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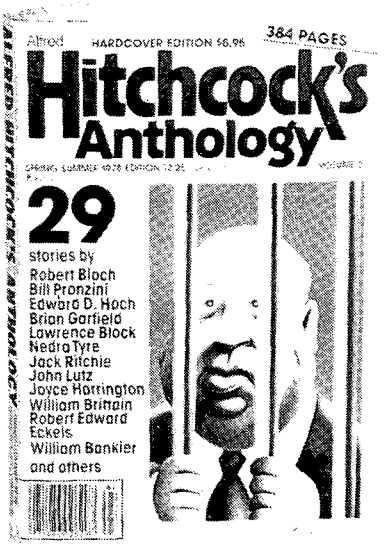

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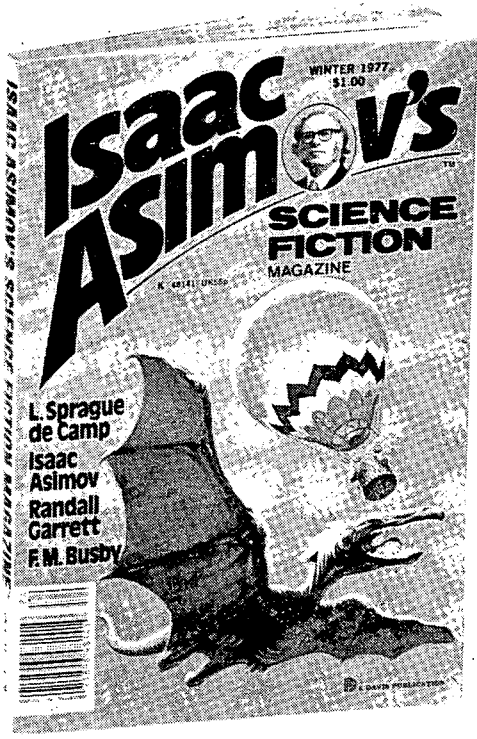

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December 1977

Dear Reader:

As you peruse this issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, as well as today's newspaper, consider the corrosive effects on all of us of the sharp increase in population over the last hundred years. Think of the pressures brought on by the social and technical changes that have evolved from that increase and the strains imposed on us by overcrowding, pollution, the deafening noise and frantic pace we've had to adjust to since the turn of the century.

The seven deadly sins—and their consequences—have always been with us, but as the pressures increase so it seems do our worst impulses and the crime rate. But my message to you this holiday season is not to despair. Take comfort—and yes, pride—in the fact that there isn't *more* crime in today's stressful world. The man and woman of goodwill will prevail.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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A shot is a shot is a shot is a shot . . .

CLICK!

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

It was late afternoon by the time Dandridge got back to the lodge. The mountain air was as crisp as the fallen leaves that crunched under his heavy boots. He turned for a last look at the western sky, then hurried up the steps and into the massive building. In his room he paused only long enough to drop his gear onto a chair and hang his bright orange cap on a peg. Then he strode to the lobby and through it to the taproom.

He bellied up to the bar, a big, thick-bodied man. "Afternoon, Eddie," he said to the barman. "The usual poison."

Dandridge's usual poison was sour-mash whiskey. The barman poured a generous double into a tumbler and stood, bottle in hand, while Dandridge knocked the drink back in a single swallow. "First of the day," he announced, "and God willing it won't be the last."

Both the Lord and the barman were willing. This time Eddie added ice and a splash of soda. Dandridge accepted the drink, took a small sip of it, nodded his approval, and turned to regard the only other man present at the bar, a smaller, less obtrusive man who regarded Dandridge in turn.

"Afternoon," Dandridge said.

"Good afternoon," said the other man. He was smoking a filtered cigarette and drinking a vodka martini. He looked Dandridge over thoroughly, from the rugged face weathered by sun and wind down over the heavy red-and-black-checked jacket and wool pants to the knee-high leather boots. "If I were to guess," the man said, "I'd say you've been out hunting."

Dandridge smiled. "Well, you'd be right," he said. "In a manner of speaking."

