mind was a jumble of names now that she had begun the index to Dr. Arnold's history.

She didn't have to say anything to Victor. She could just hand him the lawyer's letter to read.

She mustn't have a secret from her husband.

But she *had* had a secret from Victor. She hadn't mentioned her fear all those mornings when she had left him asleep and had gone out into the dark. She ought to have shared her distress with him. There should be no secrets between lovers.

She would tell him about her fear and the legacy that very night. First, she would tell him about her fear.

Victor telephoned that he had to work late on a case and insisted she go ahead with her meal, but then the work had gone faster than he anticipated and Ellen was just finishing her dessert when he arrived. He was starving and ate the casserole without letting Ellen reheat it. It pleased her to see how he relished it. They sat for a long time over coffee and Ellen brought out the brandy. She had so much to tell him.

"I've been terrified, darling," she began. "I'm not any longer. I can talk about it now."

He listened. His attentiveness encouraged her to go into detail. He held her close and it was as if he were accompanying her on her walk and she was taking him past the town houses and through the slums and into the park and lingering at the place on the edge of the park where she had been most afraid.

In their deep embrace, she could feel Victor's heart beating and he pulled her closer to him and kissed her. A few minutes later he was the tenderest, most satisfying lover he had ever been.

He was asleep the next morning when she arose, his crippled foot thrust outside the cover.

Her walk was peaceful. Her fear had truly left her and her attention moved easily from observation to reflection on her life and good fortune. She glanced happily at a yard where a camellia bush was in bloom. She began to look for other early blossoms and thought with pleasure of the crocuses at the far boundary of the park.

She thought of the previous night with Victor and the relief she had felt in telling him about her fear. She had planned to tell him about Aunt Martha's money, but that would have intruded in their need to make love.

Anyway, Victor probably knew about her aunt's fortune. Of course he must. When she had read the letter from her aunt's lawyer, the

name of the development company had seemed familiar and now she remembered why. It was the company Victor had worked for in Concord. No doubt he had known all along of their interest in the property. So there was no secret to tell him, except that everything had been concluded and the money was theirs to do with as they pleased.

By then she was approaching the boundary of the park, and she was surprised to see someone standing there. Perhaps it was one of the nearby residents out walking his dog, though she hadn't ever encountered anyone there. But the mornings were lighter now and no doubt there would soon be joggers and people riding bikes.

The person's back was to her and he didn't move at all. She wondered if he could hear her footsteps. She didn't want to startle him. The path was narrow there and he would have to step aside to let her pass. They were very close and she said good morning, but he did not answer her. Then he turned slowly to face her.

But he had no face.

She wanted Victor. She needed him. She called his name.

She might have spoken a magic word. The stranger in front of her stumbled as if the name was obscene. She had read with fascination of the disguises thieves and attackers wore. The most cautious were masked and wore gloves. The face of the man in front of her was masked and flattened by a stocking. He wore mittens that made his hands look like hand puppets, and the puppets moved toward her throat.

All the fears and terrors of the dark morning walks had prophesied this last terrible moment, but the grip around her throat was harsher and more cruel than she had ever imagined.

In the instant before she fell dead on the ground where the crocuses were beginning to bloom, she caught a glimpse of that miracle of shoemaker's art that camouflaged Victor's crippled foot.

Conrad had good reason to sleep with a revolver under his pillow . . .

THE LADY OR THE LION?

by EDWARD D. HOCH

After three days in Ango-Phar, Conrad knew they planned to kill him. He'd been hired out of Boston to do a job, promised a guarantee of fifty thousand dollars plus expenses for a few weeks' work, and hustled aboard a trans-Atlantic jet whose first stop was the Canary Islands. Conrad was an electronics expert, a specialist in bugging and wiretapping devices. His services came high, but the cost was of little concern to the oil-rich ruler of Ango-Phar.

The tiny country on the Persian Gulf was actually a confederation of five Arab sheikdoms formed of necessity in the early 1970s when the economics of oil thrust those sandy wastes violently into the twentieth century. Ango-Phar's ruler was the most powerful of the Sheiks, Dy bin Rayid, known to his people as the Lion of the Gulf. He was a handsome bearded man in his early fifties, brimming with the newly gained knowledge of Western civilization that was being daily thrust upon him. Conrad's first meeting with the Sheik on his second day in the country was filled with the sort of talk he would come to expect.

"Ah, Conrad," the Sheik said, rising to greet him. "I trust you find the accommodations here to your liking."

"They're fine. Your whole country is magnificent."

"Much of what you see did not exist even five years ago." There was pride in the Lion's voice. "I have lifted my people from poverty, changed them overnight from desert nomads to city dwellers."

"And are they happy?"

Sheik Rayid spread his hands. "What is happiness? For some—particularly our women—the changes are too rapid. They are used to the black gowns and the veiled faces. But the young do not want that any more—they see the latest Western dresses in the shops and they want colors, like the peacock. They want their faces bare. My own daughter—" He left the sentence unfinished but it was clear the problems had spread to the ruling household.

"The wealth of oil is changing the face of the entire Middle East," Conrad agreed. "For better and for worse."

The Sheik smiled again. "It is that worse part that brings men like you here, Mr. Conrad. Your countryman and namesake, Joseph Conrad, wrote about an earlier generation that went up the jungle rivers to tame the savage—as you come here."

"Joseph Conrad was British," Conrad corrected. "Or Polish if you want to be technical. And his heroes usually didn't fare too well in foreign lands."

"You will fare better. Do you have all the equipment you need?"

"Yes."

"And Alja explained the problem?"

"You want the residence and all of your offices bugged. You want the telephones tapped. You want voice-activated tape recorders that can pick up every word."

"Exactly like your Mr. Nixon."

"I hope fate deals more kindly with you." Conrad got to his feet. The conversation was achieving nothing except to keep him from earning his money. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Sheik Rayid."

The eyes hardened. "You have not yet been dismissed."

"Then dismiss me. I've got work to do."

The smile returned. "Go, then. Alja will be available should any problems arise."

On the way out, Conrad passed a beautiful dark-haired young woman whose eyes bore a striking resemblance to the Sheik's own. She could only have been his daughter, and he couldn't help noting that her face was unveiled.

And she wore a red dress.

Alja Mohad was there the next day, supervising the work as Conrad busied himself running wiring through holes in the walls. The man was grimly ugly and when he spoke even the most casual question seemed to carry a note of menace. "Must you drill so many holes in the walls?"

"Here I do, because the walls are so thick. In some of the other rooms I can use a transmitter microphone." He saw the young woman from the previous day pass by in the hall. "Is that the Sheik's daughter?"

"That is Serean, yes. She is to know nothing of this. To her you are merely an electrician."

"I see. Big secret, huh?"

"Of course. That was the agreement."

More to make a joke than anything else, Conrad said, "Once I'm back in Boston I'll have to write it up for the *Wiretappers' Weekly.*"

"No," Alja said simply. "You will not do that."

Conrad went on with his work, and it was not for several minutes that the full import of Alja's words hit him.

They meant to kill him.

When the job was done they meant to murder him, just as the builders of secret fortifications were sometimes put to death in earlier times. The Sheik's eavesdropping activities were to remain a state secret.

Conrad's first impulse was to go up to his room in the guests' wing and get the snub-nosed .38 revolver he always carried with him. There

were many ways to kill a man in Ango-Phar, but he wasn't going to make it easy for them. Then, thinking more clearly, he relaxed. It was true that they might be planning to murder him when the job was finished—but he was certainly safe until then. Perhaps, like Scheherazade, he could even prolong his life by making the task last for a thousand and one days.

For the moment, the revolver could remain hidden in his suitcase.

Two days later, as he was completing the first phase of his work, Conrad received an invitation to dine with Sheik Rayid and his daughter. He could hardly refuse, and his growing curiosity about the daughter made him eager to accept.

When he presented himself shortly after seven he found both father and daughter attired more formally than himself. Serean wore a high-necked green gown that left her arms bare. The dress would have been more than proper that season in Paris or New York. The Sheik wore a dinner jacket on which were fastened an assortment of military decorations. "This is my daughter, Serean," he announced. "She will dine with us tonight."

The dark-haired young woman nodded, unsmiling, and took her seat at the table. There were obviously to be no preliminaries to the meal. "You have a beautiful country here," Conrad said, taking the chair across the table from her.

"It has changed."

"For the better, surely."

The Lion of the Gulf answered for her. "My daughter feels an important part of any progress must be in the area of women's rights. I fear she has been too greatly influenced by your Western ideas of liberation."

Serean lifted her head proudly. "I do not intend to live out my life as my mother did—as part of a desert sheik's harem."

"My dear, there are no more desert sheiks," her father corrected her. "Now we live in palaces, not tents."

"Did it matter to my mother?" Serean retorted. She started to eat her soup, then suddenly changed her mind. She put down the spoon, rose from the table with a barely audible "Excuse me," and left the room.

Conrad half expected a burst of anger from her father, but the Sheik

only smiled. "See?" he said with good humor. "My daughter—the liberated woman!"

The meal progressed uneventfully, with Conrad asking questions about life in Ango-Phar. The Sheik enjoyed talking about his country, and each question brought a reply that sounded like a political speech. Conrad had no doubt that if Ango-Phar held elections he would have been elected to office easily.

"Come," the Sheik said, finishing the last of his brandy after dinner. "Let me show you my pet!"

Conrad followed him down a long sunlit corridor to the rear of the palace, expecting to see anything from an aging camel to a desert tarantula. Sheik Rayid opened a door at the end of the passageway and they stepped out onto a small balcony. Below them, gnawing contentedly on a bone, was a large African lion.

"Your namesake," Conrad observed. "Is he tame?"

"When he wants to be. Perhaps they call me the Lion of the Gulf for the same reason."

Conrad wondered fleetingly if the bone might be human, if he might end up in the lion pit when his job was finished.

That night he slept with the revolver under his pillow.

The work progressed.

Each day, as he installed the voice-activated tape recorders and checked out the system under the watchful eyes of Alja Mohad, he knew he was drawing closer to the end. Before very long it would be finished, and there would be no further reason to keep him alive.

He made his escape plan carefully, booking a seat on a plane to Paris one day ahead of his scheduled departure. With luck he could be gone before they realized it. With luck.

Toward the end of his stay, on the very night that the final installations had been made, Sheik Rayid invited him for dinner once again. Serean was there too, and this time she remained for the entire meal, though she contributed little to the conversation. It was obvious that she regarded Conrad with some contempt.

"Come," Sheik Rayid said when the brandy had been consumed. "I have something to show you."

"Another lion?" Conrad asked with a smile.

"Something far more modern. A recent acquisition from your coun-

try. Do you wish to join us, Serean?"

"I have seen all your playthings, Father. If I may be excused . . ."

"Certainly."

As they walked down yet another corridor, Conrad asked, "Why does your daughter dislike me? I hope I haven't offended her."

"No, no, no. I had hoped she would like you because she knows so few men outside her own country, but I may have told her too much about you."

"Too much?"

"You must realize Alja looked into your background before we hired you for such an assignment as this. I needed someone who was completely trustworthy."

"Of course."

"The business about your former wife, while of no interest at all to me, might have colored her opinion of you."

Conrad felt suddenly chilled. "You dug up that story, did you?"

"She obtained her divorce on the grounds that you beat her when you'd been drinking. Here in the Middle East, such action is of no consequence. There are times when a woman should be beaten."

"There was no need to tell your daughter about it."

"The fact amused me. It indicated that the customs of our two countries are not so different after all. But here—my latest plaything!"

Conrad might have laughed out loud had it not been for the Sheik's obvious pride in his possession. Instead, he stepped into the room and studied the large blank television screen and the box with levers and buttons that sat on the table before it. It was a video game, the kind currently popular in America.

"Look," Sheik Rayid said proudly, turning on the set. Immediately the screen was alive with colored lines and a vivid red ball that bounced lazily from side to side.

"Will you play me a game?"

Conrad found himself seated by the box, manipulating a pair of vertical lines in a game that bore some slight resemblance to tennis. The first person to score fifteen points was the winner, and despite his familiarity with similar barroom games Conrad went down to defeat by a score of 15–6.

"Ah, you see? I have practiced," the Sheik gloated. "Another one?"

"Not tonight, thanks," Conrad said. He couldn't help wondering

what he'd be shown next. A lion and a video game would be difficult to beat.

He retired to his room and slept restlessly. Two more days and he'd be out of Ango-Phar with his money.

All went well the following day as he checked out the final elements of the system and demonstrated its working to Alja and the Sheik. "A wonder!" the Lion of the Gulf exclaimed. "A true wonder!"

Conrad imagined him showing it to his next dinner guest, as Conrad had been shown the lion and the video game. But no—this was one plaything that would remain a secret. Only Rayid's enemies might discover its existence, when they were already doomed by their own words.

"When are you leaving?" Alja asked while Conrad gathered up his testing equipment.

"In two days. After you've had time to test the system."

The Arab nodded, watching him with veiled eyes.

Conrad saw no more of them that day. He did not even catch a glimpse of Serean as he went about the business of packing up. But that night, as he lay dozing with the revolver beneath his pillow, he was suddenly awakened by a scratching at the door.

Someone was picking the lock.

He tensed as he waited for the door to swing open, reflecting grimly that in a novel it would turn out to be Serean, come to share his bed. But this was life and there were no pleasant surprises. When the door opened it was Alja, armed with a wavy-bladed Malay kris.

Conrad rolled from the bed as the blade descended, then hurled the bedclothes like a gladiator's net to ensnare the Arab. He had his gun now, and he brought the butt down hard on the shrouded head. Alja collapsed with a muffled grunt.

Keeping his gun in hand, Conrad carefully unveiled the Arab. He was alive but unconscious, breathing with a deep rasping sound approaching a snore.

There seemed only two courses open. Conrad could fight his way out of the palace with his gun, hoping to get by the guards and somehow reach the airport, or he could confront Sheik Rayid and bring the whole business to a head.

Conrad had always favored confrontation. He tossed the gun on the

bed, deciding it would be of little use against Rayid's palace guards, and hefted Alja onto his shoulders.

He encountered no guards until he reached the entrance to the palace proper. There he told the armed man to take him to Sheik Rayid. The man hesitated, then pushed an intercom button in the wall and spoke a few quick words Conrad couldn't catch. When he had his answer, he motioned Conrad to precede him down the corridor.

In the spacious sitting room where he had first met the Sheik, Conrad dumped Alja onto the Persian rug and waited. After a few moments Sheik Rayid appeared, wearing a brightly colored caftan. He glanced at Alja and asked, "What have we here?"

"He tried to stab me as I slept."

"Is he dead?"

"No. Only unconscious."

"Why bring him here? Why have me awakened?"

"Because he was acting on your instructions. You wanted me killed so your secret would be safe."

Rayid glanced nervously at the guard. "I could have you shot down where you stand."

"Look, I'm not trying to hassle you. Just let me catch my plane and there'll be no trouble."

"You lied about the plane you were taking. You tried to sneak away one day early."

"With good cause! I suspected you'd try to have me killed."

The Sheik motioned for the guard to wait outside and prodded the unconscious Alja with his foot. "You must have hit him very hard."

"I did. Am I going to be allowed to leave here?"

"Only the three of us in this room know of the taping system. Alja here might never recover from that blow to the head. If you should die too, it would be the best sort of secret. Only I would know it."

"I have people back home who'd ask questions."

"An unfortunate accident. You slipped and fell into the lion pit."

"Ah—the lion!"

"He serves a purpose on rare occasions. We are not without resources. I could hardly allow your return to America where your knowledge could so easily embarrass me."

"I could kill you right now," Conrad said, "before you had a chance to recall the guard."

"Yes, you could." Sheik Rayid considered the situation. "But the truth of the matter is that you would still die. Look here—I will offer you a sporting proposition. I will play you a game for your life!"

"A game?"

"The game I demonstrated last night. I will play you a game for your life."

"That's insane!"

"Not at all. It is the only hope you have. If I win the game, you will be consigned to the lion pit. If you win the game, you will be allowed to live."

"And return to America?"

"I did not say that. There is another possibility. You could remain here in Ango-Phar, as my daughter's husband."

"What!"

"She needs a man. She is of an age when marriage becomes important. And I would like her to marry a Westerner."

"I would be your son-in-law?"

"If you won the game."

"What's the catch?"

"Only that you could never leave Ango-Phar. But then you will not be leaving in any event."

Conrad thought about the armed guards and his slim chances of fighting his way out. He thought about the lion.

And about Serean Rayid.

"Let's play," he said.

The Sheik took an early lead.

It was 1–0 and then 2–0 as the red dot bounced back and forth between sides. Conrad began to sweat a little. "I should have had a practice round. You beat me badly last evening."

3–0.

"I believe we are evenly matched, all things considered."

"What does that mean?"

3–1.

"Well, you just won that point, didn't you?"

"How often do you feed that lion?"

4–1, 5–1.

"He has not been fed in several days, Mr. Conrad."

5–2, 6–2, 6–3.

"Funny," Conrad said, "I just happened to think—it's *The Lady or the Tiger*."

"What?" 6–4. "Oh, you mean Stockton! Your American writer." 6–5. "We have no tigers in Ango-Phar."

7–5, 7–6, 7–7.

The television screen flickered, seeming to take on a life of its own. Sheik Rayid pulled ahead with two quick swats that got by Conrad completely. 9–7.

"You're playing better than last night, Conrad."

"There's more at stake."

9–8.

9–9.

Now Conrad went ahead for the first time, but his triumph was short-lived. The Sheik tied it at 10-all and then took the lead again, 11–10. And 15 points was the game.

He'd have to tell his kids about this, Conrad decided. If he ever got out of here alive. And if his ex-wife ever let him see them again.

11–11.

The Sheik ran up three quick points as Conrad faltered badly. But then, with the score 14–11 and victory within his grasp, an odd thing happened. Rayid seemed to miss the ball purposely, letting him win a point.

14–12.

14–13.

Was he throwing the match to gain an American husband for his daughter, or was he only toying with Conrad before sending him to the lion?

14–14. Rayid had given him another point.

But now what?

Twisting the plastic knob before him, watching the colored movement on the TV screen, Conrad knew how Stockton's hero must have felt. The Sheik was in full control, but which way had he decided? Would it be the lady or the lion?

15–14.

The game was over.

Sheik Rayid rose from his chair.

"I will have my daughter brought to your room," he said. . .

Conrad walked for a time in the inner courtyard, savoring the night air, reflecting on the luck that had kept him alive. It was a good country, and the moon he saw overhead was, after all, the very same moon they saw back in Boston.

When he thought she'd had time to get there, he went up to his room and found her waiting. "My father told me," she said, looking more beautiful than he remembered. "You played the television game for me."

"We are to be married, Serean, and I am a very happy man."

"Yes."

"I'll try to make you a good husband."

"As you did with your first wife? Don't you understand? Doesn't my father understand?"

And then her hand came out from behind her back and he saw what she was holding. She'd found his pistol on the bed.

"Oh, God, Serean! No!"

"I won't be sold into slavery like my mother! I won't be beaten and abused by a drunken man!"

"*Serean*!"

She raised the pistol and shot him twice in the chest.

He felt the bullets tear into him and he toppled backward. Even as the life drained from his body, he realized that he had ended up like one of Conrad's heroes after all—dying alone in a country he never fully understood.

Justice was as blind as he was . . .

SOMETHING FOR THE DARK

by John Lutz

"It bothers me," the lieutenant said.

"It didn't bother the jury," I told him. "They found me guilty."

The scent of fear wafted across the waxed wood table where I sat in the prison visiting room. I understood the lieutenant's fear, felt sorry for him, but nothing could be done about that. He was a conscience case and always would be.

"Your wife had many enemies," he said in a voice dulled by the res-

onance of the words in his memory. My lawyer had reminded the jury of Miriam's enemies over a dozen times during the trial.

Of course I had pleaded not guilty, claiming my confession had been made under duress. But I had little doubt as to the trial's outcome. The smoking gun, the locked room. . . Justice was as blind as I was.

I heard the lieutenant shift his weight uncomfortably in his chair, caught the scent of his lime after-shave lotion as it mingled with the doubt that would never loose its hold on his conscience. He'd been the arresting officer, the one who'd forced my confession and whose testimony at the trial destroyed my case. He had reason to doubt, but doubt was all he could do.

The lieutenant's breathing leveled out as he relaxed somewhat. On the left side of my face, I felt a subtle coolness as someone quietly opened the door. A soft-soled shoe whispered abruptly on the cork floor. I heard the lieutenant turn in his chair, felt faint vibrations along the wide table as he strained to see the visitor. "You have about ten more minutes, Lieutenant," the voice of Graves the guard said evenly, "then I have orders to take him back to his cell." I felt the movement of air as Graves left, heard the click of the door latch, the turn of the key, the sigh of the lieutenant as he leaned on the table and made it live with the tenseness of his frustration.

Miriam had stood by me in my blindness. That says all I need to know about her, all I need to remember. It proved her love for me.

It's true about Miriam having had many enemies, but what gossip columnist doesn't? I can vouch that everything in the Miriam Moore Tells All columns was true. And more importantly, there was much that was true that Miriam kept out of her columns. Probably only I know that. Miriam was too concerned with her image of quintessential bitch ever to tell anyone of the dirt she didn't write. She knew that image gave her a certain credibility with her readers and meant an uninterrupted flow of money into the bank.

My medical expenses after the accident were astronomical.

I honestly believe that if it weren't for the accident, for me surviving after all those dark months in the hospital, Miriam would have given up her column. It bothered her more than anybody knew, some of the things that happened as a result of her stories. I tried to tell her she wasn't responsible for what other people did when confronted with the truth. The agonizing part is that neither of us really believed that.

"She was shot exactly in the temple from a range of less than fourteen inches," the lieutenant said. "That's what won't go down with me, that a blind man could fire a revolver with that much accuracy."

He'd never be able to let it go. "I can see my lawyer should have subpoenaed you," I said.

"You've been sentenced to die, Edwards. You'll be the first under the new state law. But you don't seem concerned, and that bothers me almost as much as the accuracy of the death wound."

I shrugged. "There are few successful blind fugitives. I was dead when Miriam died. I knew that would be the case and decided to kill her anyway. I'm not happy with my predicament, but it's not unexpected."

"Suppose you told me the truth confidentially," the lieutenant suggested in the tone of conspirators. "There's no way you can get another trial now, and you could deny this conversation if you wanted."

"The truth came out in court, the way it's supposed to happen."

He sighed again. I felt sorry for him and wanted him to leave. There was no other direction for our conversation to take. I had been found sitting in a room locked from the inside, the gun in my hand, Miriam on the floor dead of a bullet wound in her head. How could the lieutenant blame the jury for finding me guilty? How could he blame himself? He should never have become a policeman; he was a creature of the heart, doomed to suffer.

I heard chair legs scrape, felt the turn of air on my face as the lieutenant stood. His defeat permeated the room, a tangible question that would never be answered, that would thrive in dark places.