" 'In a manner of speaking,' " the smaller man echoed. "I like the phrase. I'd guess further that you had a good day."

"A damn good day. Hard not to on a day like this. When it's this kind of a day, the air just the right temperature and the sun comes through the trees and casts a dappled pattern on the ground, well, hell, sir, you could never set eyes on bird or beast and you'd still have to call it a good day."

"You speak like a poet."

"I'm afraid I'm nothing of the sort. I'm in insurance, and let me tell you there's nothing the least bit poetic about it. But when I get out here the woods and the mountains do their best to make a poet out of me."

The smaller man raised his glass, took a small sip. "I would guess," he said, "that today wasn't a day in which you failed to—how did you put it?—to set eyes on bird or beast."

"No, you'd be right. I had good hunting."

"Then let me congratulate you," the man said. He raised his glass to Dandridge, who raised his in return.

"Dandridge," said Dandridge. "Homer Dandridge."

"Roger Krull," said the other man.

"A pleasure, Mr. Krull."

"My pleasure, Mr. Dandridge."

They drank, and both of their glasses stood empty. Dandridge motioned to the barman, his hand indicating both glasses. "On me," he said. "Mr. Krull, would I be wrong in guessing you're a hunter yourself?"

"In a manner of speaking." Krull glanced down into his newly freshened drink. "I've hunted for years," he said. "And I still hunt. I haven't given it up, not by any means. But—"

"It's not the same, is it?"

Krull looked up. "That's absolutely right," he said. "How did you know?"

"Go on," Dandridge urged. "Tell me how it's different."

Krull thought a moment. "I don't know exactly," he said. "Of course the novelty's gone but, hell, that wore off years ago. It's something else. The stalking is still exciting, the pursuit, all of that, and there's still that instant of triumph when the prey is in your sights, and then the gun bucks, and—"

"Yes?"

"Then you stand there, deafened for a moment by the roar of the gun, and you watch your prey gather and fall, and then—" He shrugged heavily.

"Yes? Go on, Mr. Krull. Go on, sir."

"Well, I hope you won't take offense," Krull said. "It feels like a waste, a waste of life. Here I've taken life away from another creature, but I don't own that life. It's just—gone."

Dandridge was silent for a moment. He sipped his drink, made circles on the bar with the glass. He said, "You didn't feel this way in the past, I take it."

"No, not at all. The kill was always thrilling and there were no negative feelings accompanying it. But in the past year, maybe even the past two years, it's been changing." The smaller man reached for his glass. "I'm sorry I mentioned this," he said. "Here you had a good day and I have to bring you down with all this nonsense."

"Not at all, Mr. Krull. Eddie, fill these up again, will you?" Dandridge planted a large hand on the top of the bar. "Don't regret what

you've said, Mr. Krull. I'm glad you spoke up and I'm glad I was here to hear you."

"You are?"

"Absolutely." Dandridge ran a hand through his wiry grey hair. "Mr. Krull—or if I may call you Roger?"

"By all means, Homer."

"Roger, I daresay I've been hunting more years than you have. Believe me, the feelings you've just expressed so eloquently are not foreign to me. I went through precisely what you're going through now. I came very close to giving it up, all of it."

"And then the feelings passed?"

"No," Dandridge said. "No, Roger. They did not."

"Then—"

Dandridge smiled hugely. "I'll tell you what I did," he said. "I didn't give it up. I thought of doing that because I grew to hate killing, but abandoning the woods and the mountains galled me. Oh, you can walk in the woods without hunting, but that's not the same thing. The pleasure of the stalk, the pursuit, the matching of human wit and intelligence against the instincts and cunning of game—that's what makes hunting what it is for me, Roger."

"Yes," Krull murmured.

"So what I did," Dandridge said, "was change my style. No more bang-bang."

"I beg your pardon?"

"No more bang-bang," Dandridge said. "Now it's click-click instead." And when Krull frowned uncomprehendingly, the big man put his hands in front of his face and mimed the operation of a camera. "Click!" he said.

Light dawned. "Oh," said Krull.

"Exactly."

"Not with a bang but a click."

"Nicely put."

"Photography."