"This is your last chance, Edwards," he told me, knowing it was his last chance. "I'd like to know—I need to know—if you're really guilty."

I wanted to tell him everything, but I couldn't risk it. He started to say something else, then abruptly left the room, his footsteps fading on the other side of the thick door he closed behind him. Leaving me alone.

I sat quietly with my hands on the smooth table top, thinking despite myself of that day of the unexpected thunder in the tiny bedroom, my wrenching fear as I crawled over the coarse carpet toward the central point of the great crash that still hovered in charged air.

My hands had sought like separate, desperate animals before me, exploring every contour of the deep-woven rug. Then the sticky wetness, the well-like, drawing edge of the wound, the gun, the still flesh.

The gun was in my hand as I made my way to the closed door and locked it. Already I could hear and feel approaching footsteps in the hall outside. For a long time I ignored the knocking. Then the door was forced.

I'll never let them know the truth—that the haughty and wise Miriam Moore committed suicide. I owe her that and more. They never found the note she had written, the note I'd folded to a narrow, tight strip and wedged between the molding and the wall near the floor.

They found me seated on the carpet, my back against the wall and the murder weapon in my hand. A guilty man in any impartial court of law.

So now the lieutenant has to wonder, and I feel sorry for him. And as long as I keep my silence, I have to wonder along with him. Was I actually guilty in a way the jury couldn't imagine? Was I responsible for Miriam's death? I know I'll have to live and die with a question even more haunting than the lieutenant's, a question I'll do anything rather than face:

What was in Miriam's note?

The trouble with Mr. Bermondsey will be familiar to those of you who saw a film I made in 1955 . . .

THE YEGG IN MY BIER

by CHARLES PETERSON

I have never had as much trouble with a customer as I had with Mr. Bermondsey. For one thing, he refused to stay put. For another, various people seemed to take exception to this and to hold me personally responsible—to the point of threatening several ways of debilitating me, some permanent. Inasmuch as Mr. Bermondsey had been dead some hours before I even became acquainted with him, this was all quite unnerving.

My name is Orlo Bostwick. I operate the Valhalla Funeral Parlor in Kniffleboro, Kentucky, as well as the Bon Ton Furniture Emporium. What with a rather remarkable talent for longevity displayed by local residents, the latter does somewhat more business than the former, though neither is what you'd call overwhelming.

You can imagine my surprise, therefore, when Mr. Bermondsey arrived, via a Sheriff's Department ambulance, on the same afternoon as I was handling the obsequies for the late Dr. Maud Millmoss, who had passed away at the age of 97. It was almost an embarrassment of riches, one might say.

Anyway, Mr. Bermondsey had been found, not a mark on him, in a car that had gone into a ditch on the outskirts of town. The assumption was that he'd had a heart seizure while driving alone, and had just sort of coasted to an arterial stop. The county coroner would arrange for an autopsy shortly, but meanwhile, since there was at that moment an urgent call for ambulances on the other side of the county, the sheriff's deputy wanted to park Mr. Bermondsey in my receiving room temporarily. Which, of course, was fine with me.

"I'm rather busy just now," I remember remarking, "but I don't suppose he'll be much trouble."

Ha!

First off, Lum Gormley appeared. He is our Chief of Police and is unusual in that he affects hand-tailored uniforms and tools around, off-duty, in a Continental Mark V. Folks in Kniffleboro say it shows what devotion to duty can do, when you also marry the daughter of the hay, grain, and feed mill owner.

"I understand you got a stiff here," he said.

"I have two," I replied, with a touch of pride. "Dr. Millmoss and a Mr. Bermondsey."

"I paid my respects to Dr. Millmoss last night," said Gormley, "so it is your Mr. Bermondsey I'm more interested in. I had an APB a little while ago on a character who may be the one picked up by the sheriff's deputies. O.K. to look?"

I nodded courteously and pointed the way to the receiving room. "Third drawer. But if you'll excuse me, I have to set up a lot of chairs and arrange flowers and such in the Tranquility Room before we bring in Dr. Millmoss."

Gormley waved me away with a grin, and I went about my duties. Presently he reappeared and, at my questioning glance, shook his head. "Doesn't answer the description," he said. "Were there any other personal effects?"

"What you see is what we've got," I said. "The men who dropped him off said his name was Bermondsey and that he had a New Jersey driver's license. That's all I know about him."

Gormley gnawed at his moustache as though it might be a source of intellectual nourishment, then shrugged. "Well, I guess he'll be the coroner's problem. See you around, Orlo."

And what with getting Dr. Millmoss tucked away, that was the last thought I gave to Mr. Bermondsey until about five-thirty that afternoon. At that time, I was sitting in my office—the funeral-home office, that is—assessing the afternoon's ceremony. My prime concern was Rudy Hofmeister, who, with his brother Randy, were my assistants on occasions when additional manpower was called for. Unfortunately, Rudy was growing out of his frock coat, the sleeves of which were now fully two inches above his wrists, and out of his striped trousers, which were exhibiting a more and more distant relationship to his ankles. The question was, where was I going to find another assistant with a strong back and a malleable mind in a Size 40 Long?

At this point, the bell rang several times in a peremptory sort of way, and I answered it to find a man and a woman standing there. The man was dressed in a dark-blue pinstripe of a quality seldom seen in Kniffleboro—a dark-browed man of forty-five or so, with black hair flecked with grey, and sad-looking brown eyes. The woman was in black and, in general terms, a knockout from her shimmering blonde hair all the way down to her trim ankles, including all the side excursions. She was dabbing at her nose with a lace-trimmed handkerchief.

"Oh, Rocco, I just know it's Uncle Herbie!" she sobbed.

Mr. Rocco patted her arm. "Courage, my dear Thelma. It may not be.

"We understand," he went on, to me, "that you have a middle-aged gentleman here. A dead middle-aged gentleman," he amplified, to the accompaniment of a fresh sniffle from the lady. "And we thought it might be Thelma's uncle, who is long overdue at her home."

"It's him; I know it's him!" Thelma wailed, ungrammatically.

"You are perhaps referring to Mr. Bermondsey?" I asked.

"Bermondsey!" said Mr. Rocco, as the woman emitted several "Ohs" simultaneously, on rising notes. "May we—?"

"Certainly." I invited them to enter. "How did you know Mr. Bermondsey was here?"

"We've been checking leads all day," the man replied. "Finally we found someone in the County Coroner's office who remembered a report about a body being left here. Evidently there was an industrial accident of some kind on the other side of the county that kept everyone rather busy. They're sending someone around for the body, but we thought we ought to—that is—"

"Of course," I interposed. "Please come this way."

I led them downstairs, Thelma sniffling at my heels like a bloodhound with a sinus condition, into the receiving room and to the third drawer. "Here he is," I said.

There ensued a longish silence and what is known in theatrical-parlance as a tableau effect.

Because there he wasn't. Unless he had metamorphosed into a brown bag that I recognized as containing one of Rudy Hofmeister's frequently forgotten lunches, from which arose the scent of overripe banana.

"Merciful heavens!" I gargled, and opened Drawer #2.

Nothing there.

I opened Drawer #1.

Nothing there either.

"I'm terribly sorry," I said, when I had recovered a shred or two of aplomb, "but it appears that the departed has—er—departed."

My visitors had undergone a notable change of demeanor. The sympathetic light in Mr. Rocco's eye had altered to something more in the nature of a laser beam, and the lady's was no less unfriendly.

"Tony!" she muttered through set teeth. "He got here first!"

"Maybe, maybe not. Digby O'Dell here could be pulling a fast one," Mr. Rocco muttered back, also t.s.t.

"Perhaps he was simply mislaid somehow," I babbled on, rather dreading the moment when the conversation would languish. "As you see, there's no dead body here."

"A condition that can easily be remedied," retorted Mr. Rocco, producing from a hitherto unnoticed shoulder holster a pistol the size of a small howitzer which he jabbed into my vest buttons. "Unless you'd

prefer to come clean as to where you've stashed Herb."

"I assure you, sir, I have not hashed Sterb anywhere," I said with as much dignity as I could muster while being pushed backward against the far wall, to which I attached myself like a piece of wallpaper. What with the light switch pressing my shoulder-blade and the pistol pressing my stomach, my position was distinctly uncomfortable.

"Oh, yeah?" This from Thelma, whom I was less and less inclined to regard as a lady. "Who would be rummaging around here but you?"

"The parlor was open all afternoon. Nobody locks doors in Knifflеboro, and no one was here to stop anyone from—as you say—rummaging."

Mr. Rocco looked thoughtful. "Could be. If we could figure out where Herb was, so could Tony. He could even have got word from somebody in the coroner's office. He's got ears everywhere."

"We're wasting time. Let's plug Digby," Thelma said, thereby dropping another notch in my estimation, "and get going. Watch it!" she added. "The guy's fainting!"

I was not fainting. What I was doing, actually, was sliding down the wall far enough to trip the light switch and throw the room into utter darkness. I dropped to the floor and rolled over, upending someone—I hoped it was Thelma—in the process. At this point the conversation languished, as I had feared. The gun went off and a bullet ricocheted off several walls, the ceiling and the floor, and in the aftermath of the shot it sounded as though my visitors had met and mingled. I didn't stay to find out and, having the advantage of knowing precisely where the door was, I laid a patch getting out of there and up the stairs. I was about to dive out the front door when a better idea occurred to me and, leaving the front door open, I ducked behind the portieres of the alcove in the foyer.

Just in time. Mr. Rocco came charging out and stopped short of the front door, his manner that of a bull entering the ring with the intention of disassembling a matador only to find that the latter was still out to lunch. For a moment I thought he was going to snort and paw the carpet. Then Thelma arrived, and I was pleased to observe, through the chink in the curtain, that she was limping.

"Gone!" Mr. Rocco fumed.

"Probably gone for the cops," Thelma guessed. "Let's give this joint a quick casing, and split."

Mr. Rocco stowed his gun, and the two hastened off into the Tranquility Room. Behind me was the door that, unknown to the general public, connected the Valhalla Funeral Parlor with the Bon Ton Furniture Emporium, and to slip through it and lock it securely on the other side was the work of a split second. Possibly less.

Five minutes later, I was down at the Fire and Police Station, pouring my story into the astonished ears of Lum Gormley.

"Lemme get this straight," he said, as I paused for breath. "You say a couple of total strangers came into your place and started shooting it up when they discovered one of your bodies had gone and vanished? Orlo, have you been sniffing the embalming fluid again?"

"It's true, Lum!" I panted. "And this Rocco had a gun about yea long, and Thelma—that's the woman—wanted him to kill me with it when they couldn't find Mr. Bermondsey."

"Orlo," said Lum patiently, "things like that just don't happen in Kniffleboro."

"Just a moment," said a new voice, and I became aware that there were others in attendance—two men, the shorter and balder of whom had stepped forward. "I am Thaddeus Hackaberry, representing the county coroner's office. This is Rodney Uncapher, an assistant district attorney. Am I to understand that the corpse we were to pick up has somehow disappeared from your custody?"

"This could be a very serious matter," chimed in Mr. Uncapher, frowning.

"I thought being threatened with a gun was sort of serious too," I said.

Hackaberry waved that aside. "Whether or not that part of your story is true, you have admitted that a corpse for which you accepted responsibility is somehow unaccounted for, and we can't have people strewing bodies about in this cavalier manner."

"I believe Section 576.12, sub-paragraph three of the state statutes calls for penalties of one to five years and a fine up to one thousand dollars," Uncapher added. He seemed disappointed that the information failed to draw a round of applause.

"Look," I said, "it seems to me it's a good deal more important to find out who this Mr. Bermondsey might be, and why these people are interested in him, and who this Tony is. Maybe it's tied in with that

APB that Chief Gormley—"

"Hey!" cried Lum, leaping to his feet and staring out the window. "Is that the couple you were describing, Orlo? Just went by in that car?"

He dashed outside, with Mr. Hackaberry at his heels, while I went in the opposite direction. The feeling had been growing that I was getting nowhere and that further discussion might well find me out of circulation altogether, behind bars. So I nipped out the back door as they went out the front. The streets were clear, as they so often are in Kniffleboro, as I hot-footed it back to the Bon Ton, where I collapsed into a sectional sofa sale-priced at two hundred and thirty-nine dollars.

The state of collapse lasted only about five seconds, because it came to me that time was of the essence and I'd better get back to the receiving room. Ten minutes from now it could well be crawling with coroners and assistant district attorneys and police chiefs, trampling under any chance for me to find a clue to Mr. Bermondsey's disappearance.

So I returned via the doorway unknown to the general public and hurried back downstairs—to find that the receiving room was not unoccupied. Rudy Hofmeister was there, leaning on his carpet sweeper, wearing coveralls and his usual bemused expression, as though someone had just handed him an equation of Einstein's and asked for an explanation.

"There you are!" I said, and in my distraught frame of mind the words emerged with a good deal of zap. "Good of you to drop by. How many times do I have to tell you not to keep your bag lunches in the drawers?"

Rudy brightened. "Oh, yeah. I forgot."

"You didn't happen to move a body and forget where you put it, did you?"

"Body?" said Rudy.

"Body!" echoed a different voice with an unpleasant rasp to it. "I am very interested in that body. Where is it?"

I turned. A man stepped from behind the door, as Rudy attempted, but quickly abandoned, an introduction. Like Mr. Rocco, he was wearing a dark pinstripe. Like Mr. Rocco, he had unfriendly eyes. Like Mr. Rocco, he was pointing a gun at my midsection.

"You're looking for Mr. Bermondsey," I said, hazarding a guess. It

was so obviously successful that I hazarded another. "Would you be Tony, by any chance?"

This provoked a more enthusiastic response—a firm grip on my necktie and a pistol barrel in my left nostril, to be exact. "How'd you know that, Mac?"

I disengaged myself gingerly. "A man named Rocco and a female named Thelma were here earlier. They seemed to think you'd already been here. And they didn't find Mr. Bermondsey either, if you're interested."

Tony's expression became markedly less genial. "So Rocco was here. And now you know I was here. Well, I expect they might find a couple of bodies if they come looking again."

He raised the gun, but fraught with interest though this action was, I was even more fascinated by what was happening just behind him. I strove to keep my eyes on Tony's as a hand and arm appeared at the doorway, the former clutching a Sample 0-151-A Bronze Funerary Urn, Plain, which presently clanged off Tony's head and terminated his active part in the proceedings.

Rodney Uncapher stepped in, attached to the hand, arm, and funerary urn. "That man was going to kill you!" he announced.

"I don't know why I've become so unpopular lately." In the sudden sense of relief, my nerves were flapping like a loose windowshade.

In answer to my query, Uncapher explained that he had been intrigued by the fact that when everyone else at the station had gone haring off after Lum Gormley, I had headed in the opposite direction. So he had followed me, fetching up here in time to overhear Tony's threat.

"Now," he said, when with Rudy's help we had trussed up Tony and filed him away to await police action, "I must admit I was skeptical of your story, but this has convinced me that something very peculiar is going on. Let's have it once more."

So I went through it again. "Oddly enough," I concluded, "not one of these people has seemed particularly interested in any of Mr. Bermondsey's effects. They're after the body itself for some reason."

"I wonder why," Uncapher mused. "And I wonder where. The body, I mean."

I took a deep breath. "I don't know why, but I have an idea who and where . . ."

In Kniffleboro, the sidewalks roll up promptly at nine-thirty, and the consumption of electricity dwindles to three taverns and a movie theater that's open only on weekends, so Uncapher and I had only starlight to see by during our vigil—hardly enough to see a hand in front of your face. However, the situation was one that tended to concentrate one's sense of hearing wonderfully, and it was not too long after midnight, when even most of the nocturnal creatures had decided to call it a night, that I nudged Uncapher. There were footsteps approaching, very quietly. Then a tiny flicker of light from a carefully screened flashlight. Then the sound of shoveling that seemed to go on interminably until there was a *thunk!* followed by more digging and then scraping sounds.

"Now!" I whispered, and Uncapher and I arose and moved toward the noises, he flicking a quick signal with a tiny penlight.

And all at once there were a dozen other men around and brilliant lights winked on to illuminate the freshly opened grave of Dr. Maud Millmoss. It was also occupied by Mr. Bermondsey, displaying a kind of patient resignation, and Lum Gormley, showing considerable surprise.

"I thought it was funny," I told Rodney Uncapher later, "when Lum hollered that he'd seen a car go by with Rocco and Thelma in it, because I was facing the window and *I* hadn't noticed any car. So I wondered if he was trying to divert attention from my remark about the APB on Mr. Bermondsey, on the chance that you might know there was no such bulletin. I don't know where he got his information about Mr. Bermondsey."

Uncapher was watching the coroner examine Mr. Bermondsey, now laid out on an examining table. "I think it'll turn out that Gormley was one of the informants Rocco mentioned as part of Tony's operation. And I'm looking forward to checking further into his finances. Somehow, I doubt that his wife's money paid for all of that house and car and lifestyle of his. We've suspected a local link in the Mexico-Canada drug traffic for some time, and he may fill the bill."

"But how did anybody know where Mr. Bermondsey had got to?"

"There was a tracer under the fender of his car," said Uncapher. "It got smashed when the car went into the ditch, and they lost track of him."

"Anyway," I continued, "Lum was ordered to get Mr. Bermondsey, so he showed up at my place, and while I was setting up for Dr. Millmoss's memorial service he moved Mr. Bermondsey into her coffin—knowing we'd already had the viewing and that the coffin wouldn't be opened again. Then he told me it was the wrong body and left me thinking it was still in the drawer. It wasn't until I learned about Rudy's lunch bag having been left in the same drawer that I realized the body must have been gone long before noon, rather than while I was away from the parlors. And the only person who could have taken it was Lum Gormley."

Mr. Hackaberry came over, looking baffled. "We've been over him with a fine-toothed comb. There's nothing on him at all."

"How about inside him?"

"Nothing there that shouldn't be there."

"There's got to be something!" Uncapher growled. "They weren't all threatening Mr. Bostwick and going to all that trouble for the fun of it."

"The amusement value was practically nil," I agreed.

We all stood around looking at Mr. Bermondsey, who remained totally unimpressed. He had a head of inordinately thick black hair, not one of which turned under our scrutiny. And it was while staring at this that I had a thought.

"I wonder," I mused, "if someone read the same book I did—about how some ancient Greeks or Romans used to send secret messages back and forth? Got a clipper, Mr. Hackaberry?"

Ten minutes later, Mr. Bermondsey was sporting a bald cranium, on which, we saw as we all leaned forward breathlessly, was clearly tattooed a nine-digit number.

"Well, I'll be!" cried Mr. Hackaberry, looking at me as though I had just conjured a dozen silk scarves out of his ear. "But what does it mean?"

Rodney Uncapher cleared his throat. "Of course, we can't say for sure—yet—but I shouldn't be at all surprised if that weren't the authorization number for a Swiss bank account. Probably one stuffed full of profits from that drug traffic I was telling you about."

It was after seven in the morning before I finally returned to the Bon Ton and staggered in the door. My eyelids seemed to be filled

with foundry sand and my jaws set in an automatic yawn sequence, and I was about to pass out on the sale-priced sectional sofa when I noticed it was already occupied. By Rudy Hofmeister.

I agitated him back into consciousness. He yawned and stretched, opened one eye and said, "Oh—hi, boss."

"Out!" I demanded. "You've test-run that sofa long enough; now it's my turn."

"I was waiting up for you," he said. "Did you ever find that Mr. Bermondsey?"

I yawned and sank back on the sofa. "Yeah. He was with Dr. Millmoss."

Rudy smiled. "That's nice."

About to drop off, I opened my eyes and fixed them on Rudy as best I could. "Nice?"

"Sure. I'll bet it's been fifty-sixty years since Dr. Millmoss was out with a fella," said Rudy.

I knew no more for several hours.

There are those who can bear to face dreadful memories and those who can't . . .

"Tell me, Auntie," I said again. "Tell me."

"Tell you what, dear?" she asked, her eyes too innocent, too young for her many years. "What is it you want to know?"

Over and over and over. Her mind going back to that of a child's, and mine working itself into a frenzy.

"About my nightmares," I tried to say patiently. "I've told you about what I saw when I was a little girl, and my headaches get worse all the

time and I know they'd get better if just someone would tell me what it was. Whenever I asked they said I was 'imagining' things—who could possibly imagine what I saw?—or else they said it was all a bad dream. Was it? *That's* what I want to know!"

"But you're grown up now," said Aunt Sara, "so why do you bother with something that happened so long ago?"

"Because it's an obsession!" I all but screamed at her, my patience gone. "I've told you and told you! Who was it I saw out in the springhouse?"

After a moment Aunt Sara said slyly, "If I tell you will you let me go? Back to my own house?"

"Why, of course, dear," I said, my voice soothing now. "You know that. It's just that I thought it was better for you to stay here with me for a while, because you do get confused, you know; you're safer here with me. For a while."

"Until I tell you," she said, and sometimes I wasn't so sure she was senile, after all. But how else could I keep her with me? Because I had to know. All these years and the waking nightmares and the sleeping nightmares and the migraine headaches and my awareness that what had happened was something I should have forgotten years ago, but couldn't. Once I knew, I could forget. For weeks now I had had Aunt Sara living with me; for weeks I had tried coercion and coaxing and veiled threats and nagging and anything else I could think of, and she would always change the subject and act like an obstinate nine-year-old.

Nine-year-old. That's how old I was when it happened. So many years ago and it was still obsessing me. A dream? A hallucination? A story remembered from some of those that Aunt Sara had used to tell us children? In those days she wrote children's stories, and sold them, but she always told them to us first, to see how we reacted.

The family was scattered and gone now, the great old patriarch whom I remembered vaguely, the aunts and uncles and cousins, living their own lives, far removed from the center core of the family as it once was. But why? What had happened to that inviolate unity, the family that to my grandfather was closer than God or country, a unity that he had instilled into his young to the extent that in case of need or a family "meeting" they would drop everything and hurry to the old family homestead in the coastal hills of California, the ranch which in

other parts of the country would be called a farm, the old-fashioned house with the vines almost shrouding it, the smell of fresh or rotting fruit, depending on the time of year, the grove down by the rushing creek, with its platform of seasoned wood, built-in benches around it, where the family reunions were held—with, of course, Grandfather always presiding. A benevolent dictator, loving, stern, always fair, meting out justice, giving his orders in the kindliest way imaginable, and everyone following them, not from fear but from loyalty.

And then suddenly there was nothing. No more family meetings, Grandfather looking old and frail, the others—the four sons and two daughters—going back to their own family units and living their own private lives.

Because I was little when all this happened, the people of my grandfather's fief are confused in my mind, except that they were all relatives by blood or marriage, and that we were once a happy unit belonging to our patriarch. But then the time came when a wedge entered into the family relationships, and Grandfather grew older and quieter and no longer wielded his power. He lived alone and his descendants lived their separate lives that no longer touched his.