"Let's not say photography," Dandridge demurred. "Let us say hunting wih a camera."

"Hunting with a camera."

Dandridge nodded. "So you see now why I said I was a hunter in a manner of speaking. Many people would not call me a hunter. They

would say I was a photographer of animals in the wild, while I consider myself a hunter who simply employs a camera instead of a gun."

Krull took his time digesting this. "The act of taking the picture is equivalent to making the kill. It's how you take the trophy, but you don't go out because you want a picture of an elk anymore than a man hunts because he wants to put meat on the table."

"You do understand, Mr. Krull." The glasses, it was noticed, were once more empty. "Eddie!"

"My turn this time, Eddie," said Roger Krull. He waited until the drinks were poured and tasted. Then he said, "Do you get the same thrill, Homer?"

"Roger, I get twice the thrill. Another old hunter name of Hemingway said a moral act is one that makes you feel good afterward. Well, if that's the case, then hunting with a gun became immoral for me a couple of years back. Hunting with a camera has all the thrills and excitement of gun hunting without the letdown that comes when you realize you've caused pain and death to an innocent creature.

"Here, let me show you something." Dandridge produced his wallet, drew out a sheaf of color snapshots. "I don't normally do this," he confided. "I could wind up being every bit as much of a bore as those pests who show you pictures of their grandchildren. But I get the feeling you're interested."

"You're damned right I'm interested, Homer."

"Well, now," Dandridge said. "All right, we'll lead off with something big. This here is a Kodiak bear. I went up to Alaska to get him, hired a guide, tracked the son of a bitch halfway across the state until I got close enough for this one. That's not taken with a telephoto lens, incidentally. I actually got in close and took that one."

"You hire guides and backpack and everything."

"The works, Roger. I'm telling you, it's the same sport right up to the moment of truth. Then I take a picture instead of a life. I take more risks now than I did when I carried a gun through the woods. I never would have stood that close to the bear in order to shoot him. Hell, you can drop them from a quarter of a mile if you want, but I got right in close to take his picture. If he'd have charged—"

They reached for their drinks.

"I'll just show you a few more of these," Dandridge said. "You'll notice some of them aren't game animals, strictly speaking. Of course,

when you hunt with a camera you're not limited to what the law says is game, and the seasons don't apply. An endangered species doesn't shrink because I take its photograph. I can shoot does, I can photograph in or out of season. The fact of the matter is that I prefer to go after trophy animals in season because that makes more of a game out of it, but sometimes it's as much of a challenge to try for a particular songbird that's hard to get up close to. That's a scarlet tanager there, it's a bird that lives in deep woods and spooks easy. Of course, I had to use a telephoto lens to get anything worth looking at but it's still considered something of an accomplishment. I got a thrill out of that shot, Roger. Now no one would shoot a little bird like that, nobody would want to, but when you hunt with a camera it's another story entirely, and I don't mind telling you I got a thrill out of that shot."

"I can believe it."

"Now here's a couple of mountain goats, that was quite a trip I had shooting them, and this antelope, oh, there's a heck of a story goes with her—"

It was a good hour later when Homer Dandridge returned the photographs to his wallet. "Here I went and talked your ear off," he said apologetically, but Roger Krull insisted that he had been fascinated throughout.

"I wonder," he said. "I just wonder."

"If it would work for you?"

Krull nodded. "I had a camera years ago," he said, "but I never had much interest in it. I couldn't tell you how long it's been since I took a photograph of anything."

"I never had the slightest interest in it myself," Dandridge said. "Until I substituted click for bang, that is."

"I don't know, Homer. I suppose you've got all sorts of elaborate equipment, fancy cameras and all the rest. It'd take me a year and a day to learn how to load one of those things."

"They're easier than you think," Dandridge said. "Especially since I've got some reasonably fancy gear. Hell, the money I used to spend on guns I spend on cameras now. I've got a new Japanese model that I'm just getting the hang of, and I've got my eyes on a lens for it that's going to cost me more than a whole camera ought to cost, and the next step's developing my own pictures."

"That's what I thought. I don't know if I'd want to get into all that."