The last day there: the final reunion, with Grandfather dead for many weeks and the dismantling of the house and farm by the survivors. No tears, but a hushed and somber atmosphere. Then the awful memory of chasing my little dog into the hills and coming upon a fieldstone cabin with barred windows behind a huge boulder, and with the curiosity of a child clambering up and looking in and screaming and falling to the ground, then running and stumbling and crawling and sobbing my way back to the house and my mother. The nightmares have been with me ever since, increasing rather than lessening, for at first, after that terrible day of discovery, my memory was blocked out. No one ever answered my questions, no one ever told me anything except that I must have imagined what I had seen, or else that I had been dreaming. But I had not been asleep.

So when visiting Aunt Sara one day after my mother was dead I found that she had fallen and injured herself slightly, and that she had neglected to get any food in the house for herself, I brought her home with me. She lived at a great distance and I had seldom seen her, but I don't know where she got the idea that I wouldn't let her return to her own cottage until she told me about the thing in the springhouse,

because of course she was free to go as soon as she was well enough to travel and as soon as I could be assured that she was no longer confused.

"Tell me, Auntie," I pleaded with her. "Tell me about what I saw in the springhouse. I have to know. It *wasn't* my imagination—I saw it—no one would ever tell me, and I will die of these headaches and dreams unless I know."

So she told me. At last.

"I don't know," she began, "how much you remember of our family, the way it was. Probably nothing, since you were so young when the events took place that ruptured our family unity. No doubt you just remember us as distant relatives whom you saw only occasionally if at all, but there were once seven of us, and a very close family we were—love and total obedience to your grandfather were the precepts of our lives.

"Your grandfather was a patriarch in the truest sense of the word—a benevolent one, to be sure, but his word was law and we were glad for his guidance: he was kind and loving and attentive to our needs. One of the first things we learned from him was loyalty—not just to God and country, but first and foremost to the family. We learned early to rally around any family member who was having any kind of difficulties and, even more important, to keep our lips sealed outside the family. Our unity, he made us understand, must remain intact always and it was to be handed down to our children.

"What he didn't understand was that times change, people change, and generations change. His grandchildren have gone out into the world and have families of their own, and there is no longer any unity anywhere. But in those days we truly did cleave only unto each other. From Father we learned total protection. Within us and to all purposes we had utter security. Which, we know now, is the worst thing that could happen to us—"

"Auntie," I pleaded, "please tell me. Why were there seven of you? Who was the seventh?"

"His name was Donnie," she continued, her voice growing clear, her eyes beautiful with intelligence. "He was our little brother who came along years after we thought our family was complete. He was the cause of our mother's death, for Father had assured her there was

no need to go into town to the hospital when she had shown alarming tendencies throughout her pregnancy.

"The rest of us raised Donnie. He was a beautiful child, with gold-colored curls and a laughing way of teasing us all, and a way of retreating into himself at times as if he were living in another world and had closed the door against us. I can't explain how much we loved him, the way we cared for him and protected him and cherished him. Donnie. Sometimes I think he was a figment of our imaginations—"

"I want to know about the springhouse," I said impatiently. "Tell me what I want to know, Auntie."

"That is what I am trying to do, because I want to go home and you won't let me until I tell you. That is not what you say but it is the truth—Donnie was our darling, our loved one, we would have spoiled him if he had been spoilable, but he was just himself—sunny, fun-loving, sometimes disobedient as children will be but always so contrite afterward that no one held it against him. But then something happened to him.

"He became very sick—infantile paralysis they called it then—and all of us nursed him and prayed. He was sick for a long time and when he finally recovered he had a slight limp which he was never able to overcome. He was the same Donnie, but different, as if the shadow of a cloud had moved over the sunswept gold of a summer meadow, and this made him more of a treasure than ever.

"Then—it is difficult for me to talk of this, but it is what you wanted to know. I shall put it as quickly and briefly as possible. Donnie was eighteen years old. He loved people and animals and the hills more than anything in the world. He now lived alone with Father on the ranch. The rest of us were married and settled in various small towns in the valley."

She paused, her eyes distant, as if a death of sorts, long past, was now upon her.

"Donnie was eighteen," she said again, "at the time a girl on the next farm was found raped and murdered. Suspicion rested on Donnie because he was the last person who was seen talking to her. And he ran. From fear, not guilt, for he had always been protected, you see.

"The family became totally cohesive once again. We all took turns sheltering him and evading the sheriff and his deputies who, of course, looked to us first of all. But we knew the hiding places up in the hills

and down along the creekbed, and we fed him and saw that he had shelter. We protected him in every way we could until an in-law turned him in.

"That in-law was my husband, who was a small-town lawyer, totally devoted to his profession and appalled at the idea of a whole family making itself an accessory after the fact and defying the law." She paused, her face a study in pain.

"We had had a happy marriage. There were no children, but that drew us closer together. But my bond with my family was so close that from the point of his betrayal on our marriage disintegrated.

"Anyway, Donnie was caught and put in a jail, behind bars, where the childlike quality in his nature became old and lost and helpless. He was still our Donnie, but in a way unknown. The civilized world had grabbed hold of him and had shaken him and stamped on him and left its mark of brutality where none had been before.

"Of course, there was a trial. There was little money amongst us, but we donated every cent we had. We mortgaged our homes and farms, we denied our children a higher education, we sacrificed our life's savings and went into debt to save Donnie. And save him we did. We lied for him, we gave him alibis that did not exist because we knew he could not have done this terrible thing and he was part of our family.

"After the trial, the family separated once again, although our hope for an independent future was gone. The homes of some of us were gone and poverty and bitterness on the part of our husbands and wives became a way of life. Our children left home, some of them, and wandered off into strange lives of their own. There were separations and divorces. There was friction and lack of direction, no longer a unified family center—all of us went in different directions, all of us were destroyed. Father would call a reunion of the family, and scarcely anyone would come. We hardly communicated. No one cared. Father grew aged and bitter along with the rest of us.

"But we still had our Donnie, who roamed the hills and regained his lost youth and found life rare and beautiful once more."

She paused for a longer time now, and I could see the beads of perspiration on her tired, aging face. I wiped them away with a clean cloth and hated myself for forcing her to bring up the past. But I had to know.

"Tell me, Auntie," I whispered. "What happened?"

"There were some gypsies camped down by the creek," she said, "and Father, in his kindness, let them stay there. One evening, while he was sitting on the porch, he heard the sound of a young girl's screams, and he hurried down the road as fast as he could manage and found that Donnie had thrown her to the ground and was on top of her, his hands squeezing her throat.

"Then Father knew all our sacrifices had been in vain—his kingdom destroyed, his children drawn apart and embittered, his grandchildren God knew where, all life as he had structured it gone with our misguided protection of his murderous youngest child."

Sick at heart, I sat at her feet and waited.

"Father was the kindest of men, but he could be a stern judge too. So, with grim determination, he imprisoned Donnie in the springhouse up behind that great boulder, and every day, rain or shine, he made his way up the hill with food for him. After my husband betrayed Donnie's whereabouts he no longer trusted any of us, so he told no one what he had done.

"Then one day, there alone in his house, Father had a stroke. When he was found he was taken to the local hospital where he could neither speak nor write. He was in a coma for weeks. And when finally the halting words came out, we learned what had happened to Donnie. But by then it was too late. Without food or water, Donnie had died. And, once more drawing together, the family made a vow never to speak of it to a living soul. And we left him there. That was what you saw."

There was silence after she stopped speaking, and deep within my head the pain started again, worse than ever before. Lights darted in front of my eyes and the agony went through my whole body. I could not walk. I crept to the bathroom and was sick. I was blinded, except for the brilliant flashes of light, and aware of nothing but the most unendurable pain.

For I knew that my aunt had lied.

Suddenly, in the midst of my fearful pain, came the memory that I had almost blocked from my mind. I had never forgotten the horrible sight that had met my eyes as I looked through the barred windows of the springhouse—a body long dead but not yet a skeleton—but not

until now had my mind allowed any of the details to stay in my memory. But now, with the stabbing pains and the knowledge that my aunt had lied, the details returned to me.

The man I had seen in tattered rags on the floor of the springhouse had had straight black hair, not the golden curls described by my aunt. And another memory returned to me from my childhood: my aunt's husband had had straight black hair.

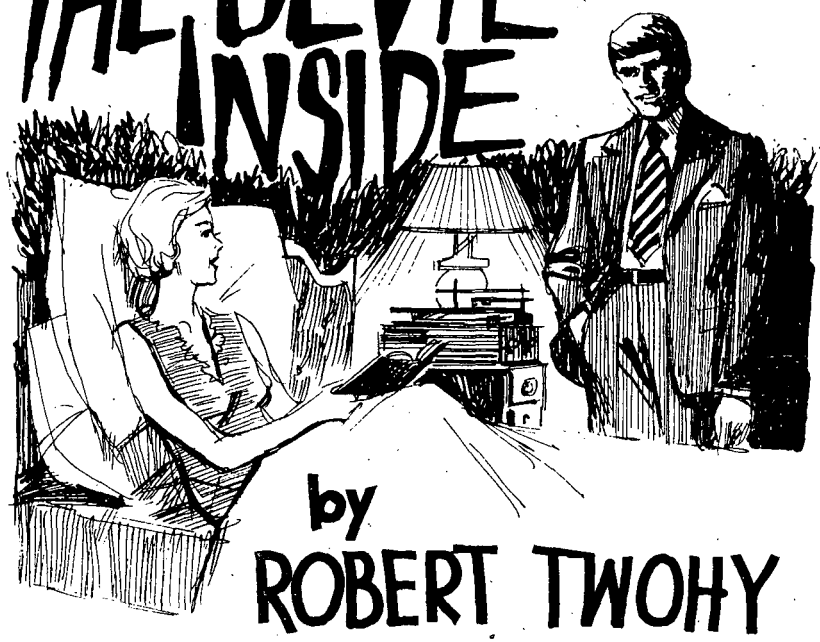
I crept back to her from the bathroom and she said plaintively, "May I please go home now? You promised."

"Yes," I whispered, "but first you must tell me the truth. Who was the man in the springhouse? Tell me, Auntie. Was he your husband? Did your father put him there because he had betrayed the family? And is Donnie still roaming the hills, still free? Still—dangerous?"

But she did not speak to me again. She smiled her innocent smile, and I could see that she was wandering far away once more, perhaps forever, into her healing world of gentle hills, waving meadows, and soft clouds in the sky.

"And the Devil did grin . . ."

THE DEVIL INSIDE



by ROBERT TWOHY

At 4:20 that Friday in May, Richard Haydrick called his dentist and told him that a tooth had dropped out.

"While I was having coffee with the boss. It fell right in the cup, plunk. Kind of embarrassing."

"I can imagine. Any pain?"

"No. It's that cap you put on three years ago."

"Do you have it?"

"Sure."

"Bring it around, and I'll cement it back on the peg."

"I can't today, I've got an appointment with an insurance man. It doesn't show except when I smile—then I look like a vampire. You won't be open tomorrow, I suppose."

"For you I will be. How about ten o'clock?"

"Sounds good, Jim."

"Maybe afterwards we can go target shooting."

"Yeah. It's been quite a while."

"I'll see you at ten, then." The dentist hung up.

Haydrick got his jacket, said goodnight to Jane, the receptionist, and left the building on San Francisco's Montgomery Street where Consolidated Air Filter Company had its headquarters. Being Friday, most banks were open until 6:00. He walked two blocks to his bank and wrote a check for $1,000, asking for the cash in hundred-dollar bills. Then he stood in front of the bank, waving at passing cabs. Finally one stopped. He got in and told the driver, "519 Pepper Street."

That would have surprised his dentist, because Pepper, near Chinatown, is a short street of crumbling frame duplexes and triplexes. No reputable insurance agent would have offices there. Pepper is a smorgasbord of working people, students, artists, writers. Rents, by current standards, are cheap, and the atmosphere is permissive.

519 was a triplex. On the left glass door was a vacancy sign. Over the doorbell on the right was a Chinese name. Over the doorbell in the middle was a printed card: FLORIO.

Haydrick pressed this middle bell, and after a few moments the door sighed, wheezed, then sprang open. A flight of steep, gloomy stairs went up. At the top stood a thin man with curly dark hair shot with grey. He peered down at the well dressed, heavy, florid young man who stood below, his eyes tight with the look of one who has anticipated a friend and sees a stranger—and fears the bill-collector.

Haydrick said, "Anton Florio?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Richard Haydrick."

"Haydrick." Relief snuffed the look of tension from the dark liquid eyes. "You must be Louise's husband. Come on up."

He wore a shabby green sweater and dark pants splotched with myriad hues of paint. His long bony face was grooved with lines of

hardship and discouragement.

Haydrick, breathing heavily from the climb, followed him into a front room. Abstract paintings and charcoal drawings hung on the walls, all signed with a flourishing *Anton,* and most of them dated month and year. An easel stood near the center of the room on spread-out newspapers. A fresh canvas rested on it, ready to be brought to life.

The paintings on the wall were bright, the colors seeming to pulse; obviously, Florio knew his craft. Haydrick's wife had told him that, and she knew: 31 years old, a perennial art student, first in New York, then in Chicago and Paris, now in San Francisco. San Francisco teems with artists who teach, but Louise Haydrick had chosen Florio, unknown except to the cognoscenti, to study under. Well, so he was good; you can be good and still not make your fortune.

Florio said, "You wanted to see me about something?"

"Can I sit down? This may take a while."

There were a couple of chairs, one wood, the other overstuffed. Florio waved him to the latter and took the hard one. Haydrick said, "My wife has mentioned that you want to move to New York."

"That's right. There are better opportunities there for an artist."

"But you're too broke to move." Haydrick lit a cigarette, and smiled crookedly. "It's always money at the bottom of problems."

The artist's voice was sharp. "What point are you making?"

"Do you find my wife at least a little attractive?"

"What?"

"I'm not baiting you. I'm asking."

Florio got up. He got an ashtray, which he set on the arm of Haydrick's chair. "Listen, Haydrick. I haven't seen your wife since she finished the course, two months ago."

"I didn't say you did."

"She was a student of mine, that's all. When she was here, another student, a middle-aged woman, was here also. Do you want her name?"

Haydrick waved a meaty hand. "I'm not hinting anything."

"Then what are you doing?" He had taken his seat again.

"I'm trying to find out whether you find Louise repulsive."

"What kind of a question is that?"

"That skinny white face doesn't turn you off?"

"Have you had some drinks?"

"No. What I'm saying is that Louise isn't my type. She never was. I know what my type is, and I mean to get it. I want what I want."

The artist stared. Haydrick went on, "I think of staying married to her and it makes me sick. But I'm trapped. You know why I'm trapped?"

"No. How could I?"

"I'm trapped because her uncle, George Wensley, is the boss where I work, and where I plan to stay. I was a clerk in the stockroom when I set out to marry Louise. Her parents are dead and she was Wensley's ward. I'm a salesman there now, and my future is solid. But if I went for a divorce, without a damn good reason, he'd give me the bounce. But he's old-fashioned, and if I had a good old-fashioned reason. . . Do you begin to get the picture?"

"I don't begin to get anything. I don't know what you're talking about."

"I want a real woman, not a limp dishrag. I want to get a divorce without making an enemy of Wensley. Louise's relationship with you—"

"She has no relationship with me!"

"All right, a former relationship. As a student." He pressed out his cigarette in the ashtray, and eyed the artist. "Students often get a thing about their teachers."

Florio's mouth was drawn. "I've got work to do. Get to the point, Haydrick."

Haydrick gave him a twisted smile. "It's not a nice plan. But I'm not a nice person. You might have noticed that. I'm pretty unscrupulous. I think you can be too. Anyone can. A little temptation is all it takes."

He took from his pocket a fat, glistening wallet. "Five hundred now, and $2,500 more when the job's done. Plus—" he reached in the wallet "—$300 for expenses." He pulled out and spread in his hand eight of the new hundred-dollar bills. Florio stared, eyes wide, deep grooves showing alongside his drawn mouth.

"Three thousand dollars. Enough for a trip to New York, a stake until you can make gallery connections. And what do you have to do for it? Just a little corruption."

"I won't touch your money until I hear—"

"But you do want to hear, don't you?"

Florio's eyes went from the money to Haydrick's eyes. He whispered, "What kind of devil are you?"

Haydrick smiled widely. "We all have a devil inside. And this—" he fluttered the money "—is what brings him out."

There was a table nearby with paper and brushes and pens on it. Reaching, he laid the money on it.

"Like I said, I'm a salesman. At least once a week I'm out of town overnight. My wife is alone. I live in a sub-division down the peninsula, Tosca Heights. . . Do you have a car?"

"No."

"You won't need one. It's 58 minutes by bus from the terminal at Seventh and Mission to Euclid Avenue on the El Camino. That's the stop for Tosca Heights. If you catch the 2:07 night bus, you get off at Euclid at 3:05 on the nose."

The artist sat still, staring. Haydrick lit another cigarette.

"You walk up Euclid, two blocks west. Then one block north, to Collinwood Drive. On that corner is a service station and a phone booth. The station is closed at night—nobody to see you. There you call the Tosca Heights Cab Company and ask for a cab in ten minutes, at 1162 Collinwood."

He drew on the cigarette, then went on. "You walk west up Collinwood, two blocks, to 1162. That's my house. But before you get there, you'll see a gap in the hedge. You slip through it. If you duck, you can't be seen from the street as you get near the front porch.

"You wait near the porch. The cab pulls up in front of the house. You walk out down the driveway. You tell the driver to drive you to San Francisco, to your address here.

"You do this once a week for the next month or so. And that's all you have to do for $3,000."

He sat back and watched the artist. After a while, Florio said, "I get the idea."

"I figured you would."

"I'm supposed to be having a thing with your wife while you're out of town."

"That's it. Across the street is an old widow whose bedroom gives on the street. She has insomnia. She'll look out when she hears the cab. She'll see you as you pass under the streetlight in front of my house. She'll have her opinion. So will the cabdriver."

"It's dirty, degrading—"

"Sure it is. That's why I'll pay $3,000. That makes the devil inside sit up and take notice, doesn't it?"

The artist was silent. Haydrick said, "She's in the way of my life. I've got one life. I'm going to live it the way I want to." He motioned to the money on the table. "Do you want it or don't you?"

"So I frame her, and you have witnesses. What then?"

"I find a love note in her drawer signed Anton. I ask the woman across the street if she knows anything. She tells me what she tells me. I go to the cab company. There's proof, in their trip sheets, that I can get a look at with a little bribery. Now I know. I go to her uncle, talk man-to-man. I tell him my humiliation is too much, my faith in Louise is dead, divorce is the only answer. He'll buy it."

He put out his cigarette. "Naturally your name would come up—there has to be reality. But by that time you're on your way to New York."

Florio stood up and moved to the table. His hand went to the money. He put it in his pocket.

Haydrick got up. "I've looked up your phone number in the book. I'll call when I'm going to be out of town. Be ready to go to Tosca Heights on those nights. You have everything straight?"

"1162 Collinwood, Euclid Avenue, two blocks west, one north, 2:07 A.M."

"Good. Now write me the note." He took a pad and a ballpoint pen from the table and held it out to the artist.

Florio said, "What note?"

"Like I told you. I'm going to find a note from you in her bureau."

"I don't like that idea."

"Nobody'll see it. Only her uncle. . . Come on, take it. Write, 'To my love, whom I shall always adore.' Sign it Anton."

Florio grimaced. But seating himself, the pad on his knee, he wrote quickly, tore the sheet from the pad, and handed it to Haydrick.

Haydrick read it, nodded, folded it, and slipped it into his wallet. He went to the door.

Florio said, "Wait a minute. These cab rides. Isn't that a flaw?"

"Why?"

"What do they cost?"

"About $40. You've got enough expense money to cover them."

"I don't mean that. I mean the uncle. Won't he think it strange, a poor artist taking cab trips to the city?"

"There's no other transportation to San Francisco at that hour. He'll think Louise gave you the fare."

Haydrick started down the stairs. The artist stood in the open door. Haydrick turned. "I think I'm slated for Bakersfield next Tuesday. I'll call you on Monday and let you know for sure."

"And it will all be over in a month?"

"More or less." From the bottom of the stairs, Haydrick looked up at him. "A month, more or less, and it'll all be over."

He kept his appointment with the dentist that Saturday, and the cap was cemented back in place. Afterward they went target shooting just outside Burlingame. Haydrick shot 55 and 62 out of 100—which didn't surprise him, he hadn't shot in weeks. Target shooting with a .22 pistol is a skill that has to be kept up.

Over drinks in a Burlingame bar, he told the dentist, "We should do it more often. But it's hard to find the time."

"Don't work too hard, Dick. You're too young to wind up the richest man in the cemetery."

Haydrick tapped his broad chest and smiled. "No danger of that."

"Eat less, then."

"Hmm?"

"You're putting on weight and I notice you're a little short of breath. Drink less, eat less. I don't much like your color." He peered at Haydrick's florid cheeks. "Is there any history of heart in your family?"

"No. I'm healthy as a horse."

"I think you ought to go to a doctor for a checkup."

"Let's change the subject, Jim. You're making me feel morbid."

Actually, he had never felt better. The excitement over what was finally programmed, what was finally going to happen, possessed him. He had dreamed of the plan for weeks. When had he realized that he was going to put it into action? He couldn't tell, precisely, when the dream had become a scheme, when it had crystallized into a workable answer to his wish to be free of Louise. It had depended on Florio. And Florio was perfect. The perfect tool, shaped by poverty into just what Haydrick needed: a man ripe for corruption.

Corruption. Haydrick had insights into it. He knew it was total. He

himself was corrupt, he faced it, shrugged and smiled at the realization. A man had moral values, or he got what he wanted—he couldn't have it both ways. Florio thought that he would be temporarily corrupt, then live down his corruption—but he wouldn't.

On Monday Haydrick called the artist and confirmed the Bakersfield trip. Wednesday, on his return, he called from the airport. Florio said that all had gone smoothly, and as he was getting in the cab he had noticed a flutter of the curtain across the street.

The following week the message was the same: no problem.

Haydrick said, "It's a soft job you have."

Florio said grimly, "I'll be glad when it's over."

"A few more weeks," said Haydrick.

Back home, he looked at Louise's paintings on the livingroom walls. Insipid things, he thought. Just like she is herself.

There was nothing insipid about her insurance policy, though. On the death of either of them, the other would receive $200,000. That was something Florio didn't need to know.

He turned. Louise had come in from the kitchen. She was watching him.

"You're home. Was it a hard trip?"

"No. Why?"

"You have a strange look. Lately your face is often. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Often what?"

"Thick-looking. Dark."

"I feel all right."

"You've put on weight. You eat and drink too much."

"I've had some problems."

"I wish you'd share them with me. You don't share anything with me any more."

"They're working out. It won't be long."

She turned away. He looked at her pallid hair and smiled.

Another out-of-town trip, then another. Then the trip he had been waiting for was scheduled—the trip to Sacramento.

He said to Florio on the phone, "Thursday. It will be the last time you have to ride the bus to Tosca Heights."

"That will be the end of it?"

"The end of it. I'll come to your place and pay you on Friday."

"That's good news. I'm sick of it."

"There's a bus that leaves the terminal at 10:09. Take that one."

"Not the 2:07? Why?"

"I've got my reasons. And it'll end it for you that much sooner."

"All right, the 10:09. And you'll pay me on Friday night."

"That's what I said."

"Then I can start planning my departure for New York."

"You can start planning anything you want." Haydrick hung up.

Louise walked to the car with him on Thursday morning. She said, "Whatever it is that's on your mind, whatever has changed you, I want to know what it is."

"All right." He got in the car. "When I get back, you'll know."

He got through the day by keeping his mind on business. Then it was time to leave.

The receptionist said, "Will you be staying at the Treasure Cove Motel in Sacramento?"

He answered, "I didn't like it too well last time. They gave me a stuffy room. . . I'll stop somewhere, and call you first thing in the morning."

"Have a good trip."

He drove to Sacramento—it was company policy to drive, not take a plane, to central California points—and registered at a motel called Ranchland. It was after 7:00.

He drove to a bar downtown called The Carnival Room. It was crowded, as he knew from previous visits it would be. Down the block was a theater marquee announcing *Slap Shot,* with Paul Newman. He had known it was playing, having previously checked the Sacramento newspaper in the library. He had noted the time of the last showing—9:20. Tuesday afternoon he had passed up some business calls and gone off to the San Francisco theater where the film was showing. That was to be the central part of his alibi—not that he was likely to need it with the case he was going to give them. But taking care of every detail was part of the excitement of the plan.

He stood a few moments away from the crowded, chattering bar. There were two bartenders, both in a hurry. Neither was looking at

faces—they mixed their drinks and picked up their money. One was a short dark youngster, the other red-faced, aging, with a bald spot. Haydrick fixed their faces in his mind, then turned and went out. It was nearly 8:00 when he got back in his car.

An hour and a half later he was across the Bay Bridge, skimming along the Bayshore Freeway over downtown San Francisco. Some forty minutes after that he turned off the freeway, up the road marked TOSCA HEIGHTS—2 MILES.

The service station at the corner of Collinwood and Lester was dark. A few cars were parked there—there were always a few, left overnight for servicing. He pulled up next to them and cut the motor. Quickly, he walked the two blocks to his house and slipped through the gap in the hedge. Crouching, he made his way to the porch and opened the door with his key. From behind the bedroom door, he could hear classical music.

Pausing at the desk in the living room, he pulled open a bottom drawer and took from it his target pistol. He had loaded it weeks before. Leaving the drawer open, he went to the bedroom door and opened it.

She was in bed, in her blue nightgown, reading. She gaped in astonishment. "You're home!"

"Change of plan." His right hand was behind him. He moved to the record player, and with his left hand increased the volume.

She was staring. "Your face. Your eyes. What. . .what's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"You look—"

"Like death?" He raised his right arm; and as she started to scream shot her in the temple.

She lay as if broken, as if dropped from a height. Her empty eyes stared at him. Blood showed in her pale hair, a gleaming badge of blood. He gazed at her, and felt calm, sure, the master of his destiny.

He put the gun in his pocket. From his wallet he took the note he had had Florio write, unfolded it, and set it on the bureau. He wiped it carefully with his handkerchief, front and back, then, still with the handkerchief, put it into her hands, pressing her dead fingers against it. Then he opened the bureau drawer and put the note in back, under her lingerie.

He turned off the record player, then walked to the front door,

opened it slightly, and stood listening. There was no sound outside.

Pulling the door shut behind him, he crouched, and passed behind the hedge to the opening. The street was empty.

He walked down it swiftly. At the service station he slid into his car and drove back to the freeway, back toward San Francisco.

He drove without pushing. It was 11:40 when he stopped on Pepper Street, a block above and across the street from Florio's place. Florio would be in a cab now, on his way back to the city.

Haydrick waited. It became 11:50. Then midnight. 12:05.

A cream-colored cab came sailing up Pepper and slid to a stop in front of 519. Haydrick watched Florio emerge from the cab, climb the stairs, open the middle door, close it behind him. The cab had moved away, turned at the corner. Haydrick got out of his car and walked down the street.

He crossed the street, climbed the stairs, and pushed the middle bell. The door gasped and heaved open.

From above, the artist peered down. "I didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"A change of plan. I can pay you tonight." He climbed the worn staircase. "How did it go?"

"As always. I'm glad to be finished with it."

Florio had shed his jacket. His eyes were bright as he waited for Haydrick to produce the money.

Haydrick took out his wallet. "Two thousand, five hundred," he said, handing Florio a sheaf of bills. "You'd be crazy not to count it."

The artist took the money and started to thumb through it. Swiftly, Haydrick slid the pistol from his pocket, put it to the artist's temple, and fired.

Florio fell forward on the table, blood spilling from his head.

Haydrick rescued the money and returned it to his wallet, took his handkerchief, wiped the gun, and pressed it into Florio's limp right hand.

Picking up the phone, he took his pen from his pocket, dialed once with the end of it, and with his handkerchief in front of his mouth said, "Operator? Get me the Tosca Heights Police Department. Quickly."

"Sir, that's a long-distance call. For long distance—"

"Operator, do this yourself, I don't have time. Make note of this. At 1162 Collinwood Drive, Tosca Heights, a woman lies dead. My name

is Florio. I live at 519 Pepper. I killed her. Now I kill myself."

"Sir! Wait a minute!"

Haydrick hung up.

He went downstairs, waited a moment inside the door, then went out quickly, walked to his car, and eased it out of the parking place. Five minutes later, he was on the freeway, heading for the Bay Bridge.

His watch said 2:12 when he pulled into the Ranchland Motel. A reasonable time for a man to get home after a night out in Sacramento—taking in a movie and drinking until closing time at a bar.

He was up at 8:30. Sunlight streamed through the window. A typical sun-drenched Sacramento day.

He put on his blue suit, and packed the brown suit and the hat in his bag. He went to the motel office, where there were pay phones, gave the operator his office number, and fed in coins. He said, after a few moments, "Jane? This is Mr. Haydrick. I'm at the Ranchland Motel—"

"Oh, Mr. Haydrick!"

"What, Jane? What is it?"

"Call your home at once. Mr. Wensley is there."

"At my house? What's he doing there?"

Her voice choked: "He'll tell you. Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Haydrick!"

He got through to his house. Wensley's voice sounded thin with anguish: "Louise is dead, Dick."

"Dead!"

"Some sleazy San Francisco gigolo. . ."

His voice trailed off. A crisp voice came on: "Mr. Haydrick? This is Lieutenant Doneto, Tosca Heights police. Your wife has been murdered, sir."

Haydrick was silent. Then he said, his tone like Wensley's, "No!"

"I'm afraid it's true. A man named Anton Florio. . . Do you know the name?"

"Florio? Yes, he's an art teacher. Louise was taking lessons from him a few months ago. . . Are you saying that Florio killed Louise?"

"It looks like that."

"Do you have him?"

"He's committed suicide."

Wensley's voice came on: "He used your target pistol to kill her."

"My target pistol?"

"Yes. He took it out of the drawer and killed her. They have a note, some witnesses. They say Louise and this gigolo were having an affair. They're wrong. Not Louise. Not our Louise."

"I'll be there as fast as I can."

He drove the 120 miles like a devil on wheels.

Wensley's Mercedes and a blue-and-white police car were parked in front of the house. Some housewives stood on their lawns staring as he swung the car into the drive and slammed to a stop.

He ran inside.

Wensley was in a chair with a drink in his hand. He stood up. His face was red, his eyes bloodshot, his grey hair damp and tangled. He looked ten years older than he had the day before.

"They took her away, Dick." His voice was a broken whisper.

A tall man in a grey suit had also risen. "I'm Lieutenant Doneto. Please accept my sympathies, and try to understand that I have to ask certain questions—"

"First," said Haydrick, "tell me what this horrible thing is all about."

Doneto started to speak, quietly and to the point. When he had finished, Wensley tossed down his drink and whispered, "He tells me and tells me, and it all makes sense—except that it doesn't. Louise wouldn't have been carrying on with this man. Not Louise."

"It's crazy," said Haydrick. "Crazy."

Doneto said, "There's a note from him we found in the bedroom—and we have witnesses, a neighbor who saw him frequently on nights you were away, another who saw him several times—and a couple of cabdrivers who were taken to San Francisco this morning and made positive identification of him as the man they picked up here early a number of mornings. I'm afraid there's no question about it, Mr. Haydrick."

Haydrick went to the table on which the liquor bottle was and poured himself a shot. "How did it happen?"

Doneto said, "Apparently they had a quarrel—maybe she told him she wanted to break it off—and he got your target pistol and shot her."

"How would he know where I kept the pistol?"

"She must have mentioned it. . . He called a cab, much earlier than usual, and went to his place in San Francisco. From there he called

the phone company, reported the death here, and shot himself. You had no idea of their relationship?"

"None. I never met the man."

"You never met him?"

"Never."

Doneto was silent for some minutes. He stared at Haydrick. There was puzzlement in his brown eyes.

Haydrick said, "What is it?"

"You never met him?"

"No. Why does that surprise you?"

"I was at his place early this morning with the San Francisco police. We went through his papers and found a sketch of you. A caricature, but recognizable, with a wide, smiling mouth. It was dated. May 5, 1977. And underneath was lettered, 'Haydrick the Corrupter.' "

Haydrick felt blood throbbing in his temples. His eyes slid from the detective's, and strayed around the room. It was too late to deny his remark. But he waved a hand. "There are several photos of me here, as you can see, some with Louise. Others are in the bedroom. He must have drawn from memory of a photo. Though I can't imagine why he'd want to. Haydrick the Corrupter?" He shook his head. "I don't know why he'd give me a title like that. Maybe he brooded about me, was convinced I was bad for Louise."

"It's odd," Doneto said. "Particularly the mouth. On the left side the drawing shows a pointed tooth, like a fang."

The pounding in Haydrick's head was louder. He turned away, to set his glass on the table. It was a normal gesture. He hoped it was a normal gesture.

He turned back. "A fang? Well, if he hated me, he might want to make me look like a devil—"

"Yes, but then you'd think he'd make them all pointed, or a fang on each side, you know. Why just one? And why off to the side like that?"

"What's the difference? What does it have to do with anything?"

"It's odd," said Doneto.

They looked at each other.

Wensley said, "Wait a minute. That cap of yours, Dick."

"Cap?" said Doneto.

"Yes. For a tooth. While we were having coffee. Remember, Dick? It fell in your cup. You had a pointed stump in the upper left corner of

your mouth."

Doneto said softly, "A pointed stump in the upper left corner. That's what Florio drew."

The blood pounded in Haydrick's head, and he felt a thickness in his chest as the steady eyes of the policeman stayed fixed on him.

"When did the cap fall off?" Doneto said.

"I don't remember."

"It was a Friday," said Wensley. "A Friday early in May. I remember because when we had our Monday sales conference your tooth was normal again."

"A Friday early in May," said Doneto. "What's your dentist's name, Mr. Haydrick?"

"Why? Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know when he fixed your tooth. If the cap fell off the day Florio made that sketch, it would seem that he saw you that day. If he did, it raises questions. What did you talk about? Why should he think of you as The Corrupter? And why did you tell me that you'd never seen him?"

Now the pounding in his chest was heavy, rhythmic. His face was burning. Wensley said, "Are you sick?"

"I'm all right." His voice sounded slurred, strange. Damn Doneto, damn Florio and his sketch. He glared at Doneto. The Lieutenant's face looked twisted, blurred.

"Are you trying to make some kind of case against me?"

"I'm trying to find out the date of a missing tooth. You'd better sit down. You don't look well."

"I'm all right." But suddenly he had to sit. He dropped on the couch. His breath struggled in his lungs, and it was as if a blanket, a thick musty blanket, had come between him and Doneto, Doneto with his hard, accusatory eyes. He had to get through to him, convince him. It wasn't right. All his planning.

"The Ranchland Motel—you can check that. And the Odeon Theater, the Paul Newman movie—ask me about it. I can give you the plot, the cast, everything."

Doneto turned to Wensley. "What's the matter with him?"

"I don't know. I've never seen him this way. Can you get a doctor fast?" Doneto nodded and moved to the phone.

Wensley said, "Lie down, Dick."

"I have to talk. Don't you see he's trying to frame me? There's a bar called The Carnival Room. I went there after the movie. I can describe the bartenders. And the note, the one that they found in the bureau."

"The bureau?" said Doneto, at the phone.

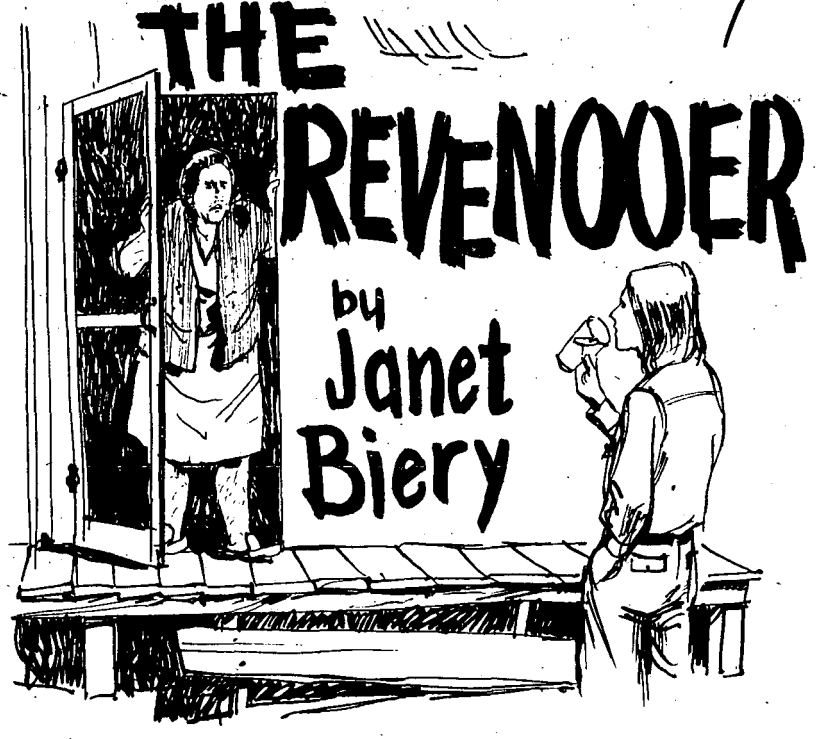
"Yes. *Her* fingerprints are on it, not mine. You have no case, no case! A missing tooth! You'd try to make a case on a missing tooth?"

The blanket was thick over him. It had a dirty, rotten-smell. His chest was on fire. He tried to claw the blanket away from his head. He realized that he had lunged from the couch. He felt himself falling. "Help me!" he tried to cry, but the blanket muffled him and he was on the floor, flames shooting through his chest. Suddenly Florio's face flashed before him.

They heard him whisper, "You devil! You've finished me!"

Doneto hung up the phone, came over and knelt beside Haydrick, put a hand to his chest. Wensley stood over him, gazing down at the empty eyes.

The men in these parts had always got their hooch at Ida's and Abe's . . .



Ida May sat at the quilt frame. Her hands were curled and stiff but she managed to draw the needle through the layers as she stitched the stem of a rose in the center square. Her body rocked to the rhythm of her movements, her stiff shoulders bowed to the effort. Sixty was too old to be making a new quilt but what else was there to do?

In the distance she heard one of Hansen's hounds barking and she let her ear follow the notes. Low and angry, "Don't you come walking

'cross here" drawn into the deep woof, woof, wooooo of parting. She pricked her thick fingers as she pushed her needle up too quickly. Pursing her mouth to clean the blood away, she again heard a dog in the hollow. This time it was the Stevens' cur yipping. She could see in her mind's eye the short-haired mutt scrunched at the heels of some stranger, his neck hair bristling at whoever was heading up the ridge.

Stiffly, Ida scooted back the rocker, working her old hips to the front of the seat, then touching the frame to steady herself upright. She crossed the floor slowly, her legs refusing to limber up. She touched the curtain lightly, pulling the faded cotton back by inches. Her tongue pushed forward under her dark-haired lip as she squinted into the light, trying to see through the distance. Her black eyes glittered as she searched for a blur of movement, but there was nothing but the dark-green line of cedars. Well, there hadn't been enough time. It would take a good walker twenty minutes to climb the steep blind of the mountain to reach her cabin.

She turned around toward the corner and she crossed to the rifle. It felt cold to her touch and she ran her old hand against the blue metal, touching the sights with her thumb. She raised the weapon, pulling the bolt back and checking the load, then snapping it back. Let 'em come. There had been revenooers come up the pass before. Abe had always taken care they stayed away from the treasure hidden against the spring. Once she had seen a revenooer head toward the draw and never come back. If only Abe were still around.

Ida felt cold despite the heat of the day. She turned back to the window to watch. A pair of grackles rose crying against the clear blue sky. He was still coming.

Ida leaned against the worn planking of the wall and continued her guard. Letting the wall hold her, she used the gun as a cane to steady her. She was too old for all this, but then what would she be without the still? Now that Abe was gone, the liquor was all she had to live on. A nip now and then pushed the cold away and made the pain of her joints soften. But mainly it meant food, a little bit of money to live on. The men in these parts had always gotten their hooch at Ida's and Abe's. Each time the brew was right, she would set her pigeon loose to Campbell's store. They would all see the fat grey bird with the white rag on her leg and then they would come up the ridge. The first up would sometimes help finish the run with her. All brought

something—baskets of beans, sacks of potatoes, or corn in season. Only after long periods would she have to drape the gunny sack over her shoulders to wander down the ridge to the store. She'd run out of salt, meal, or tobacco. But it wasn't often. They all liked her brew and would bring what she needed to trade for it. Ebers brought a ham each spring and Claybo chickens. The still was everything now, a way to keep on living.

Outside, she heard the crackle of brush. She arched to study the threat. Slowly, a shadow began to emerge from the trees and onto the bare slope. It was a young man with a bundle of papers on a wire hung on one shoulder, a strange rod in his hand. As he stopped to view the cabin in surprise, she raised the gun into the window to use the sight for viewing him. He was young, his hair womanishly long. He looked a bit bookish about the eyes. She grunted with dissatisfaction.

Dan hesitated at the open space, wondering at the shack with no road to it. He looked for smoke or movement but there was nothing. Perhaps it was abandoned, yet it didn't feel empty. Funny way to think. Unwillingly, he told his aching legs to continue upward, nearer to the rickety building. As he puffed upward, the sunlight flashed from one of the windows and he froze. He thought he saw a shadow of movement as the curtain dropped. It was suddenly hard to breathe. Everyone had kidded him at the office about working alone in the hills with his long hair. His mouth felt dry as he forced a call out. "Hello . . . hello there! Anybody home?"

The silence filled the clearing. The sun drifted behind the linty clouds and cast a cool shadow of warning around him. The birds grew tense and cried excitedly to each other, tearing the emptiness.

Ida May placed the rifle behind the door, then turned the cold brown knob. At least he had no weapon, she had seen that. He was alone too, the birds had told her that and the dogs too as he entered the valley below. The door creaked as she pulled it open. Her lips felt gummy from being closed all morning and her voice clung in her throat, coming out huskily. "How'd do."

Dan's face lit up at the sight of the old woman. Her stooped shape blotted out his fears. "Hello there, I sure am glad to see someone." He hurried forward and stopped at the porch, letting the bundle of papers

slide from his shoulder to the ground. "You wouldn't have anything to drink, would you?"

Ida stood stiffly studying him, wondering how to answer. She turned away from him to where the pigeon coop stood. Petty was there, fluttering and cooing at the intrusion of the stranger. If he came for moonshine, it wasn't time, no one would have sent him without asking her first. If she offered him a cool sip of whiskey and he was a revenooer, he might knock her over the head with that strange rod.

Dan stood there, his grin fading. He felt a chill along his neck. It was the strange way she stood staring at him, her eyes cold and dark like flint, stabbing their way through him. Her hair was fine and pulled back by a grey string that might have once been a ribbon. He bet even when she was young she had been ugly. Unable to match her cold stare, he dropped his eyes, noticing dark hairs on her legs and the blue house shoes that were worn down at the heels. Strange to run into her up here so far away from everything. The cold silence worried at him, making him rub his hands in nervousness.

"I'm Dan Stark, I'm working for the state survey, taking soil samples of this area."

She stuck her head forward like an old turtle from its shell, her eyes roving over him. "Survey?"

"State survey, ma'am. We're updating our maps of this area. I'm taking samples over the eastern part of the state. We analyze them to see what kind of minerals are in them. It lets us draw up a soil profile of the area." He gave her a friendly smile but she ogled him coldly.

What if he was really a revenooer. Maybe they had a new way of testing the dirt to tell where stills were. She'd heard they had dogs could find dope. You never knew in these times.

"I really am thirsty. If you could spare a little water, I'd really appreciate it."

She scrunched her chin up and spat. Dan had never seen anything so vulgar. Nodding, she said, "Reckon I can."

Ida closed the door cautiously behind her. She peered out the window at the intruder. Trembling, she pulled a chipped glass from the sideboard and twisted the spigot on. Bless Abe for putting in the water line. She wouldn't feel like walking out to the springhouse for the likes of that sprout.

She sat the glass down on the sloping porch, then stepped back into the shadow of the door.

Dan hesitated. Perhaps he wasn't all that thirsty. The chipped glass with the cloudy water looked anything but appealing. But with the woman standing there, he picked it up and drained the coolness away.

"Many thanks, ma'am. I'll be heading on across the ridge taking samples. Don't pay me any mind. Good day and thanks again." In one move he swung the sample bags up and struck out across the clearing into the protecting trees. The old woman's glare was more than he could tolerate.

Ida watched him cross out of sight. He seemed so young, but it was hard to judge a foreigner. He said he worked for the state, but he could be lying. She was too old to trust anyone who admitted working for the government. Well, she'd have to follow and see. If he was just interested in plain dirt and rocks, he'd probably curve on out and cross Pilot's Peak and never come near her still. But if he didn't, even if he wasn't a revenooer, he'd probably tell them where to come look. She'd just have to follow and see.

Ida discarded her shoes for a pair of brown brogans that had served her well for years. They might not be so pretty, but they were good to her feet and the high leather was safer in snake weather. Taking the rifle, she dropped the latch on the cabin door and began to trail the shadow of the stranger. Hunch-shouldered, with the gun in the crook of her arm, the cruel barrel planted at an angle to the bare earth, Ida breathed a sigh when she escaped the open space into the dark shelter of the trees. It wouldn't do for him to see her and know he was being followed.