"But that's the whole thing, Roger. You don't have to. Look, I don't know what your first hunting experience was like, but I remember mine. I was fourteen years old and I was out in a field down near the railroad tracks with an old rimfire .22 rifle, and I shot a squirrel out of an oak tree. Just a poor raggedy squirrel that I plinked with a broken-down rifle, and that's as big a hunting thrill as I guess I ever had. Now I'd guess your first experience wasn't a hell of a lot different."

"Not a whole hell of a lot, no."

"Well, when I put down the gun and took up the camera, the camera I took up was a little Instamatic that cost under twenty dollars. And I'll tell you a thing. The picture I took with that little camera was at least as much of a thrill as I get with my Japanese job."

"You can get decent pictures that way?"

"You can get perfect pictures that way," Dandridge said. "If I had any sense I'd still use the Instamatic, but as you go along you want to try getting fancy. And anyway, it hardly matters how good the pictures are. You don't want to send 'em to *Field and Stream,* do you?"

"Of course not."

"Hell, no. You want to find out if you can go on having the sheer joy and excitement of hunting without having the guilt and sorrow of killing. That's it in a nutshell, right?"

"That's it."

"So pick up a cheap camera and find out."

"By God," said Roger Krull, "that's just what I'll do. There's a drugstore in town that'll have cameras. I'll go there first thing in the morning. What have I got to lose?"

"That calls for a drink," said Homer Dandridge.

Dandridge was out in the woods early the next morning. His head was clear and his hand steady, as was always the case on hunting trips. In the city he drank moderately, and his rare overindulgences were followed by mind-shattering hangovers. On hunting trips he drank heavily every evening and never had the whisper of a hangover. The fresh air, he thought, probably had something to do with it, as did the way the excitement of the chase sent the blood singing in his veins.

He had another good day, shooting several rolls of film, and by the time he returned to the lodge he was ready for that first double shot of

sour-mash whiskey, and ready too for the good company of Roger Krull. Dandridge was not by nature a proselytizer, and in casual conversations with other hunters he rarely let on that he employed a camera instead of a gun. But Krull had been an obvious candidate for conversion, and now Dandridge was excited at the thought that he had been instrumental in leading another man from bang-bang, as it were, to click-click.

Again he stowed his cap and gear and hurried to the taproom. But this time Krull was not there waiting for him, and Dandridge was disappointed. He drowned his disappointment with a drink, his usual straight double, and then he settled down and sipped a second drink on the rocks with a splash of soda. He had almost finished the drink when Roger Krull made his appearance.

"Well, Roger!" he said. "How did it go?"

"Spent the whole day at it."

"And?"

Roger Krull shrugged. "Hate to say it," he said. He took a roll of film from his jacket pocket, weighed it in his hand. "Didn't work for me," he said.

"Oh," Dandridge said.

"I envy you, Homer. I had my doubts last night and I had them this morning, but I went out and got myself a camera and gave it a try."

"And it didn't work."

"No, it didn't. I'll tell you something. I'd like myself better if it had. But for one reason or another it isn't hunting for me without the bang-bang part. Just squeezing the shutter on a camera isn't the same as squeezing a trigger. Some primitive streak, I suppose. I stopped enjoying killing awhile ago but it's just not hunting without it."

"Hell," Dandridge said. "I don't know what to say."

And that was true for both of them. They suddenly found themselves with nothing at all to say and the silence was awkward. "Well, I'm damned glad I tried it all the same," Krull said. "I really enjoyed talking with you last night. You're a hell of a guy, Homer."

"You're all right yourself, Roger," Dandridge said. "Say, don't you want this?" He indicated the film Krull had left on top of the bar.

"What for?"

"Might get it developed, see how your pictures turned out."

"I don't really care how they turned out, Homer."

"Well—"

"Keep it," Krull said.

Dandridge picked up the film, looked at it for a moment, then dropped it in his pocket. He wondered if Roger Krull had even bothered to purchase a camera at all. Men sometimes came to momentous decisions under alcohol's heady influence and changed their minds the following morning. Krull might have decided that hunting with a camera made as much sense as taking portrait photographs with a shotgun, and then might have gone through the charade with the film to keep up appearances. Not that Krull had seemed like the sort to go through that kind of nonsense, but psychology was another hobby of Homer Dandridge's.