Stopping by a large boulder Ida rested, tired by the long walk. The young snoop was ahead, crossing the ridge toward the draw where her still was. She studied him restlessly, noticing how he would check a little box in his hand, then walk a few feet before plunging the long rod into the ground. Pulling it out, he then shook the dirt loose into one of the long paper sacks, folded it over, then placed it on the metal strip across his shoulders.

She wished he would go a different way. There was plenty of time. But even as she watched he continued to head down the back of the ridge to the valley where the still was. After his footsteps had faded amid the rustle of the leaves and the bird calls, Ida stood up. Although

it was cool in the woods, she felt flushed and her heart was pounding wildly. Perhaps she should head back to the cabin and forget it. He did seem to be interested in taking dirt samples, but what if it was merely to help him detect the whereabouts of her still? After bagging each sample, he checked that little gadget in his hands before walking nearer to the still's hiding place. They knew so much, and Lord knew she'd spilled enough mash and brew during the years in her journeys from the house to the still.

With icy fear, Ida inched on down the bank, setting her boots sideways as she walked downward noiselessly. At the bottom of the gorge, her breath caught and her heart began to pound fiercely. He was resting in the hollow a few feet below her, but his eyes had turned to the narrow path that led to the still.

Dan stuck his hands in the cold stream at his feet and bathed his hot face. It was a nice spot to take a break. He slipped out of the heavy bundle of samples—the ring was already half full. He pulled a map from the case at his waist and spread it out on his lap. He had climbed the crest of the ridge and then down the back slope of it to the stream valley below. Now he would just climb up along the stream bed between the two ridges to come up on the flank of the mountain and then circle back to the jeep.

The soft gurgle of the stream was so pleasant, he sagged against the rough bark of the tree, enjoying being here. It was a beautiful spot. Probably very few people had ever seen such an isolated and unspoiled place. Working for the survey was great. He remembered Brian's warning as he had left for this week of field work, to be careful of the mountain folk. He laughed and he leaned back. The only hillbillies he'd seen had been poor creatures, like that ugly old woman at the shack—odd, crouching and rocking, letting their feet lie flat against the ground while they squatted to study you. They could do it for hours and look so comfortable. Dan had tried it but it was impossible. Strange people. It would be good to be back where strangers ignored you completely or talked back when you spoke to them.

Slowly Dan stretched up, dusting his pants where they clung to him, damp from the creek bank. He stood with his feet placed firmly on the stream rocks, then pulled out the Brunton to check his course. Follow the stream back up the valley at N 25 E, for about 2500 feet, then go

at a right angle along the shoulder of the mountain back down to his jeep.

Lifting the heavy samples, he came onto the bank and worked his way slowly upward. He took one sample, then let his feet follow the trail up the draw until a slithery sound made him stop. He feared snakes more than wild-eyed hillbillies but there was nothing to see. Reluctantly, he again took up the climb, checking the Brunton, and took a sample dead center of the trail. It wouldn't be right but it would be close enough.

Ida moved like a shadow higher up along the side of the ridge. He was on the path now, the still only a few hundred feet to his left. She prayed to God he would keep moving on out and not see the still or try to bust it. The sweat stained her dress under the arms and down the back. She felt it in a ring around her head, making her itch beneath the ribbon. She wanted to cry, to go back, to have Abe here to do this, but she was alone. Alone with the prowler, this violating stranger that meant to destroy all she had in the world.

As a fat partridge might rustle under the bushes, Ida moved down the ridge to hide behind a large oak tree a few feet above the still. As she rested the gun in the crotch of the tree, she noticed poison ivy twining there. Placing the butt of the gun in her shoulder, she wet her fingers, then wiped the sights. Sticking her tongue out, she squinted down the barrel, aiming just a little to the left of the still. If he didn't walk into the sights, she'd not shoot him. God help that he would walk on by.

Dan wired the sample on, then raised up to study the trail he was following. He checked the compass. He was now a good twelve feet off course, but he could climb on up and be back on it before the next sample. A cloud of insects buzzed about his ears, seeming to come from nowhere. There was no breeze and even with the tall shadow of the trees it was hot. He checked the map again. There should be an old exploration pit along this ridge flank. It had been dug during the days of early settlers when small traces of gold in some of the streams had sent them digging about for their fortunes.

The wire was cutting deeper into his shoulder. He started to change arms, but decided to wait. It was still a long way back, he'd best stand

it as long as possible. He might as well stay on this old path as long as it went up. After all, it was parallel to the right line and the gurgle of the stream was nice. But it was getting late and he had no desire to be in these woods alone at night.

Suddenly he froze. The trail was gone. He hesitated a moment. A sweet-sour smell smothered him, making him hesitate longer. He saw without believing it a glint of copper in the lush green of the brush. Cautiously, he pulled at one of the saplings in front of him and a screen of wood moved away.

An honest-to-God still! His voice broke the silence. "Well, I'll be damned!" There was a sudden crack of thunder in the air and Dan felt a sharp bite of pain. He raised his hand to touch his head, feeling the warm blood. He stared at his red hand, then fell dead.

Ida moved like a storm in summer. She carried the smoking gun in the crook of her arm as she scurried down toward her victim. He lay there with a look of disbelief frozen in his eyes, his long hair blown back from the hole in his head. Her heart beat like a stomping herd of horses as she tugged at him. He was so big. She stopped and let the horror of the moment race through her. What if someone was going to meet him? Quickly she worked. Pulling out one of the sheets she used for draining the moon through, she tied his feet together. She knew where the pit was. Never knew what it was dug for, but knew where it was. Pulling till she felt her sides ache, she drug the limp body down away from the still. Just a few feet more, just a little more. She stopped, dizzily, sensing the black hole now. Turning away from it, she dropped the feet and moved to lift the shoulders, sliding her arms under his right arm and dragging the body around parallel to the hole. Without hesitating, she pushed at the corpse with her foot, pushing and breathing in great heaving gulps.

He wouldn't roll. Cautiously she sat down, pulling a nearby shoot over to hold her. She felt she could lie down and die here too. Perhaps she would push too hard and drop down with the body, never to have the strength to push her way out again. Holding the bent sapling with both hands over her head, she scooted her hips forward slowly, one at a time, pushing the heavy weight before her ever nearer the pit. After an eternity, her arms ached, and she was near to crying from the effort. Finally the corpse began to roll and with a sickening sound she

heard it hit bottom.

Ida tried to scoot back away from the hole but she felt herself slide on the loose dirt instead. Terror-stricken, she grabbed tighter at the sapling. Her hands ached but each hold pulled her back up from the edge of the pit. When her right hand felt the earth at the trunk, she breathed a sigh and let her face touch the chill damp earth. God had always been there when she'd called, even in the valley of death he was always there to help her. Exhausted though she was, she got up, feeling her knees shaking. Crying would have to wait.

Ida trudged back toward the still. She scuffed at the drops of blood where she had drug him, pressing the stains into the dirt. She lifted the bundle, but it was too heavy to carry. Painfully, slowly now, she shook the dirt from the sample bags, rubbing the earth in them around the base of the still. When almost all of them were empty, she lifted the hoop and dragged the long curly rod along toward the pit. Stopping above the sapling, she put her left foot against it and let the slimness of it rise against her. With the aches of a thousand years, she gently swung, then swung again, letting the ring drop over the pit and flutter down to the bottom. The rod she gripped in arthritic numbness and then tossed javelin fashion, hearing the fat thud of it in the dark pit. A low hissing told her the snakes inside didn't like being disturbed. Wearily, Ida turned, covered the still, then turned back toward the house.

It was dark when the old woman escaped the cover of the woods and crossed over to the cabin door. She pulled the string to lift the latch, then slipped into the familiar darkness of home. Lifting her feet in a hobbled way, she crossed over to the edge of the bed and pulled her boots off, letting them fall heavily against the floor. She relaxed against the soft comfort of the high metal bed. So tired it caused the pain in her legs and arms to dim in consciousness, she closed her eyes and let the soft piled mattresses ease her agony.

The cabin was cold and the darkness offered up shadows that would not let her rest. Getting up by pulling on the bed post, Ida stood and spoke to the shadows. "Might as well light the stove and warm a bit of supper." Blowing back the ashes, she fed the coals from the pile of kindling, watching the yellow flames lick at the sticky pine splints. When it was going good, she set in a pair of dry hickory logs and tried

to relax in the bright warmth. Even the flames mocked her, crackling and flashing like the rifle, glowing like the blood on the youth's head. Ida slammed the door shut on the fire.

Dragging the iron skillet forward on the stove, she let the heat melt the bacon grease. She poured a cup of meal into a bowl and added a little canned cream to it. Fried mush wasn't much, but a body had to eat. She set a pan of water on the back to heat for a cup of coffee. The mush was brown on both sides, so Ida lifted it out onto an enamel plate, then sat down at the narrow table to eat. Her hand shook as she tried to raise the coffee cup and she put it down. Mush really needed a mite of something sweet with it. She reached over for the molasses, knocking the salt shaker over. After sprinkling some over her shoulder, she held the can with two hands as the molasses inched forward in a wide black tongue of sweetness. Her arms ached so from the effort that when it finally reached the plate she could barely grasp the fork to wipe the rim of the can.

She remembered the sapling.

Full of despair, too weak and quivery to eat, she pushed away from the table. After making sure again that the door was latched, she pulled the cold jug from under the sink. Holding it tight against her, she turned back to the bed. This time she pushed the covers back before sitting down. Biting the cork, she tugged it out, then raised the heavy jug on her elbow to let the raw liquid pour hotly down her throat. Not coughing as she once would have done, she continued to gulp it until the fire reached her stomach. Setting the jug down beside her bed, she corked it, then rolled her legs up into bed. She was so tired. She was too old for this, too old to fight wars, to learn about killing. Ida pulled weakly at the quilts, feeling the rough wool patches in her stiff fingers. The patches had been part of Abe's checked shirts. Suddenly the tears came, hot salt flowing along the lined face.

Abe, oh, Abe—I did what you'd of done, but I wish it'd been different. If only he hadn't seen the still. But he found it, Abe, you saw him. Ida listened with her heart, trying to conjure the image of her dear Abe beside her. Through the tears she could see him, hear his high crackly voice. Idy May, it's all right. A body's got to do what she's got to do. Character should have minded his own business, but since he didn't, reckon he'll know it was his wrong doing did him in. It's all right, Idy, you had to do it. God knows you had to.

The old woman lay still, her dark eyes hidden under puckered lids, the long hair moving on her lip as she snored.

Dawn came early. Ida woke feeling strange. Her old bones ached from the cold and as she sat up her head felt like a copper bell, heavy and hollow, with pain clanging inside. She sat hunched on the edge of the bed, feeling sick. Something was wrong.

"Ho, Ida! Hullo!"

Turning her head too quickly toward the sound, Ida was rewarded by a shooting pain in her neck and down her spine. Every inch of her ached at the effort, but somehow she managed to reach the door. The voice calling sounded familiar. Outside, she squinted her face in the sunlight to see lanky Ebers squatting in the yard waiting.

"Morning, Ida."

She stared, wishing he'd leave, come back any time but now. He held a split twig loosely in his mouth, but his eyes showed he had something to say.

"Ida, me and Claybo seen a stranger head up here yestiddy. Left one of them jeeps down the hollow."

Ida's jaw dropped, and she pushed at the stiff hair drooping over her eye.

"Didn't come back for it."

Ida trembled inside but knew Ebers wasn't the type of man you showed fear to. She felt like a muskrat on a hill with a hawk glinting at it. "So?"

"Well, we wondered if he'd be back for it?"

Ida breathed a sigh of relief. Letting her missing teeth show, she gave a sly smile. "Reckon not."

"Couldn't have a drop of squeezins 'fore I go?"

Without further words, Ida shuffled inside, pulling a pint Mason jar out of the sideboard, turning the lid, and leaving it lying on the sink. As she carried the cool drink out, she studied Ebers.

"We done stripped it," he said. "Reckoned he'd not come back down." He swallowed some of the hard clear liquid without pause, then asked the expected question. "Revenooer?"

Ida nodded wisely. "Yep."

As she watched him cross into the cedars, she forgot the pain and achiness of the morning. She'd done the right thing. It'd been awful hard, but she'd done the right thing.

Everything depended on her next move . . .

THE LAST ACT

by MICKEY LANFORD

The girl had drifted into an exhausted doze. She jerked to awareness at the blast of angry voices. Her large dark eyes, red-rimmed, flew open. The naked light bulb assaulted her sight like a welder's torch. She squeezed her gritty eyelids shut and quickly turned away, her heavy veil of dark hair falling over her face like a curtain. For a moment she had forgotten where she was. Now she sank back awkwardly into the dim corner where the big man had sent her sprawling. She

mustn't draw attention to herself.

The shouting continued, making her head ache fiercely, but with hands tied behind her back she couldn't cover her ears. Suddenly light-headed, she thought: When did I sleep last? She had no desire for food, but she was terribly thirsty. The bulky gag seemed to swell and fill her cotton-dry mouth.

Would this night never end? And when it did—did she really have a chance? Or were the miseries of these past few days for nothing? She pushed the idea away, angry with herself. She *had* to make it. Her success—or failure—here tonight would decide Bill's chance for survival. Thinking of Bill in a hospital bed with a bullet in his head brought the tears again, but she stifled them quickly. Nothing must keep her from making her best effort when the time came.

The voices, which had seemed to swell and diminish in waves, suddenly focused again, jarring her back to full awareness.

"That's right!" the big man was bellowing. "They both had access to that information! She's the one we have to worry about now, not him!"

There was more—something about "leaks" and "traitors in the organization"—but his voice faded as the nightmare pictures sprang vividly to her mind once more. If Bill didn't survive his terrible wound, she didn't want to live. She had to help him! And she couldn't help him if she didn't come out of this with the hope of engaging the only surgeon who gave him a chance.

She listened intently for the words that would indicate the men had finished talking and were ready for action. When those words came, and the men moved toward her, she was ready too.

She was helped to her feet, the gag removed. Words and phrases sprang automatically to her lips. Time became a blur, but when she finished speaking she knew she had put on the best performance of which she was capable. The men stared at her.

Fear swirled around her in chilling eddies. She closed her eyes briefly, felt herself swaying. When she opened them, the smaller man had her by the arm and was saying, "Hey, Claire, are you all right?

"Jeff, come tell this gal how great she was, then get her something to drink. Now quit worrying, Claire. Of course you have the part. No one but you could have come out of retirement and filled in for poor Amy without dropping a line. That hot-shot doctor will be begging for the chance to fix up the husband of the new star of *Undercover*."

When two people are of the same mind, it's never too late for love . . .

WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

New York City is a small town in some ways. Anybody who keeps a dog knows what I mean. A dog likes to walk its person on a fixed schedule and likes to visit certain predetermined landmarks: every fire hydrant along the way, certain city-stunted trees much favored by other dogs, the cornerstones and entrances of selected buildings, and doormen, some to fawn over and others to threaten with bare dripping fangs. The dog is by nature a pertinacious puzzler; it must investigate

these canine conundrums to its satisfaction before moving on.

My own dog, a long-legged black-haired creature of indeterminate breed, is no exception to the rule. Three times a day Marcus leads me from the apartment we share and where I am engaged in writing my memoirs and allows me to follow him, securely attached to his leash, six blocks down Madison Avenue, across to Fifth, back uptown with a detour into the Park, and so home again and to work. We meet many other dogs along this route. Marcus is scornful of the effete and nervous members of his race, and takes delight in playing jokes on them. There is a champagne-colored poodle no bigger than a well-nourished city rat who is his special victim. He will bear down upon this bedizened creature, much as a destroyer upon an unseen sailboat in its path, until the poodle, in a frenzy of agitation, begs its mistress to pick it up.

But enough of Marcus and his habits. My own habit on these daily strolls is to observe the passers-by. People are slaves to routine, and in my retirement, after a long career in which routine played very little part, there is some comfort in fitting myself into a slot in which each day's events can be predicted with some degree of accuracy. This is not to say that I have become totally adapted to retirement. Sometimes I do get restless. When this happens, my former employers are only too glad to welcome me back and make use of my services on a free-lance basis.

I have never been married, have no acknowledged children, and my origins are known to me alone. In my line of work, it was better not to establish close personal ties. It's been a solitary life, but not a lonely one. Loneliness visits those who crave to define themselves through the approval of others. I have always known precisely who and what I am, and have conducted my life according to that knowledge. A rather austere life, perhaps, but one which suited me down to the ground. I have never met a woman who could tolerate what is called nowadays my "lifestyle"; every one I ever met and lingered with, and there were many, wanted me either to settle down or to devote myself to showing her a good time. I could do neither and be true to myself.

So, here we are, Marcus and I, he in the prime of his life and I, a mongrel of a different sort, somewhat over the hill but still presentable if your predilection is for tall, thin gentlemen with greying temples—and a face that even in its best days was politely described as rugged

and now bears the lines of a lifetime of disillusion and a sardonic humor. Otherwise, I am in fine health and reasonably good spirits in the face of the decline of elegance and the rendering of all human emotion in terms of catchwords and slogans. I have never suffered an "identity crisis" nor have I been prey to the anguish of a "generation gap" or been moved by "peer group pressure."

In the course of trailing Marcus on his excursions I have made the nodding acquaintance of others who keep the same timetable. There is the strapping Norsewoman who emerges from the next apartment building pushing a high-wheeled perambulator every morning. I say she is a Norsewoman for she is crowned with thick yellow braids and stares at me with pugnacious blue eyes. She might have leaned into the wind from the prow of a Viking ship. We have never exchanged a word, but I like looking at her.

We often meet a young man, pale and dreamy-eyed, struggling down the avenue with a cello case under his arm. He will murmur "Hi, dog!" to Marcus and ignore me completely.

There are others: the mailman, schoolchildren, an increasing number of joggers in bright warm-up suits, the neighborhood panhandler who is tolerated because he is picturesque and not overly persistent. And there is Mrs. Kimberly.

Mrs. Janet Kimberly, widow, to give her her full name and status. Such information is easy to discover given my background and past career. In this case, it was simplicity itself. Mrs. Kimberly's apartment is in one of the older buildings on Fifth Avenue and her doorman is one whose aura sends Marcus into transports of slavish delight. I had seen Mrs. Kimberly often in my ramblings, and I was struck by her cool elegance, her regal bearing, and the great beauty she must have owned at one time, traces of which still linger in her high pale brow, her long neck, her imperious violet eyes. I remember thinking the first time I saw her, Here is one who might have been a suitable companion. She has a hard, clean edge to her.

I saw her many times after that. She had no dog, but apparently enjoyed walking. And to see her striding down the avenue, always dressed with impeccable taste, her fine white hair gleaming in the sunlight, gave me more pleasure than all the young unfettered breasts jouncing past under T-shirts proclaiming fealty to rock heros, the city itself, or nothing at all. I thought of following her, either openly to draw her

attention or with stealth, as I know so well how to do. But each time, I allowed Marcus to tug me into his predetermined path and I let her go.

Then one brilliant spring morning when the air over Manhattan seemed faceted with dew, Marcus chose to fawn upon his favorite doorman, Abe Turner, just as Mrs. Kimberly was coming out of the building's double doors. Thus I discovered that she lived but two short blocks from me.

"Ah, you're a good dog, you are," the doorman babbled. "Now look at that, will you? The way he rolls over and plays dead for old Abe. I guess maybe I got a little something in my pocket for a good dog." He groped inside the capacious pocket of his uniform coat.

"What a striking woman!" I murmured.

"What? Oh, her. Yeah, she's O.K. A little stuck-up, but a good tipper and she never forgets old Abe at Christmastime. Here you go, Marcus, you're a good dog." And he withdrew from his pocket a greenish object shaped to resemble a bone. Marcus took it delicately between his teeth and sat down at the feet of his idol to crunch in ecstasy.

"I'm sure I've seen her before. Could it have been at that conference in Atlanta? Is her husband in textiles?"

"Nah," said Abe, scratching Marcus's broad head. "Old Doc Kimberly kicked off about ten years ago. Funny thing, him a heart specialist, and had a weak ticker himself. Me, I got a ulcer that kicks up once in a while. You wouldn't think there was that much strain on a job like this, but some of these tenants you wouldn't believe."

"She looks as if she might be one of the demanding ones," I suggested.

"Well, yes and no. She wants her mail delivered pronto and she hates to see fingerprints on the glass there. 'Abe,' she says, 'this place looks like the scene of the crime.' " He laughed grudgingly, "Yeah, Mrs. Janet Kimberly is a lady. No two ways about it. Hey, old boy, how about another doggie biscuit?" And with that, good old Abe fished another bilious green bone-shaped object from his pocket and offered it to Marcus.

So. Mrs. Janet Kimberly. Marcus and I sauntered back down the avenue, the way we had come, the way she had gone. Marcus was puzzled and tried to pull in the direction of home. But I insisted this

time and he loped reluctantly by my side. In the next block, I quickened our pace. I could just see her white head gliding along above the masses out to enjoy the splendors of the day. She was two full blocks ahead.

I am still not quite sure why I followed her that morning. It's one of the few illogical things I have ever done, and logic has been part of my survival kit, along with a number of more strenuous attributes, ever since I had embarked on my profession. Let us just say that now that I knew her name, she intrigued me more than ever. I had no intention of making her acquaintance.

She was a dedicated walker. We soon passed the Plaza, but a half block behind her with Marcus entering into the spirit of the chase. He strutted before me, ears cocked and nose alert for hints of possible danger. For him, this was *terra incognita*, a zone of unfamiliar scents and a jungle of nylon-clad legs.

I watched as she gave Saks' windows no more than a passing glance and waited while she subjected Scribners to a closer scrutiny. I almost approached her then, but she moved on after a moment and turned the corner, heading east toward Madison. Marcus was completely bewildered by this time and reproached me with sad eyes, letting his tongue roll past his chops as a signal of fatigue and thirst.

The streets were beginning to fill with early lunchers. Mrs. Kimberly crossed Madison Avenue and came to a halt at a bus stop. The buses on Madison go only north. Perhaps she had grown tired and intended to take a bus back uptown. She stood somewhat behind and remote from the small clump of waiting people, elegant in her grey silk frock, a different breed from the jostling herd. I would have passed by—Marcus clearly wanted to go home—but there was something in her gaze that roused my curiosity. She was not, like most of those waiting, staring anxiously down the avenue for the bus. Instead, she was examining the individuals standing at the yellow curb. Each person was subjected to the closest scrutiny of those violet eyes, and each new arrival received the same thorough appraisal.

I paused behind her and drew Marcus into the shade of an awning projecting over a shop window filled with useless expensive gimcrackery. At length, she moved forward into the waiting group and took up a position directly behind a young woman whose pasty complexion, vacant eyes, and ill-conceived costume proclaimed her a flouter of the

last remaining shreds of civilized conduct on this tired earth.

Mrs. Kimberly stood behind this fattish, sullen-faced trollop and the contrast was enough to leave me breathless. She was of a dying race and I felt I must speak to her before it was too late. I started forward. A phalanx of yellow taxis was roaring past; perhaps I could flag one and whisk Mrs. Kimberly out of the common crush and off to some secluded haven where we might sit at a table covered in fine linen, sipping tea from china cups while discussing the decline of civilization.