Well, it was easy enough to find out, he decided. All he had to do was include Krull's film with his own when he sent it off to be developed. It would be interesting to see if there were any pictures on it, and if so it would be even more interesting to see what animals Krull had snapped and how well he had done.

When the pictures came back, Homer Dandridge was very confused indeed.

Oh, there were pictures, all right—an even dozen of them, and they had all come out successfully. They did not have the contrast and brightness of the pictures Dandridge took with his expensive Japanese camera, but they were clear enough, and they revealed that Roger Krull had a good intuitive sense of composition.

But they had not been taken in the woods. They had been taken in a city, and their subjects were not animals or birds, they were people. Ten men and two women, captured in various candid poses as they went about their business in a city.

It took Dandridge a moment. Then his jaw fell and a chill raced through him. He examined the pictures again, thinking that there ought to be something he should do, deciding that there was not. The name Roger Krull was almost certainly an alias. And even if it was not, what could he say? What could he do?

He wasn't even certain in what city the twelve pictures had been taken. And he didn't recognize any of the men or women in them.

Not then. A week later, when they started turning up in the newspaper, then he recognized them.

It was a talent, like being able to paint, or play the cello . . .

THE QUESTIONER

by JONATHAN KELLERMAN

Santiago had waited for the phone to ring six times, unanswered, before the intercom button flashed and the buzzer sounded.

It was de Mauro, calling from the room.

"He's ready, Jorge. It shouldn't be a difficult one."

"I'll be there in three minutes."

Santiago stood up, straightened his tie, took a deep breath, and walked to the door. It had been a vaguely troubling day. It was good

that this wasn't going to be a difficult one. He needed time to clear his brain, to stop and think. Already his skull was bursting.

He left his office and began the familiar walk down the long white-tiled corridor. Each step was choreographed by the past, every movement of his tall ascetic body was well planned. That was the key to his success, good planning. It had always separated him from the others. The ability to set the stage, to prepare and rehearse precisely the correct stimuli so that the probability of eliciting the desired responses was maximized. One did not always succeed, Santiago knew, but one maximized the probabilities. There was nothing that could be done about the rare psychopath who, totally cut off from the anxieties of interpersonal relationships, did not budge. But that was not his fault. He was not God.

He had first noticed that he was different when he was a child. It was, he reasoned, a gift, a talent, just like being able to paint, or play the cello. In his mind there was some confusion as to whether his own talent had begun immediately after a particularly virulent attack of fever had swept through his village, leaving him delirious and sweating in the rear of his parents' house. He had been little more than eight or nine and everyone said it was a miracle he had survived and even more of a wonder that his brain had not been affected. Of the latter, Santiago was sometimes not totally sure, though he knew his mind was intact—no doubt more intact than most others.

In school, the teachers had noted, first with amusement and relief and then with increasing concern, how they could leave the classroom, entrusting the behavior of the other children to young Santiago, and upon returning find the children more composed, disciplined, and quiet than before. One teacher had peeked through the doorjamb in an attempt to find out exactly what the boy did, for his ability to maintain order surpassed that of the adults. To the teacher's surprise, he noted nothing. The boy made a few statements about rules and regulations and the other children just seemed to listen. There was a curious air of tension in the room, but nothing tangible. The teacher relayed this observation to his colleagues and they shrugged, laughed nervously, and said how they were lucky to have a boy like Santiago, an unpaid deputy, and how he would go far, a boy like that.

Santiago himself wasted little time exploring the origins of his talent. It was a visceral thing. Literally. The squirm in his stomach. He could

sense a lie coming from another person before the false words left loose lips. It cued him, so that by the time the lie had been spoken he was ready to counter it, to challenge, attack, parry delicately—whatever maneuver was appropriate. The split-second delay between the squirm and the other person's voice gave Santiago just the extra edge he needed to win: to ferret out the lie, to scoop it loose like a surgeon shelling a tumor, to expose it to his mind and watch the liar recede into helplessness. At first he was upset by the squirm—it was startling, vibratory, like a low grade electric shock. As time passed, however, he began to recognize the utility of it and adapted to the pain.

He was the best thing they had, the colonels said. With Santiago there was no need to torture. He was cleaner, more efficient, and no bleeding hearts from the Red Cross would ever complain. He had played a large role during the wave of political convulsions that had washed across the country several years before, questioning prisoners to the point of physical exhaustion, pinpointing the lies, saving those who told the truth. That period of unrest was over now and he had achieved his rank; he was a man who commanded respect. Not a colonel, to be sure, but a captain of the highest rank. A man to be reckoned with. He had a whitewashed villa in the suburbs, an official chrome-colored Mercedes, and the young daughter of a rich man—a truth teller—as his wife. It was a good life for Santiago at this point in time. And all he had to deal with now were the murderers, arsonists, rapists, thugs, and thieves who insisted upon inflicting themselves upon an otherwise orderly new republic. Small challenge for him.

The prisoner had been prepared. He had been told that he was going to be questioned by Captain Jorge Santiago. He had been informed by a smiling de Mauro that Captain Santiago was the best questioner in the republic, that he had a knack for knowing when the truth was being told and when it was not. That Captain Santiago never failed (miniscule hyperbole offered in the service of truth). Having been so informed, the prisoner was then left alone to wait in an empty room decorated only by two chairs and the static hum of air-conditioning. The prisoner waited for eighteen minutes. Then Santiago entered. If the prisoner smoked, Santiago brought cigarettes that had been denied for days. If he was a coffee drinker, Santiago offered a steaming mug of a good brew. If he was an addict, Santiago brought

coca leaves to chew. Santiago smiled, sat down, crossed his legs, pulled out a sheaf of official-looking papers, and examined them for a few minutes. Then he faced the prisoner.

He was a young man, barely into his twenties. Thin, fine-boned, with pale skin and a thick unruly tangle of black hair. He had not shaved for several days and Santiago noted that his beard was incomplete. Stubble showed over his upper lip and on his chin, and there were sprinkles of hair in the region of his sideburns, but his cheeks and jaw were baby-smooth. A boyish-looking man, thought Santiago.

The prisoner tried to avoid Santiago's eyes, but he had been seated in such a way that this could not be accomplished without closing his eyes or looking down at his feet. It was the latter that he chose, as they usually did. Closed eyes implied pain. And guilt. Such was their logic. The repetitiousness of human behavior!

The questioner looked full face at the prisoner.

"How did you feel," he asked gently but clearly, "when you first found out about the girl's death?"

The young man was shaken. The unexpected question. The conversational tone of the questioner's voice. He had expected a barrage of interrogation about his whereabouts, details, alibis. And here he was presented with a question that even went so far as to assume his innocence—when he had *first found out.*

"I don't remember. It was—"

"When you first found out, when you heard the news about her death," Santiago repeated, probing but still gentle, "were you angry? Scared? Sad? Stunned?"

"Sad! I was sad!"

"You were sad." Santiago nodded, expecting more.

"She was beautiful—it was sad that so beautiful a creature was gone."

"Like a beautiful bird? Like a creature with magnificent plumage who has been plucked from the air and thrown to the ground?"

The prisoner looked at Santiago with stunned eyes.

"A compassionate response, Luis—that is your name, isn't it? A very compassionate response, and an aesthetic one too. Sadness at beauty lost."

"She was a beautiful person too," whispered the young man. He spoke with remembrance in his voice.

"I'm sure she was beautiful." Santiago crossed his legs again and waited a moment before speaking. "Still, Luis, I must say it is an unusual response. I would have thought that your response would have been anger—a desire to avenge the death of a beautiful creature—a beautiful *woman*, whose beauty you have known. You were intimate, were you not?"

"We were lovers." The young man trembled visibly.

"Beauty that you have tasted, a woman who was yours. I would have thought there would be a desire on your part to avenge her death, to strike out at the coward who pulled her from flight."

"Of course." The prisoner was trying to compose himself. "There was anger too. But first, sadness."