I kept my eyes on Mrs. Kimberly as I tugged Marcus to his feet—and could not believe what I saw. But I had to believe the screech of brakes, the collective gasp that went up from the crowd at the rim of the street, and the angry words that poured from the lips of the cabdriver who had narrowly missed crushing the tubby, lumpish girl beneath his wheels. The crowd surged forward, avid and sympathetic, while Mrs. Kimberly sedately withdrew. She turned her face uptown and began to walk away.

I fell into step beside her and took her arm.

"You really shouldn't do it that way," I said.

Without so much as a sidelong glance at me, she murmured, "Are you the police?"

"No," I answered. "But I'd like to know why you pushed her."

She smiled then, a tight victorious quirking of her finely molded lips. "I gave her a fright, didn't I? And perhaps something to think about."

"But will she think?" I retorted. "And if she does, what is it you want her to think about?"

She sighed and for the first time turned her head to look at me. "Who are you?" she asked. "And if you saw what I did, why don't you turn me in? There's an officer across the street. Shall we go and speak to him?"

We were by this time walking swiftly uptown, Marcus happily in the lead with the scent of home in his distended nostrils.

"I saw, but I haven't the least interest in notifying the police. If I tell you my name, it will mean nothing to you, but since I already know yours it's only fair that you should know mine. I am Omar Flagg, at your service." This antique phrase sprang to my lips as appropriate to the occasion. But she couldn't know that yet. "And you are Janet Kimberly."

"Omar Flagg," she repeated. It was typical of her that she did not inquire how I knew her identity. "Tell me, Omar Flagg, why do you want to know my purpose?"

I drew a deep breath. She might not like what I was about to say, but say it I must.

"Because whatever your intentions were, your action was ineffectual. You succeeded only in giving that slovenly creature a bad fright and in supplying the crowd with an unsatisfactory sensation. They would have been far more gratified if she had perished before their greedy eyes."

She nodded reflectively. "I am aware," she said, "of the infirmity of my will. I always push at a moment when there is still a margin of safety. I leave it up to fate. I have not yet eliminated any of my targets. It's cowardly of me, I suppose." But then her eyes flashed and she regarded me sternly. "But I do not undertake my mission with the object of pleasing the crowd. I have been pushed into a corner. I have seen the values I cherish trampled upon and ridiculed. My world has shrunk and is in danger of disappearing utterly. My actions may be futile, but at least I am not going down without a struggle."

Her gloved hand now rested companionably on my arm and my hopes soared like those of a schoolboy embarked on his first romance. I had never met a woman like her. We walked in silence for several blocks; I felt the need to consider what she had just told me and what my next move would be.

Finally, I spoke. "You must let me help you."

She laughed, a delighted trill of pure enjoyment.

"Don't tell me you're a psychiatrist," she said.

I laughed too. "By no means," I said. "And forgive me for sounding like one. But I can help you. I have some expertise in a field which could lend a great deal of effectiveness to your mission. And I confess that while I have deplored the general nastiness that seems to be enveloping the world, I have done nothing whatever to combat it. You have made me ashamed of my *laissez-faire* attitude."

We were nearing the corner of the block in which my apartment is located, and Marcus was tugging frantically at his leash. I had wondered during our walk how I could best inform Mrs. Kimberly of my profession. It is not my habit to boast of my accomplishments; indeed, most of my work had been done in complete secrecy. Only my former employers knew the nature of my assignments, and even they did not

know the full details of their execution. They had paid well, both for my skill and for my discretion. And then it occurred to me that there was no better way to convince her of my seriousness and my professional interest in her problem than to let her read my unfinished memoirs.

"Mrs. Kimberly," I said. "Please don't misunderstand what I am about to say. I would like to invite you to come up to my apartment to read a few pages of manuscript. If after reading them you do not agree that I can help you, I will say no more and we will go our separate ways. But I think you will see my point and will want to form a working partnership."

Her violet eyes twinkled at me. "Mr. Flagg," she said, "I have no idea what you are trying to tell me, but oddly enough I trust you. I shall be delighted to read your manuscript if you will be kind enough to provide some lunch. I am always ravenous after one of these episodes."

"I was planning broiled bay scallops and a spinach souffle for my own midday meal."

"Splendid."

As we ascended in the elevator, I was assailed by tremors of nervousness. What if she found the starkness of my bachelor decor unappealing? What if she loathed the few carefully chosen art works that hung upon my walls? What if the spinach souffle fell into a disgusting green slime in the bottom of the dish? I couldn't remember when I had been so unsure of myself. Why was her opinion so important to me? If I didn't know better, I could almost believe I was falling in love. It was absurd!

I settled her in my comfortable reading chair, a glass of Montrachet on the small table beside her and my loose manuscript pages in her lap.

"You won't find it necessary to read it all," I said with some diffidence. "And if it bores you, please put it aside immediately."

She smiled. "I doubt that it will bore me," she said. "You have not done so yourself." She drew a pair of reading glasses from her handbag and picked up the first page.

I retreated to the kitchen, where at last I tended to Marcus's thirst with a bowl of fresh cold water and began the preparations for our lunch.

I will not detail my thoughts as I seasoned the scallops and anxiously watched the souffle rise through the glass oven door. I have lived alone so long and have enjoyed my solitude so thoroughly, I will only say that my very nature had turned traitor to me and induced a state of mind in which I actually considered asking her to marry me. Each page she turned was audible to me two rooms away, and I wondered what she thought of the life that was laid bare in those scrupulously honest chapters.

At last the souffle had risen to the peak of its perfection and the scallops were a delicate crusty brown and I went to the living room to tell her that lunch was ready.

She was gazing out the window, her glasses in her hand, the manuscript still in her lap with half its pages turned face down.

"Mr. Flagg," she said, "you make it seem so easy."

"It was easy. It was almost a labor of love."

"But you were paid for killing." The word fell smoothly from her mouth.

"And you would like to kill but would prefer it to seem an accident of fate," I reminded her.

"Had you never a pang of conscience?"

"Conscience must wait upon lunch. Will you join me?"

She laid the manuscript on the table, carefully preserving her place. It pleased me inordinately that she thus indicated her intention to continue reading. During lunch, we spoke of other things—books and plays and music, architecture old and new, the cities of the world we had visited, she in search of beauty and I in the course of business. She admired my paintings and complimented me on my cooking. We found much to share and much to learn from each other.

Afterward, over coffee, we returned to the subject which had drawn us together.

"You hardly seem to fit the popular notion of a hit man," Janet remarked as she settled back into the comfortable chair in the living room.

"My dear, my assignments were almost always in the realms of finance or politics, with an occasional troublesome royal personage thrown in. Hit man is hardly the term."

"My little crusade must seem very insignificant to you."

"Not at all," I reassured her. "But your perspective is slightly askew.

If you set about eliminating every walking example of bad taste, you will find yourself depopulating the earth. Clearly an impossibility, and you won't even get your point across. But suppose, now, that we were to direct our activities to the prime sources of vulgarity, to the makers of shoddy worthless merchandise, to the purveyors, for example, of that disgusting phenomenon of modern life, fast food."

"A gentleman comes immediately to mind," she chortled. "I'd love to turn him into mincemeat."

"You get the idea. Now consider several television game-show hosts and their celebrity guests, gossip columnists, fashion designers, builders of model homes . . ."

"A certain rock singer, a sportscaster—" she broke in enthusiastically.

"The list is endless."

"We'll make the punishment fit the crime."

"Do you like Gilbert and Sullivan?" I asked.

"I do," she replied.

It was that "I do" that settled matters for me. I decided then and there that I would hear the elegant fastidious Janet say those very words to me in quite another setting before long. But first things first. I inserted my treasured cassette recording of *Pinafore* by the D'Oyly Carte into the machine, and for the rest of the afternoon we plotted the rescue of civilization. I felt quite exalted by the time Marcus was ready for his stroll.

"We'll walk you home," I said. "And may we meet again tomorrow?"

"Of course," she said. "We have a great deal of work to do."

Two weeks later, we were married. Janet looked stunning in a plain lavender gown that intensified the glowing violet of her eyes. Or could it have been the satisfaction of a job well done? I know I felt proud of what we had accomplished in such a short time. The newspapers that morning had run screaming headlines: ROLLER DERBY STAR KILLED IN SKATEBOARD MISHAP.

Janet smiled at me as I slipped an antique gold ring onto her finger. She was pleased with the outcome of our trip to California. It had been so easy to challenge the skater to a private exhibition of his prowess on a skateboard in a deserted parking lot on a cliff overlooking the wide Pacific.

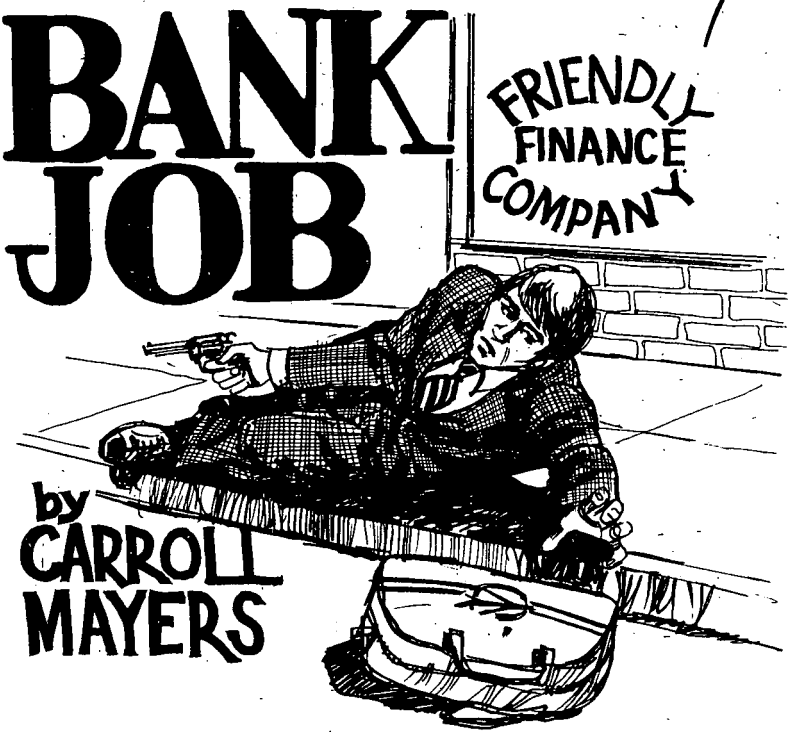
We still have much to do. The task is monumental but we have each other for inspiration and moral support. We are working on a plan to poison the toothpaste of a certain grinning brother and sister act, and we are doing research on the subject of plastic flowers. That was Janet's idea. She wants to decorate several graves with them.

I am still working on my memoirs, but the final chapter is a long way off. And Janet still enjoys an occasional walk down Fifth Avenue and back home by way of Madison. She says she likes to keep in touch with people. And I must admit, she has gotten better at it. There was a fatal accident just the other day when a fat man in a loud plaid polyester double-knit suit fell in front of the Madison Avenue bus.

Marcus adores Janet and plays dead for her.

Scott Fitzgerald spoke of giving oneself a margin for hard luck . . .

BANK JOB



by CARROLL MAYERS

Alternately sobbing and cursing, Harry Lowe wrenched his careening car around a cruising taxi. Horns blared. Brakes shrieked and shouts echoed. Harry's knuckles were white on the wheel; he floored the accelerator for a three-block clear stretch ahead.

He'd blown it! He'd likely get clear—he'd diligently checked stoplights and traffic patterns for this hour of the afternoon and he was a skillful driver—but he'd still blown it. Twenty, thirty grand, at least.

Right in his hands.

At forty-two, with his slowing reflexes, armed stickups were not Harry's predilection; slick cons were more his specialty. But he'd wanted a truly big score and the Friendly Finance Company had looked like a piece of cake. He'd cased the premises and personnel, the whole works, for a week. This afternoon the curtain went up.

At first everything clicked. Two customers and three clerks were terrified at Harry's menacing .38. So was the mousy manager, who personally thrust large-denomination money packets into Harry's flight bag. Great. Harry had whirled, bolted from the building, and crashed headlong to the sidewalk as his right ankle unaccountably twisted beneath him. The moneybag had jolted from his grasp, skidded twenty feet into the avenue, and disappeared beneath a bus stopped in traffic.

Frantically, he'd heaved erect. Behind him, pandemonium sounded. Around him, pedestrians scattered as they glimpsed the revolver he still clutched in his free hand. The bus didn't move. Harry lurched for the car he'd parked at the corner and rocketed into cross-avenue traffic. Damn, oh damn!

When he got clear, he slowed somewhat, cut into a freeway circling the city for a short distance, and then swung off onto secondary roads. His failure still rankled, but it did not cloud his essential acuity. Eventually he would have to ditch this heap; some sharp-eyed citizen could have tabbed its description and license plates, and that would pepper the police radio band statewide. For a while, though, he could chance some mileage on these back roads.

The town of Benton was a tidy little community with a spate of shops, a movie theater, bank, and hotel clustered about a center square. Tiring, his ankle now shooting painful twinges up his calf, Harry considered holing up at the hostelry for a day or so, but finally drove on through. He'd be too conspicuous in such an environment.

Two miles further, he came upon the farmhouse.

The place appeared deserted. Set well back from the road atop a slight rise, it had at one time evidently been an imposing structure, with a sweeping front and side veranda, gabled windows, and turreted roof. Now, peeling paint, sagging carpentry, and a weed-choked front plot and approach lane suggested total vacancy.

Slowing, Harry eyed the farmhouse with mounting enthusiasm. This

was exactly what he was looking for. He could get off the road, lay over here for the night, perhaps even all day tomorrow. Breaking in would present no problem.

He jounced up the rutted lane and pulled the car behind the house where it could not be seen from the road. Favoring his ankle, he eased from behind the wheel, then froze as a woman's voice reached him.

"Are you hurt?"

Harry pivoted. The rear of the farmhouse featured a small screened porch, and the speaker stood in the doorway, regarding him quizzically. "Are you hurt?" she repeated.

Damn! The place wasn't deserted! Harry's mind churned as he managed a small smile. "I—just twisted my ankle a bit." To cover his presence, he indicated the car, adding, "I wondered if I could get some water for the radiator?"

"Certainly." In her late fifties, with greying hair, the woman was birdlike, almost frail, but her movements were quick and decisive—and behind thick lenses her blue eyes were bright and alert. "Now don't move around so much. I'll get it—"

Moments later, she was back with a brimming bucket. Harry released the car's hood and screened the already-full radiator with his shoulders as he contrived to dump most of the bucket's contents on the ground, apparently as overspill. His mind raced.

"I do appreciate this, Mrs.—?"

"Miss," she corrected. "Miss Wilma Hadley. And it's no trouble."

"Even so." Shifting his stance to put down the bucket, Harry winced visibly, then gave Miss Wilma an uncertain look. "I'm George Lukens," he said, "and I—I hate to impose, but do you suppose I might get off this foot for a bit?"

"Of course!" Her assent was immediate. "Here, let me help."

Half-supporting him, Miss Wilma guided Harry into the farmhouse. She settled him on an ancient mohair sofa in the parlor and fetched a basin of cold water and a washcloth for his ankle.

Harry welcomed her ministrations. The ankle *was* painful—besides, it allowed him to advance his ploy.

He drew a breath. "That feels much better," he said. "I'll just rest here a spell, if I may—"

"Nonsense," Miss Wilma rejoined. "You'll stay for supper, Mr. Lukens. That swelling's still rather bad."

Harry exulted. Aside from being a good samaritan, Miss Wilma, a maiden lady living alone, appeared to welcome company. The supper invitation would keep him off the road for the early evening. If he played his cards right—acted the gentleman and hobbled convincingly—maybe that period could be extended.

As it developed, no additional hobbling was required. Miss Wilma did not own a TV, but she did have a small radio in the kitchen, and as they finished a modest meal of cold chicken, tossed salad, and tea, she nodded at the set and remarked simply, "I heard about your misfortune this afternoon."

Harry's heart tilted. "Eh?"

"The holdup at the finance company in the city," Miss Wilma said, "and how you lost the money satchel beneath a bus. It was on the news. They described you and said you'd wrenched your ankle."

Her calmness stunned Harry. Denial, he sensed, would be useless. More to the point was why the woman had given no prior intimation of her knowledge. And why, having now broached it, she obviously stood in no fear of him.

"I wanted to appraise you, Mr. Lukens—or whatever your real name is. For a year now I've been looking for a man—the right man—to suggest this to. And now I think sheer fortune has brought you here." She paused, and added spiritedly, "You see, I want to tell you how easily you can hold up the bank in town."

Harry's jaw dropped. Miss Wilma was the personification of a retired librarian or Sunday school teacher—not a conniving woman suggesting a bank heist. This was ridiculous!

"Tell me *what*?" he blurted.

"How easily you can hold up the bank," she repeated equably.

"My sister and her husband originally farmed this place. When they died, I came on, took over. It's been hard, and I'm tired of grubbing, seeing everything go to seed. I want to get away and live a little. I've decided that holding up the bank's the quickest way."

"But that's crazy," Harry said. "What makes you think *I'd* try it? I mean, I went out of my league today with a finance company and look what happened—"

"That was an accident," Miss Wilma said. "At Benton, nothing like that will happen. There's no traffic, no problems. You can zip back here and hide out just as you planned to do when you thought the

place was deserted. Afterward, you can leave with a small fortune and I'll have my stake too."

Harry studied her in disbelief. "I say it's crazy."

She bent forward intently. "No, it isn't," she said, "and I'll tell you why. The bank's like the whole town: stodgy and complacent. No warning system or cameras. Only a single guard and they're even trying to ease him out because of his age. I promise you, it will be a breeze."

Miss Wilma's confidence was infectious. Despite himself, Harry began to consider the caper. After all, why not? The town *had* appeared to be sheer Hicksville; the job really might be easy. And while Miss Wilma envisioned an equal split, what was to stop him from keeping all the take? "All right," he capitulated. "I'll be your man."

Miss Wilma's eyes danced. "Excellent! Tomorrow?"

"Uh-uh," Harry said. "I want to do a little checking of my own first."

The next morning, when Harry drove into town, his detailed inspection was gratifying. The citizens of Benton all seemed geared to only two speeds, slow and slower, and the bank itself was totally as Miss Wilma had represented it. The one guard, a portly, aging character named Wilbur Something-or-other, doubtlessly deserved forced retirement and appeared likely to shoot himself in the foot in the event of any real trouble.

"I'm satisfied," Harry declared upon his return. "I'll do it tomorrow afternoon."

"Fine!" Miss Wilma said. "I'll go shopping now. I'll get us a bottle of wine to celebrate."

Harry walked into the bank on schedule. Unfortunately, although he had his .38 in his hand, he never got the opportunity to enunciate any threatening demands. The instant he crossed the threshold the old guard silently materialized behind him and bashed him over the head with his service revolver.

When Harry came to, he was in the custody of the sheriff. Subsequent investigation linked him to the finance company holdup back in the city. The two criminal forays, however profitless, appeared likely to remove Harry from circulation for some time.

Miss Wilma and her supper guest reviewed the charade that evening.

"When he drove up and I realized who he was from the radio report, the idea popped into my head full-blown," Miss Wilma said.

Wilbur Something-or-other (actually Peterson) forked a piece of home-baked apple pie. "It's hard to believe he accepted the idea of you plumping for a bank robbery."

"Thank heaven he did," Miss Wilma said.

Wilbur sobered. "I am grateful to you, Wilma, for coming in and tipping me off. It, well, it did make me look good."

"Then they're not going to force you to retire?"

"No. Mr. Gantry, the manager, said he'd misjudged me, that my action—immediate and decisive, was how he put it—proved I'm still capable. He told me my position's secure for as long as I want it."

"That's grand," Miss Wilma said. "But remember, it's our little secret."

"I'll remember," Wilbur promised.

As she cleared the dishes, Miss Wilma hummed contentedly. Who was to say a lifelong spinster could not change her mind when the right man came along? Aging he might be, and overweight, but he still was attractive enough for her to scheme not only for *his* continued employment and self-respect, but *their* mutual future.

Of the latter, though, all in good time.

There are demons who lurk in the corners of Broadway . . .

A CANDLE FOR THE BAG LADY

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

He was a thin young man in a blue pinstripe suit. His shirt was white with a button-down collar. His glasses had oval lenses in a brown tortoiseshell frame. His hair was a dark brown, short but not severely so, neatly combed, parted on the right. I saw him come in and watched him ask a question at the bar. Billie was working afternoons that week. I watched as he nodded at the young man, then swung his sleepy eyes over in my direction. I lowered my own eyes and looked at a cup of

coffee laced with bourbon while the fellow walked over to my table.

"Matthew Scudder?" I looked up at him, nodded. "I'm Aaron Creighton. I looked for you at your hotel. The fellow on the desk told me I might find you here."

Here was Armstrong's, a Ninth Avenue saloon around the corner from my 57th Street hotel. The lunch crowd was gone except for a couple of stragglers in front whose voices were starting to thicken with alcohol. The streets outside were full of May sunshine. The winter had been cold and deep and long. I couldn't recall a more welcome spring.

"I called you a couple of times last week, Mr. Scudder. I guess you didn't get my messages."

I'd gotten two of them and ignored them, not knowing who he was or what he wanted and unwilling to spend a dime for the answer. But I went along with the fiction. "It's a cheap hotel," I said. "They're not always too good about messages."

"I can imagine. Uh—is there someplace we can talk?"

"How about right here?"

He looked around. I don't suppose he was used to conducting his business in bars but he evidently decided it would be all right to make an exception. He set his briefcase on the floor and seated himself across the table from me. Angela, the new day-shift waitress, hurried over to get his order. He glanced at my cup and said he'd have coffee too.

"I'm an attorney," he said. My first thought was that he didn't look like a lawyer, but then I realized he probably dealt with civil cases. My experience as a cop had given me a lot of experience with criminal lawyers. The breed runs to several types, none of them his.

I waited for him to tell me why he wanted to hire me. But he crossed me up.

"I'm handling an estate," he said, and paused, and gave what seemed a calculated if well intentioned smile. "It's my pleasant duty to tell you you've come into a small legacy, Mr. Scudder."

"Someone's left me money?"

"Twelve hundred dollars."

Who could have died? I'd lost touch long since with any of my relatives. My parents went years ago and we'd never been close with the rest of the family.

I said, "Who—?"

"Mary Alice Redfield."

I repeated the name aloud. It was not entirely unfamiliar but I had no idea who Mary Alice Redfield might be. I looked at Aaron Creighton. I couldn't make out his eyes behind the glasses but there was a smile's ghost on his thin lips, as if my reaction was not unexpected.

"She's dead?"

"Almost three months ago."

"I didn't know her."

"She knew you. You probably did know her, Mr. Scudder. Perhaps you didn't know her by name." His smile deepened. Angela had brought his coffee. He stirred milk and sugar into it, took a careful sip, nodded his approval. "Miss Redfield was murdered." He said this as if he'd had practice uttering a phrase which did not come naturally to him. "She was killed quite brutally in late February for no apparent reason, another innocent victim of street crime."

"She lived in New York?"

"Oh, yes. In this neighborhood."

"And she was killed around here?"

"On West 55th Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues. Her body was found in an alleyway. She'd been stabbed repeatedly and strangled with the scarf she had been wearing."

Late February. Mary Alice Redfield. West 55th between Ninth and Tenth. Murder most foul. Stabbed and strangled, a dead woman in an alleyway. I usually kept track of murders, perhaps out of a vestige of professionalism, perhaps because I couldn't cease to be fascinated by man's inhumanity to man. Mary Alice Redfield had willed me twelve hundred dollars. And someone had knifed and strangled her, and—

"Oh, Jesus," I said. "The shopping bag lady."

Aaron Creighton nodded.

New York is full of them. East Side, West Side, each neighborhood has its own supply of bag women. Some of them are alcoholic but most of them have gone mad without any help from drink. They walk the streets, huddle on stoops or in doorways. They find sermons in stones and treasures in trashcans. They talk to themselves, to passers-by, to God. Sometimes they mumble. Now and then they shriek.

They carry things around with them. The shopping bags supply their

generic name and their chief common denominator. Most of them seem to be paranoid, and their madness convinces them that their possessions are very valuable, that their enemies covet them. So their shopping bags are never out of their sight.

There used to be a colony of these ladies who lived in Grand Central Station. They would sit up all night in the waiting room, taking turns waddling off to the lavatory from time to time. They rarely talked to each other but some herd instinct made them comfortable with one another. But they were not comfortable enough to trust their precious bags to one another's safekeeping, and each sad crazy lady always toted her shopping bags to and from the ladies' room.

Mary Alice Redfield had been a shopping bag lady. I don't know when she set up shop in the neighborhood. I'd been living in the same hotel ever since I resigned from the NYPD and separated from my wife and sons, and that was getting to be quite a few years now. Had Miss Redfield been on the scene that long ago? I couldn't remember her first appearance. Like so many of the neighborhood fixtures, she had been part of the scenery. Had her death not been violent and abrupt I might never have noticed she was gone.

I'd never known her name. But she had evidently known mine, and had felt something for me that prompted her to leave money to me. How had she come to have money to leave?

She'd had a business of sorts. She would sit on a wooden soft-drink case, surrounded by three or four shopping bags, and she would sell newspapers. There's an all-night newsstand at the corner of 57th and Eighth, and she would buy a few dozen papers there, carry them a block west to the corner of Ninth, and set up shop in a doorway. She sold the papers at retail, though I suppose some people tipped her a few cents. I could remember a few occasions when I'd bought a paper and waved away change from a dollar bill. Bread upon the waters, perhaps, if that was what had moved her to leave me the money.

I closed my eyes, brought her image into focus. A thick-set woman, stocky rather than fat. Five-three or four. Dressed usually in shapeless clothing, colorless grey and black garments, layers of clothing that varied with the season. I remembered that she sometimes wore a hat, an old straw affair with paper and plastic flowers poked into it. And I remembered her eyes, large guileless blue eyes that were many years younger than the rest of her.

Mary Alice Redfield.

"Family money," Aaron Creighton was saying. "She wasn't wealthy but she had come from a family that was comfortably fixed. A bank in Baltimore handled her funds. That's where she was from originally, Baltimore, though she'd lived in New York for as long as anyone can remember. The bank sent her a check every month. Not very much, a couple of hundred dollars, but she hardly spent anything. She paid her rent—"

"I thought she lived on the street."

"No, she had a furnished room a few doors down the street from where she was killed. She lived in another rooming house on Tenth Avenue before that but moved when the building was sold. That was six or seven years ago and she lived on 55th Street from then until her death. Her room cost her eighty dollars a month. She spent a few dollars on food. I don't know what she did with the rest. The only money in her room was a coffee can full of pennies. I've been checking the banks and there's no record of a savings account. I suppose she may have spent it or lost it or given it away. She wasn't very firmly grounded in reality."

He sipped at his coffee. "She probably belonged in an institution," he said. "But she got along in the outside world, she functioned well enough. I don't know if she kept herself clean and I don't know anything about how her mind worked but I think she must have been happier than she would have been in an institution. Don't you think?"

"Probably."

"Of course she wasn't safe, not as it turned out, but anybody can get killed on the streets of New York." He frowned briefly, caught up in a private thought. Then he said, "She came to our office ten years ago. That was before my time." He told me the name of his firm, a string of Anglo-Saxon surnames. "She wanted to draw a will. The original will was a very simple document leaving everything to her sister. Then over the years she would come in from time to time to add codicils leaving specific sums to various persons. She had made a total of thirty-two bequests by the time she died. One was for twenty dollars—that was to a man named John Johnson whom we haven't been able to locate. The remainder all ranged from five hundred to two thousand dollars." He smiled. "I've been given the task of running

down the heirs."

"When did she put me into her will?"

"Two years ago in April."

I tried to think what I might have done for her then, how I might have brushed her life with mine. Nothing.

"Of course the will could be contested, Mr. Scudder. It would be easy to challenge Miss Redfield's competence and any relative could almost certainly get it set aside. But no one wishes to challenge it. The total amount involved is slightly in excess of a quarter of a million dollars—"

"That much."

"Yes. Miss Redfield received substantially less than the income which her holdings drew over the years, so the principal kept growing during her lifetime. Now the specific bequests she made total thirty-eight thousand dollars, give or take a few hundred, and the residue goes to Miss Redfield's sister. The sister, her name is Mrs. Palmer, is a widow with grown children. She's hospitalized with cancer and heart trouble and I believe diabetic complications and she hasn't long to live. Her children would like to see the estate settled before their mother dies and they have enough local prominence to hurry the will through probate. So I'm authorized to tender checks for the full amount of the specific bequests on the condition that the legatees sign quitclaims acknowledging that this payment discharges in full the estate's indebtedness to them."

There was more legalese of less importance. Then he gave me papers to sign and the whole procedure ended with a check on the table. It was payable to me and in the amount of twelve hundred dollars and no cents.

I told Creighton I'd pay for his coffee.

I had time to buy myself another drink and still get to my bank before the windows closed. I put a little of Mary Alice Redfield's legacy in my savings account, took some in cash, and sent a money order to Anita and the boys. I stopped at my hotel to check for messages. There weren't any. I had a drink at McGovern's and crossed the street to have another at Polly's Cage. It wasn't five o'clock yet but the bar was doing good business already.

It turned into a funny night. I had dinner at the Greek place and

read the *Post*, spent a little time at Joey Farrell's on 58th Street, then wound up getting to Armstrong's around ten-thirty or thereabouts. I spent part of the evening alone at my usual table and part of it in conversation at the bar. I made a point of stretching my drinks, mixing my bourbon with coffee, making a cup last a while, taking a glass of plain water from time to time.

But that never really works. If you're going to get drunk you'll manage it somehow. The obstacles I placed in my path just kept me up later. By two-thirty I'd done what I had set out to do. I'd made my load and I could go home and sleep it off.

I woke around ten with less of a hangover than I'd earned and no memory of anything after I'd left Armstrong's. I was in my own bed in my own hotel room. And my clothes were hung neatly in the closet, always a good sign on a morning after. So I must have been in fairly good shape. But a certain amount of time was lost to memory, blacked out, gone.

When that first started happening I tended to worry about it. But it's the sort of thing you can get used to.

It was the money, the twelve hundred bucks. I couldn't understand the money. I had done nothing to deserve it. It had been left to me by a poor little rich woman whose name I'd not even known.

It had never occurred to me to refuse the dough. Very early in my career as a cop I'd learned an important precept. When someone put money in your hand you closed your fingers around it and put it in your pocket. I learned that lesson well and never had cause to regret its application. I didn't walk around with my hand out and I never took drug or homicide money but I grabbed all the clean graft that came my way and a certain amount that wouldn't have stood a white-glove inspection. If Mary Alice thought I merited twelve hundred dollars, who was I to argue?

Ah, but it didn't quite work that way. Because somehow the money gnawed at me.

After breakfast I went to St. Paul's but there was a service going on, a priest saying Mass, so I didn't stay. I walked down to St. Benedict the Moor's on 53rd Street and sat for a few minutes in a pew at the rear. I go to churches to try to think, and I gave it a shot but my mind didn't know where to go.

I slipped six twenties into the poor box. I tithe. It's a habit I got into after I left the department and I still don't know why I do it. God knows. Or maybe He's as mystified as I am. This time, though, there was a certain balance in the act. Mary Alice Redfield had given me twelve hundred dollars for no reason I could comprehend. I was passing on a ten percent commission to the church for no better reason.

I stopped on the way out and lit a couple of candles for various people who weren't alive any more. One of them was for the bag lady. I didn't see how it could do her any good, but I couldn't imagine how it could harm her either.

I had read some press coverage of the killing when it happened. I generally keep up with crime stories. Part of me evidently never stopped being a policeman. Now I went down to the 42nd Street library to refresh my memory.

The Times had run a pair of brief back-page items, the first a report of the killing of an unidentified female derelict, the second a follow-up giving her name and age. She'd been 47, I learned. This surprised me, and then I realized that any specific number would have come as a surprise. Bums and bag ladies are ageless. Mary Alice Redfield could have been 30 or 60 or anywhere in between.

The *News* had run a more extended article than *The Times*, enumerating the stab wounds—26 of them—and describing the scarf wound about her throat—blue and white, a designer print, but tattered at its edges and evidently somebody's cast-off. It was this article that I remembered having read.

But the *Post* had really played the story. It had appeared shortly after the new Australian owner took over the paper and the editors were going all-out for human interest, which always translates out as sex and violence. The brutal killing of a woman touches both of those bases, and this had the added kick that she was a character. If they'd ever learned she was an heiress it would have been Page Three material, but even without that knowledge they did all right by her.

The first story they ran was straight news reporting, albeit embellished with reports on the blood, the clothes she was wearing, the litter in the alley where she was found, and all that sort of thing. The next day a reporter pushed the pathos button and tapped out a story featuring capsule interviews with people in the neighborhood. Only a

few of them were identified by name and I came away with the feeling that he'd made up some peachy quotes and attributed them to unnamed nonexistent hangers-on. As a sidebar to that story, another reporter speculated on the possibility of a whole string of bag lady murders, a speculation which happily had turned out to be off the mark. The clown had presumably gone around the West Side asking shopping bag ladies if they were afraid of being the killer's next victim. I hope he faked the piece and let the ladies alone.

And that was about it. When the killer failed to strike again the newspapers hung up on the story. Good news is no news.

I walked back from the library. It was fine weather. The winds had blown all the crap out of the sky and there was nothing but blue overhead. The air actually had some air in it for a change. I walked west on 42nd Street and north on Broadway, and I started noticing the number of street people, the drunks and the crazies and the unclassifiable derelicts. By the time I got within a few blocks of 57th Street I was recognizing a large percentage of them. Each mini-neighborhood has its own human flotsam and jetsam and they're a lot more noticeable come springtime. Winter sends some of them south and others to shelter, and there's a certain percentage who die of exposure, but when the sun warms the pavement it brings most of them out again.

When I stopped for a paper at the corner of Eighth Avenue I got the bag lady into the conversation. The newsie clucked his tongue and shook his head. "The damnedest thing. Just the damnedest thing."

"Murder never makes much sense."

"The hell with murder. You know what she did? You know Eddie, works for me midnight to eight? Guy with the one droopy eyelid? Now he wasn't the guy used to sell her the stack of papers. Matter of fact that was usually me. She'd come by during the late morning or early afternoon and she'd take fifteen or twenty papers and pay me for 'em, then she'd sit on her crate down the next corner and she'd sell as many as she could, and then she'd bring 'em back and I'd give her a refund on what she didn't sell."

"What did she pay for them?"

"Full price. And that's what she sold 'em for. The hell, I can't discount on papers. You know the margin we get. I'm not even supposed to take 'em back, but what difference does it make? It gave the poor

woman something to do is my theory. She was important, she was a businesswoman. Sits there charging a quarter for something she just paid a quarter for, it's no way to get rich, but you know something? She had money. She lived like a pig but she had money."

"So I understand."

"She left Eddie seven-twenty. You believe that? Seven hundred and twenty dollars, she willed it to him, there was this lawyer come around three weeks ago with a check. Eddie Halloran. Pay to the order of. You believe that? She never had dealings with him. I sold her the papers, I bought 'em back from her. Not that I'm complaining, not that I want the woman's money, but why Eddie? He don't know her. He can't believe she knows his name. He tells this lawyer, he says maybe she's got some other Eddie Halloran in mind. It's a common Irish name and the neighborhood's full of the Irish. I'm thinking to myself, Eddie, schmuck, take the money and shut up, but it's him all right because in the will it says Eddie Halloran the Newsdealer. That's him, right? But why Eddie?"

Why me? "Maybe she liked the way he smiled."

"Yeah, maybe. Or the way he combed his hair. Listen, it's money in his pocket. I worried he'd go on a toot, drink it up, but he says money's no temptation. He says he's always got the price of a drink in his jeans and there's a bar on every block but he can walk right past 'em, so why worry about a few hundred dollars? You know something? That crazy woman, I'll tell you something, I miss her. She'd come, crazy hat on her head, spacy look in her eyes, she'd buy her stack of papers and waddle off all businesslike, then she'd bring the leftovers and cash 'em in, and I'd make a joke about her when she was out of earshot, but I miss her."

"I know what you mean."

"She never hurt nobody," he said. "She never hurt a soul."

"Mary Alice Redfield. Yeah, the multiple stabbing and strangulation." He shifted a cud-sized wad of gum from one side of his mouth to the other, pushed a lock of hair off his forehead, and yawned. "What have you got, some new information?"

"Nothing. I wanted to find out what you had."

"Yeah, right."

He worked on the chewing gum. He was a patrolman named Ander-

sen who worked out of the Eighteenth. Another cop, a detective named Guzik, had learned that Andersen had caught the Redfield case and had taken the trouble to introduce the two of us. I hadn't known Andersen when I was on the force. He was younger than I, but then most people are nowadays.

He said, "Thing is, Scudder, we more or less put that one out of the way. It's in an open file. You know how it works. If we get new information, fine, but in the meantime I don't sit up nights thinking about it."

"I just wanted to see what you had."

"Well, I'm kind of tight for time, if you know what I mean. My own personal time, I set a certain store by my own time."

"I can understand that."

"You probably got some relative of the deceased for a client, wants to find out who'd do such a terrible thing to poor old Cousin Mary. Naturally you're interested because it's a chance to make a buck and a man's gotta make a living. Whether a man's a cop or a civilian he's gotta make a buck, right?"

Uh-huh. I seem to remember that we were subtler in my day, but perhaps that's just age talking. I thought of telling him that I didn't have a client but why should he believe me? He didn't know me. If there was nothing in it for him, why should he bother?

So I said, "You know, we're just a couple of weeks away from Memorial Day."

"Yeah, I'll buy a poppy from a Legionnaire. So what else is new?"

"Memorial Day's when women start wearing white shoes and men put straw hats on their heads. You got a new hat for the summer season, Andersen? You could use one."

"A man can always use a new hat," he said.

A hat is cop talk for twenty-five dollars. By the time I left the precinct house Andersen had two tens and a five of Mary Alice Redfield's bequest to me and I had all the data that had turned up to date.

I think Andersen won that one. I now knew that the murder weapon had been a kitchen knife with a blade approximately seven and a half inches long. That one of the stab wounds had found the heart and had probably caused death instantaneously. That it was impossible to determine whether strangulation had taken place before or after death. That *should* have been possible to determine—maybe the medical

examiner hadn't wasted too much time checking her out, or maybe he'd been reluctant to commit himself. She'd been dead a few hours when they found her—the estimate was that she'd died around midnight and the body wasn't reported until half-past five. That wouldn't have ripened her all that much, not in winter weather, but most likely her personal hygiene was nothing to boast about, and she was just a shopping bag lady and you couldn't bring her back to life, so why knock yourself out running tests on her malodorous corpse?

I learned a few other things. The landlady's name. The name of the off-duty bartender heading home after a nightcap at the neighborhood after-hours joint who'd happened on the body and had been drunk enough or sober enough to take the trouble to report it. And I learned the sort of negative facts that turn up in a police report when the case is headed for an open file—the handful of non-leads that led nowhere, the witnesses who had nothing to contribute, the routine matters routinely handled. They hadn't knocked themselves out, Andersen and his partner, but would I have handled it any differently? Why knock yourself out chasing a murderer you didn't stand much chance of catching?

In the theater, SRO is good news. It means a sellout performance, Standing Room Only. But once you get out of the theater district it means Single Room Occupancy, and the designation is invariably applied to a hotel or apartment house which has seen better days.

Mary Alice Redfield's home for the last six or seven years of her life had started out as an old Rent Law tenement, built around the turn of the century, six stories tall, faced in red-brown brick, with four apartments to the floor. Now all of those little apartments had been carved into single rooms as if they were election districts gerrymandered by a maniac. There was a communal bathroom on each floor and you didn't need a map to find it.

The manager was a Mrs. Larkin. Her blue eyes had lost most of their color and half her hair had gone from black to grey but she was still pert. If she's reincarnated as a bird she'll be a house wren.

She said, "Oh, poor Mary. We're none of us safe, are we, with the streets full of monsters? I was born in this neighborhood and I'll die in it, but please God that'll be of natural causes. Poor Mary. There's some said she should have been locked up, but Jesus, she got along. She

lived her life. And she had her check coming in every month and paid her rent on time. She had her own money, you know. She wasn't living off the public like some I could name but won't."

"I know."

"Do you want to see her room? I rented it twice since then. The first one was a young man and he didn't stay. He looked all right but when he left I was just as glad. He said he was a sailor off a ship and when he left he said he'd got on with another ship and was on his way to Hong Kong or some such place, but I've had no end of sailors and he didn't walk like a sailor so I don't know what he was after doing. Then I could have rented it twelve times but didn't because I won't rent to colored or Spanish. I've nothing against them but I won't have them in the house. The owner says to me, Mrs. Larkin he says, my instructions are to rent to anybody regardless of race or creed or color, but if you was to use your own judgment I wouldn't have to know about it. In other words he don't want them either but he's after covering himself."

"I suppose he has to."

"Oh, with all the laws, but I've had no trouble." She laid a forefinger alongside her nose. It's a gesture you don't see too much these days. "Then I rented poor Mary's room two weeks ago to a very nice woman, a widow. She likes her beer, she does, but why shouldn't she have it? I keep my eye on her and she's making no trouble, and if she wants an old jar now and then whose business is it but her own?" She fixed her blue-grey eyes on me. "You like your drink," she said.

"Is it on my breath?"

"No, but I can see it in your face. Larkin liked his drink and there's some say it killed him but he liked it and a man has a right to live what life he wants. And he was never a hard man when he drank, never cursed or fought or beat a woman as some I could name but won't. Mrs. Shepard's out now. That's the one took poor Mary's room, and I'll show it to you if you want."

So I saw the room. It was kept neat.

"She keeps it tidier than poor Mary," Mrs. Larkin said. "Mary wasn't dirty, you understand, but she had all her belongings—her shopping bags and other things that she kept in her room. She made a mare's nest of the place, and all the years she lived here it wasn't tidy. I would keep her bed made but she didn't want me touching her

things and so I left the rest cluttered. She paid her rent on time and made no trouble otherwise. She had money, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"She left some to a woman on the fourth floor. A much younger woman, she'd only moved here three months before Mary was killed. If she exchanged a word with Mary I couldn't swear to it, but Mary left her almost a thousand dollars. Now Mrs. Klein across the hall lived here since before Mary ever moved in and the two old things always had a good word for each other—all Mrs. Klein has is the welfare and she could have made good use of a couple of dollars, but Mary left her money to Miss Strom instead." She raised her eyebrows to show her bewilderment. "Now Mrs. Klein said nothing, and I don't even know if she's had the thought that Mary might have mentioned her in her will, but Miss Strom said she didn't know what to make of it. She just couldn't understand it at all, and what I told her was you can't figure out a woman like poor Mary who never had both her feet on the pavement. Troubled as she was, daft as she was, who's to say what she might have had on her mind?"

"Could I see Miss Strom?"

"That would be for her to say, but she's not home from work yet. She works part-time in the afternoons. She's a close one, not that she hasn't the right to be, and she's never said what it is that she does. But she's a decent sort. This is a decent house."

"I'm sure it is."

"It's single rooms and they don't cost much so you know you're not at the Ritz Hotel, but there's decent people here and I keep it as clean as a person can. When there's not but one toilet on the floor it's a struggle. But it's decent."

"Yes."

"Poor Mary. Why'd anyone kill her? Was it sex, do you know? Not that you could imagine anyone wanting her, the old thing, but try to figure out a madman and you'll go mad your own self. Was she molested?"

"No."

"Just killed, then. Oh, God save us all. I gave her a home for almost seven years. Which it was no more than my job to do, not making it out to be charity on my part. But I had her here all that time and of course I never knew her, you couldn't get to know a poor old soul like

that, but I got used to her. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so."

"I got used to having her about. I might say hello and good morning and not get a look in reply but even on those days she was someone familiar and she's gone now and we're all of us older, aren't we?"

"We are."

"The poor old thing. How could anyone do it, will you tell me that? How could anyone murder her?"

I don't think she expected an answer. It's just as well. I didn't have one.

After dinner I returned for a few minutes of conversation with Genevieve Strom. She had no idea why Miss Redfield had left her the money. She'd received $880 and she was glad to get it because she could use it, but the whole thing puzzled her. "I hardly knew her," she said more than once. "I keep thinking I ought to do something special with the money, but what?"

I made the bars that night but drinking didn't have the urgency it had possessed the night before. I was able to keep it in proportion and to know that I'd wake up the next morning with my memory intact. In the course of things I dropped over to the newsstand a little past midnight and talked with Eddie Halloran. He was looking good and I said as much. I remembered him when he'd gone to work for Sid three years ago. He'd been drawn then, and shaky, and his eyes always moved off to the side of whatever he was looking at. Now there was confidence in his stance and he looked years younger, though it hadn't all come back to him and maybe some of it was lost forever. I guess the booze had him pretty good before he got it kicked once and for all.

We talked about the bag lady. He said, "Know what I think it is? Somebody's sweeping the streets."

"I don't follow you."

"A clean-up campaign. A few years back, Matt, there was this gang of kids found a new way to amuse theirselves. Pick up a can of gasoline, find some bum down on the Bowery, pour the gas on him, and throw a lit match at him. You remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Those kids thought they were patriots. They thought they deserved a medal. They were cleaning up the neighborhood, getting drunken

bums off the streets. You know, Matt, people don't like to look at a derelict. That building up the block, the Towers? There's this grating there where the heating system's vented. You remember how the guys would sleep there in the winter. It was warm, it was comfortable, it was free, and two or three guys would be there every night catching some Z's and getting warm. Remember?"