"Strange." Santiago shook his head. "But then again, I am only an officer of the police. I am not a psychologist."

The young man was a smoker, so Santiago offered him a cigarette. An expensive foreign brand that the prisoner was known to have favored. The young man hesitated, then took the cigarette. Santiago lit it for him, moving his chair closer in the process so that when the smoke cleared the questioner's face loomed unexpectedly larger before the prisoner's eyes.

"I saw the pictures of her, you know," said Santiago softly. "She was not beautiful. There were bruises around the face. Her throat had been cut—cleanly, I might add. And the ants—" he sighed "—those miserable jungle ants. They had begun their dirty work."

The young man was struggling with his emotions, not knowing whether to emphasize his grief or to remain calm and impassive. The struggle left him agitated, and it was at this point that Santiago felt the first tiny squirm in his stomach.

"I'm sorry," he said, "if the details are so gruesome. I felt you had a right to know."

"It's—all right."

"After all, you were her lover."

"Yes, yes." The prisoner got up from his chair and paced the room.

"You were her only lover?"

Squirm.

"Yes."

"Of this you are sure?"

Squirm.

"Yes."

"It is good to be so secure in love, to know that one is unchallenged by another man."

Squirm.

"Yes. It is—it was good." The prisoner's voice cracked. He turned away from Santiago, standing in a corner of the room, facing the wall, one hand touching the smooth white tile.

"That is why you were sad, of course. I can understand now. You were a king, unchallenged, and you had lost a creature of beauty and so you were sad."

"I don't understand. I'm confused."

"I'm confused too, Luis." Santiago's voice rose. "I don't understand how a virile, feeling man who loses his true love can reduce a human being to the level of a *creature,* can only feel a sophisticated, understated emotion like sadness! I don't understand, Luis. I am only a captain of police, but it baffles me how such a man can remain so calm."

"I am a calm person." The prisoner spoke between clenched jaws.

"This I understand. You are a student of law at the university. A student of law *must* be calm. But even the calm of reason recedes before the image of a smooth white throat with a barely separating wound stretching from ear to ear."

The young man began to retch.

"That is fine, Luis. You may vomit. Don't search for a bucket, we will clean your vomit from the floor."

The young man clutched at his stomach and heaved, but nothing came from his mouth except a dry choking sound.

"Go ahead, Luis. You may throw up your pain. Let the burning out of your intestines."

A bubble of spittle formed at the prisoner's mouth and he blew it to the floor. He coughed, heaved, and convulsed unproductively.

"It is a shame how the sourness and the burning stays inside, You would feel much better if you were able to vomit it up. Come back, Luis, sit down, relax."

The prisoner obeyed.

"I am sorry to put you through this," continued Santiago. "It is somewhat of an absurdity, a petty horror, that in this life—the one life given to both of us—that we have to occupy our time in bringing up pain."

The prisoner was terrified. He looked at the questioner as if he were a madman.

"There is too much pain in life, is there not?"

The prisoner nodded.

"Do you think she felt pain?"

Squirm.

"I don't know."

"The medical officers could not determine if she had been knocked unconscious by the blows to the head before her throat was cut or if she felt the blade."

"I hope she felt no pain."

As the young man spoke Santiago's stomach was assaulted by a rain of squirming pain.

"You hope? You don't know?" Squirm.

"No! Of course not!"

"You don't remember?"

"No!"

"Oh, you do remember?" Squirm.

"I do—I don't—there is nothing to remember. I was not there."

"You are lying." Squirm.

"No."

"Not no, yes. Quite simply yes. You are lying. I have sat in this room and questioned thousands of men and I know who lies and who does not. But no matter, you will come to the truth yourself when you find that you will not be able to vomit out your pain—and your guilt." Santiago spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, not accusing, merely predicting.

The young man buried his face in his hands.

Santiago allowed silence to settle between them. Then he spoke:

"I have my own theory—it is not a sophisticated theory, Luis, but one that you might be interested in. My theory is that your feeling of sadness is delicately linked with your guilt. You killed your lover and when you did so you were another person—not literally, but psychologically another person. Perhaps you were consumed with anger at her infidelity—these are emotions one man can understand in another.