"Uh-huh. Then they fenced it."

"Right. Because the tenants complained. It didn't hurt them any, it was just the local bums sleeping it off, but the tenants pay a lot of rent and they don't like to look at bums on their way in or out of their building. The bums were outside and not bothering anybody but it was the sight of them, you know, so the owners went to the expense of putting up cyclone fencing around where they used to sleep. It looks ugly as hell and all it does is keep the bums out but that's all it's supposed to do."

"That's human beings for you."

He nodded, then turned aside to sell somebody a *Daily News* and a *Racing Form*. Then he said, "I don't know what it is exactly. *I* was a bum, Matt. I got pretty far down. You probably don't know how far. I got as far as the Bowery. I panhandled and slept in my clothes on a bench or in a doorway. You look at men like that and you think they're just waiting to die, and they are, but some of them come back. And you can't tell for sure who's gonna come back and who's not. Somebody coulda poured gas on me, set me on fire. Sweet Jesus."

"The shopping bag lady—"

"You'll look at a bum and you'll say to yourself, Maybe I could get like that and I don't wanta think about it. Or you'll look at somebody like the shopping bag lady and say, I could go nutsy like her so get her out of my sight. And you get people who think like Nazis—you know, take all the cripples and the lunatics and the retarded kids and give 'em an injection and Goodbye, Charlie."

"You think that's what happened to her?"

"What else?"

"But whoever did it stopped at one, Eddie."

He frowned. "Don't make sense," he said. "Unless he did the one job and the next day he got run down by a Ninth Avenue bus, and it couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Or he got scared. All that blood and it was more than he figured on. Or he left town. Could be anything like

that."

"Could be."

"There's no other reason, is there? She musta been killed because she was a bag lady, right?"

"I don't know."

"Well, Jesus Christ, Matt. What other reason would anybody have for killing her?"

The law firm where Aaron Creighton worked had offices on the seventh floor of the Flatiron Building. In addition to the four partners, eleven other lawyers had their names painted on the frosted glass door. Aaron Creighton's came second from the bottom. Well, he was young.

He was surprised to see me, and when I told him what I wanted he said it was irregular.

"It's a matter of public record, isn't it?"

"Well, yes," he said. "That means you can find the information. It doesn't mean we're obliged to furnish it to you."

For an instant I thought I was back at the Eighteenth Precinct and a cop was trying to hustle me for the price of a new hat. But Creighton's reservations were ethical. I wanted a list of Mary Alice Redfield's beneficiaries, including the amounts they'd received and the dates they'd been added to her will. He wasn't sure where his duty lay.

"I'd like to be helpful," he said. "Perhaps you could tell me just what your interest is."

"I'm not sure."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't know why I'm playing with this one. I used to be a cop, Mr. Creighton. Now I'm a sort of unofficial detective. I don't carry a license but I do things for people and I wind up making enough that way to keep a roof overhead."

His eyes were wary. I guess he was trying to guess how I intended to earn myself a fee out of this.

"I got twelve hundred dollars out of the blue. It was left to me by a woman I didn't really know and who didn't really know me. I can't seem to slough off the feeling that I got the money for a reason. That I've been paid in advance."

"Paid for what?"

"To try and find out who killed her."

"Oh," he said. "*Oh.*"

"I don't want to get the heirs together to challenge the will, if that was what was bothering you. And I can't quite make myself suspect that one of her beneficiaries killed her for the money she was leaving him. For one thing, she doesn't seem to have told people they were named in her will. She never said anything to me or to the two people I've spoken with thus far. For another, it wasn't the sort of murder that gets committed for gain. It was deliberately brutal."

"Then why do you want to know who the other beneficiaries are?"

"I don't know. Part of it's cop training. When you've got any specific leads, any hard facts, you run them down before you cast a wider net. That's only part of it. I suppose I want to get more of a sense of the woman. That's probably all I can realistically hope to get, anyway. I don't stand much chance of tracking her killer."

"The police don't seem to have gotten very far."

I nodded. "I don't think they tried too hard. And I don't think they knew she had an estate. I talked to one of the cops on the case and if he had known that he'd have mentioned it to me. There was nothing in her file. My guess is that they waited for her killer to run a string of murders so they'd have something more concrete to work with. It's the kind of senseless crime that usually gets repeated." I closed my eyes for a moment, reaching for an errant thought. "But he didn't repeat," I said. "So they put it on a back burner and then they took it off the stove altogether."

"I don't know much about police work. I'm involved largely with estates and trusts." He tried a smile. "Most of my clients die of natural causes. Murder's an exception."

"It generally is. I'll probably never find him. I certainly don't expect to find him. Hell, it was all those months ago. He could have been a sailor off a ship, got tanked up and went nuts and he's in Macao or Port-au-Prince by now. No witnesses and no clues and no suspects and the trail's three months cold by now, and it's a fair bet the killer doesn't remember what he did. So many murders take place in blackout."

"Blackout?" He frowned. "You don't mean in the dark?"

"Alcoholic blackout. The prisons are full of men who got drunk and shot their wives or their best friends. Now they're serving twenty-to-life for something they don't recollect at all."

The idea unsettled him, and he looked especially young now. "That's terrifying," he said.

"Yes."

"I originally gave some thought to criminal law. My Uncle Jack talked me out of it. He said you either starve or you spend your time helping professional criminals beat the system. He said that was the only way you made good money out of a criminal practice and what you wound up doing was unpleasant and basically immoral. Of course, there are a couple of superstar criminal lawyers, the hotshots everybody knows, but the other ninety-nine percent fit what Uncle Jack said."

"I would think so, yes."

"I guess I made the right decision." He took his glasses off, inspected them, decided they were clean, put them back on again. "Sometimes I'm not so sure," he said. "Sometimes I wonder. I'll get that list for you. I should probably check with someone to make sure it's all right but I'm not going to bother. You know lawyers. If you ask them whether it's all right to do something they'll automatically say no. Because inaction is always safer than action and they can't get in trouble for giving you bad advice if they tell you to sit on your hands and do nothing. I'm going overboard. Most of the time I like what I do and I'm proud of my profession. This'll take me a few minutes. Do you want some coffee in the meantime?"

I let him have his girl bring me a cup, black, no sugar. By the time I was done with the coffee he had the list ready.

"If there's anything else I can do—"

I told him I'd let him know. He walked out to the elevator with me, waited for the cage to come wheezing up, and shook my hand. I watched him turn and head back to his office and I had the feeling he'd have preferred to come along with me. In a day or so he'd change his mind, but right now he didn't seem too crazy about his job.

The next week I worked my way through the list Aaron Creighton had given me, knowing what I was doing was essentially purposeless but compulsive about doing it all the same.

There were thirty-two names on the list. I checked off my own and Eddie Halloran and Genevieve Strom. I put additional check marks next to six people who lived outside of New York. Then I had a go at

the remaining twenty-three names. Creighton had done most of the spadework for me, finding addresses to match most of the names. He'd included the date each of the thirty-two codicils had been drawn, and that enabled me to attack the list in reverse chronological order, starting with those persons who'd been made beneficiaries most recently. If this was a method, there was madness to it; it was based on the notion that a person added recently to the will would be more likely to commit homicide for gain, and I'd already decided this wasn't that kind of a killing to begin with.

Well, it gave me something to do. And it led to some interesting conversations. If the people Mary Alice Redfield had chosen to remember ran to any type, my mind wasn't subtle enough to discern it. They ranged in age, in ethnic background, in gender and sexual orientation, in economic status. Most of them were as mystified as Eddie and Genevieve and I about the bag lady's largesse, but once in a while I'd encounter someone who attributed it to some act of kindness he'd performed, and there was a young man named Jerry Forgash who was in no doubt whatever. He was some form of Jesus freak and he'd given poor Mary a couple of tracts and a Get Smart—Get Saved button, presumably a twin to the one he wore on the breast pocket of his chambray shirt. I suppose she put his gifts in one of her shopping bags.

"I told her Jesus loved her," he said, "and I suppose it won her soul for Christ. So of course she was grateful. Cast your bread upon the waters, Brother Matthew. You know there was a disciple of Christ named Matthew."

"I know."

He told me Jesus loved me and that I should get smart and get saved. I managed not to get a button but I had to take a couple of tracts from him. I didn't have a shopping bag so I stuck them in my pocket.

I didn't run the whole list. People were hard to find and I wasn't in any big rush to find them. It wasn't that kind of a case. It wasn't a case at all, really, merely an obsession, and there was surely no need to race the clock. Or the calendar. If anything, I was probably reluctant to finish up the names on the list. Once I ran out of them I'd have to find some other way to approach the woman's murder and I was damned if I knew where to start.

In the meantime, an odd thing happened. The word got around that

I was investigating the murder and the whole neighborhood became very much aware of Mary Alice Redfield. People began to seek me out. Ostensibly they had information to give me or theories to advance, but neither the information nor the theories ever seemed to amount to anything substantial, and I came to see that they were merely a prelude to conversation. Someone would start off by saying he'd seen Mary selling the *New York Post* the afternoon before she was killed, and that would serve as the opening wedge of a discussion of the bag woman, or bag women in general, or various qualities of the neighborhood, or violence in American life, or whatever.

A lot of people started off talking about the bag lady and wound up talking about themselves. I guess most conversations work out that way.

A nurse from Roosevelt said she never saw a shopping bag lady without hearing an inner voice say, There but for the grace of God. She was not the only woman who confessed she worried about ending up that way. I guess it's a specter that haunts women who live alone, just as the vision of the Bowery derelict clouds the peripheral vision of hard-drinking men.

Genevieve Strom turned up at Armstrong's one night. We talked briefly about the bag lady. Two nights later she came back again and we took turns spending our inheritances on rounds of drinks. The drinks hit her with some force and a little past midnight she decided it was time to go. I said I'd see her home. At the corner of 57th Street she stopped in her tracks and said, "No men in the room. That's one of Mrs. Larkin's rules."

"Old-fashioned, isn't she?"

"She runs a daycent establishment." Her mock-Irish accent was heavier than the landlady's. Her eyes, hard to read in the lamplight, raised to meet mine. "Take me someplace."

I took her to my hotel, a less decent establishment than Mrs. Larkin's. We did each other little good but no harm, and it beat being alone.

Another night I ran into Barry Mosedale at Polly's Cage. He told me there was a singer at Kid Gloves who was doing a number about the bag lady. "I can find out how you can reach him," he offered.

"Is he there now?"

He nodded and checked his watch. "He goes on in fifteen minutes. But you don't want to *go* there, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Hardly your sort of crowd, Matt."

"Cops go anywhere."

"They do, and they're welcome wherever they go, aren't they? Just let me drink this and I'll accompany you, if that's all right. You need someone to lend you immoral support."

Kid Gloves is a gay bar on 56th west of Ninth. The decor is just a little aggressively gay lib. There's a small raised stage, a scattering of tables, a piano, and a loud juke box. Barry Mosedale and I stood at the bar. I'd been there before and knew better than to order their coffee. I had straight bourbon. Barry had his on ice with a splash of soda.

Halfway through the drink Gordon Lurie was introduced. He wore tight jeans and a flowered shirt, sat on stage on a folding chair, sang ballads he'd written himself with his own guitar for accompaniment. I don't know if he was any good or not. It sounded to me as though all the songs had the same melody, but that may just have been a similarity of style. I don't have much of an ear.

After a song about a summer romance in Amsterdam, Gordon Lurie announced that the next number was dedicated to the memory of Mary Alice Redfield. Then he sang:

She's a shopping bag lady who lives on the sidewalks of Broadway,
Wearing all of her clothes and her years on her back,
Toting dead dreams in an old paper sack,
Searching the trashcans for something she lost here on Broadway—
Shopping bag lady.

You'd never know but she once was an actress on Broadway,
Speaking the words that they stuffed in her head,
Reciting the lines of the life that she led,
Thrilling her fans and her friends and her lovers on Broadway—
Shopping bag lady.

There are demons who lurk in the corners of minds and of
Broadway
And after the omens and portents and signs
Came the day she forgot to remember her lines,
Put her life on a leash and took it out walking on Broadway—
Shopping bag lady.

There were a couple more verses and the shopping bag lady in the song wound up murdered in a doorway, dying in defense of the "tattered old treasures she mined in the trashcans of Broadway." The song went over well and got a bigger hand than any of the ones that had preceded it.

I asked Barry who Gordon Lurie was.

"You know very nearly as much as I," he said. "He started here Tuesday. I find him whelming, personally. Neither overwhelming nor underwhelming but somewhere in the middle."

"Mary Alice never spent much time on Broadway. I never saw her more than a block from Ninth Avenue."

"Poetic license, I'm sure. The song would lack a certain something if you substituted Ninth Avenue for Broadway. As it stands it sounds a little like *Rhinestone Cowboy*."

"Does Lurie live around here?"

"I don't know where he lives. I have the feeling he's Canadian. So many people are nowadays. It used to be that no one was Canadian and now simply everybody is. I'm sure it must be a virus."

We listened to the rest of Gordon Lurie's act. Then Barry leaned forward and chatted with the bartender to find out how I could get backstage. I found my way to what passed for a dressing room at Kid Gloves. It must have been a ladies' lavatory in a prior incarnation.

I went in thinking I'd made a breakthrough, that Lurie had killed her and now he was dealing with his guilt by singing about her. I don't think I really believed this but it supplied me with direction and momentum. I told him my name and that I was interested in his act. He wanted to know if I was from a record company. "Am I on the threshold of a great opportunity? Am I about to become an overnight success after years of travail?"

We got out of the tiny room and left the club through a side door. Three doors down the block we sat in a cramped booth at a coffee

shop. He ordered a Greek salad and we both had coffee.

I told him I was interested in his song about the bag lady.

He brightened. "Oh, do you like it? Personally I think it's the best thing I've written. I just wrote it a couple of days ago. I opened next door Tuesday night. I got to New York three weeks ago and I had a two-week booking in the West Village, a place called David's Table. Do you know it?"

"I don't think so."

"Another stop on the K-Y circuit. Either there aren't any straight people in New York or they don't go to nightclubs. But I was there two weeks, and then I opened at Kid Gloves. Afterward I was sitting and drinking with some people and somebody was talking about the shopping bag lady and I'd had enough Amaretto to be maudlin on the subject. I woke up Wednesday morning with the first verse of the song buzzing in my splitting head, and immediately wrote it down. As I was writing one verse, the next would come bubbling to the surface and before I knew it I had all six verses." He took a cigarette, then paused in the act of lighting it to fix his eyes on me. "You told me your name," he said, "but I don't remember it."

"Matthew Scudder."

"Yes. You're the person investigating her murder."

"I'm not sure that's the right word. I've been talking to people, seeing what I can come up with. Did you know her before she was killed?"

He shook his head. "I was never even in this neighborhood before. *Oh.* I'm not a suspect, am I? Because I haven't been in New York since the fall. I haven't bothered to figure out where I was when she was killed but I was in California at Christmas time and I'd only gotten as far east as Chicago in early March, so I do have a fairly solid alibi."

"I never really suspected you. I think I just wanted to hear your song." I sipped some coffee. "Where did you get the facts of her life? Was she an actress?"

"I don't think so. Was she? It wasn't really *about* her, you know. It was inspired by her story but I didn't know her or anything about her. The past few days I've been paying a lot of attention to bag ladies though. And other street people."

"I know what you mean."

"Are there more of them in New York or is it just that they're so

much more visible here? In California everybody drives, you don't see people on the street. I'm from Canada, rural Ontario, and the first city I ever spent much time in was Toronto, and there are crazy people on the streets there but it's nothing like New York. Does the city drive them crazy or does it just tend to draw crazy people?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe they're not crazy. Maybe they just hear a different drummer. I wonder who killed her."

"We'll probably never know."

"What I really wonder is *why* she was killed. In my song I made up the reason that somebody wanted what was in her bags. I think that works in the song but I don't think there's much chance it happened like that."

"I don't know."

"They say she left people money—people she hardly knew. Is that the truth?" I nodded. "And she left me a song. I don't even feel that I wrote it. I woke up with it. I never set eyes on her and she touched my life. That's strange, isn't it?"

Everything was strange. The strangest part of all was the way it ended.

It was a Monday night. The Mets were at Shea and I'd taken my sons to a game. The Dodgers were in for a three-game series which they eventually swept as they'd been sweeping everything lately. The boys and I got to watch them knock Jon Matlack out of the box and go on to shell his several replacements. The final count was something like 13 to 4. We stayed in our seats until the last out. Then I saw them home and caught a train back to the city.

So it was past midnight when I reached Armstrong's. Trina brought me a large double and a mug of coffee without being asked. I knocked back half of the bourbon and was dumping the rest into my coffee when she told me somebody'd been looking for me earlier. "He was in three times in the past two hours," she said. "A wiry guy, high forehead, bushy eyebrows, sort of a bulldog jaw. I guess the word for it is underslung."

"Perfectly good word."

"I said you'd probably get here sooner or later."

"I always do. Sooner or later."

"Uh-huh. Are you O.K., Matt?"

"The Mets lost a close one."

"I heard it was 13 to 4."

"That's close for them these days. Did he say what it was about?"

He hadn't, but within the half hour he came in again and I was there to be found. I recognized him from Trina's description as soon as he came through the door. He looked faintly familiar but he was nobody I knew. I suppose I'd seen him around the neighborhood.

Evidently he knew me by sight because he found his way to my table without asking directions and took a chair without being invited to sit. He didn't say anything for a while and neither did I. I had a fresh bourbon and coffee in front of me and I took a sip and looked him over.

He was under thirty. His cheeks were hollow and the flesh of his face was stretched over his skull like leather that had shrunk upon drying. He wore a forest-green work shirt and a pair of khaki pants. He needed a shave.

Finally he pointed at my cup and asked me what I was drinking. When I told him he said all he drank was beer.

"They have beer here," I said.

"Maybe I'll have what you're drinking." He turned in his chair and waved for Trina. When she came over he said he'd have bourbon and coffee, the same as I was having. He didn't say anything more until she brought the drink. Then, after he had spent quite some time stirring it, he took a sip. "Well," he said, "that's not so bad. That's O.K."

"Glad you like it."

"I don't know if I'd order it again, but at least now I know what it's like."

"That's something."

"I seen you around. Matt Scudder. Used to be a cop, private eye now, blah blah blah. Right?"

"Close enough."

"My name's Floyd. I never liked it but I'm stuck with it, right? I could change it but who'm I kidding? Right?"

"If you say so."

"If I don't somebody else will. Floyd Karp, that's the full name. I didn't tell you my last name, did I? That's it, Floyd Karp."

"O.K."

"O.K., O.K., O.K." He pursed his lips, blew out air in a silent whistle. "What do we do now, Matt, huh? That's what I want to know."

"I'm not sure what you mean, Floyd."

"Oh, you know what I'm getting at, driving at, getting at. You know, don't you?"

By this time I suppose I did.

"I killed that old lady. I took her life, stabbed her with my knife." He flashed the saddest smile. "Steee-rangled her with her skeeee-arf. Hoist her with her own whatchacallit, petard. What's a petard?"

"I don't know, Floyd. Why'd you kill her?"

He looked at me, he looked at his coffee, he looked at me again.

He said, "Had to."

"Why?"

"Same as the bourbon and coffee. Had to *see*. Had to taste it and find out what it was like." His eyes met mine. His were very large, hollow, empty. I fancied I could see right through them to the blackness at the back of his skull. "I couldn't get my mind away from murder," he said. His voice was more sober now, the mocking playful quality gone from it. "I tried. I just couldn't do it. It was on my mind all the time and I was afraid of what I might do. I couldn't function, I couldn't think, I just saw blood and death all the time. I was afraid to close my eyes for fear of what I might see. I would just stay up, days it seemed, and then I'd be tired enough to pass out the minute I closed my eyes. I stopped eating. I used to be fairly heavy and the weight just fell off of me."

"When did all this happen?"

"I don't know. All winter. And I thought if I went and did it once I would know if I was a man or a monster or what. So I got this knife, and I went out a couple nights but lost my nerve. Then one night—almost couldn't do it, but I couldn't *not* do it, and then I was doing it and it went on forever. It was horrible."

"Why didn't you stop?"

"I don't know. I think I was afraid to stop. That doesn't make any sense, does it? I just don't know. It was insane, like being in a movie and being in the audience at the same time. Watching myself."

"No one saw you do it?"

"No. I went home. I threw the knife down a sewer. I put all my clothes in the incinerator, the ones I was wearing. I kept throwing up.

All that night I would throw up even when my stomach was empty. Dry heaves, Department of Dry Heaves. And then I guess I fell asleep, I don't know when or how but I did, and the next day I woke up and thought I dreamed it. But I didn't."

"No."

"No. But it was over. I did it and I knew I'd never want to do it again. It was something crazy that happened and I could forget about it."

"Did you forget about it?"

A nod. "For a while. But now everybody's talking about her. Mary Alice Redfield, I killed her without knowing her name. Nobody knew her name and now everybody knows it and it's all back in my mind. And I heard you were looking for me, and I guess, I guess . . ." He frowned, chasing a thought around in his mind like a dog trying to capture his tail. Then he gave it up and looked at me. "So here I am," he said. "So here I am."

"Yes."

"Now what happens?"

"I think you'd better tell the police about it, Floyd."

"Why?"

"I suppose for the same reason you told me."

He thought about it. After a long time he nodded. "All right," he said. "I can accept that. I'd never kill anybody again. I know that. But—you're right, I have to tell them."

"I'll go with you if you want."

"Yeah. I want you to."

"I'll have a drink and then we'll go. You want another?"

"No. I'm not much of a drinker."

I had it without the coffee this time. After Trina brought it I asked him how he'd picked his victim. Why the bag lady?

He started to cry. No sobs, just tears spilling from his deep-set eyes. After a while he wiped them on his sleeve.

"Because she didn't count," he said. "That's what I thought. She was nobody. Who cared if she died? Who'd miss her?" He closed his eyes tight. "Everybody misses her," he said. "Everybody."

So I took him in. I don't know what they'll do with him. It's not my problem.

It wasn't really a case and I didn't really solve it. As far as I can see I didn't do anything. It was the talk that drove Floyd Karp from cover, and no doubt I helped some of the talk get started, but much of it would have gotten around without me. All those legacies of Mary Alice Redfield's had made her a nine-day wonder in the neighborhood. They ran to no form known to anyone but the bag lady herself, and they had in no way led to her death, but maybe they led to its resolution since it was one of the legacies that got me involved.

So maybe she caught her own killer. Or maybe he caught himself, as everyone does. Maybe no man's an island and maybe everybody is.

All I know is I lit a candle for the woman, and I suspect I'm not the only one who did.

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