As this other person, transported by, shall we say, another state of being, you killed her, plucked her from the sky. Later, when you first

found out what you had done—I don't know when that precise moment was, maybe it was as you looked at her bleeding into the soft jungle soil where you dragged her body, maybe it was not until after you had returned home, or perhaps you did not return to yourself until you heard the news on the radio—but at that moment of revelation you did indeed feel a sweeping sense of sadness. Sadness at having left your own self and having stepped into the persona of another, at having taken away a beautiful creature.

"For it was only if you were able to see her as a creature—a thing, a prize game hen, a *creature*—that you would be able to cut her throat, to beat her around the head. You could do those things to a creature, but not to the woman who whispered to you between the sheets."

Santiago let his words sink in.

"I don't know your precise motive, Luis, though I imagine it is one that I and any other man could sympathize with. Perhaps our medical officers upon conducting the post mortem examination—" he consulted his watch "—at this very moment, only a few feet away will discover inside of her the sperm of more than one man, the seed of many men."

The young man looked up. There was fury in his eyes.

"The motive will emerge. It always does." Santiago shrugged. "The important thing is you, Luis. How will you be judged? I am no psychologist, as I told you before, but I will be able to recommend to the score of psychologists who will examine you that your emotions at the time were congruent with those of a man who did not know what he was doing, who was operating within the shell of another's persona. I will tell them that your initial emotion was sadness and that such an emotion is characteristic of the murderer who has acted without reason and who later discovers the consequence of his act. I will base my opinion upon thousands of hours of experience as a questioner and I will be believed. You will be treated with compassion if I do these things, but this is dependent upon you."

"What can I do?"

"You must be truthful. You must write the truth down on paper. Simple white paper."

"I must confess."

"Tsk. I am not a priest. Your repentance does not concern me. You will never do such an act again."

"What if I am not guilty?"

"My dear Luis, we could concern ourselves with theoretics all day and you would still not be able to vomit up your pain. The truth is, you are guilty—but only in an abstract sense, of course."

"And if I insist that I am not?"

"Then you are lying." Santiago patted his midriff. "I can feel it here. In me. It is a talent I have had for some time. When you lie I can feel it. We could hook you up to a complicated set of machinery, but the result would be the same."

"You cannot prove anything."

"There will be no need to. We will find the passersby, the neighbors who heard your occasional fight, perhaps someone who saw you slap her or saw her slap you. We will find witnesses at the clubs and restaurants in which she was seen with other men. We will set the stage. I will testify that you lied frequently and that you gave calculated, premeditated testimony here today. That you resemble a cold-blooded murderer whose existence poses a threat to society. It will not be a pretty orchestration, but short of your giving us the truth it will be our only way."

"The only alternative is—" The young man was broken. Santiago knew a brief fluttering sensation of triumph.

"The truth. On simple clean white paper."

"You have this paper?" Tears were streaming down the prisoner's face.

Santiago reached inside the pocket of his jacket and drew forth the familiar sheet. He handed the young man his own gold-plated pen, a gift from the colonels.

The prisoner took them and the sound of hurried scratching writing filled the room.

Once the prisoner had been remanded in the custody of two uniformed officers and Santiago was able to shrug off the effusive admiring comments of de Mauro, he slipped quietly out of the Ministry of Police building and into his Mercedes. It was a warm, pleasant night and the fragrance of the jungles, though miles away, came to him in a perfumed rush.

At home, Salvador served him a tall cool mixture of rum and fruit juice and told him that Madame would be down for dinner shortly. He relaxed in a chair on the veranda and listened to the wind.

She came down the stairs quietly and was at his side before he could rise to greet her.

"Good evening, Jorge."

"Good evening, darling."

They walked together to the dinner table and as he held out her chair he noticed that her face looked unusually flushed. Her hair was tied back in gleaming ebony plaits and her shoulders were warm and brown. A beautiful woman, his wife. He kissed her cheek softly and returned to sit opposite her at the well set table.

"You know, darling," he said, spreading a stiff linen napkin across his lap, "I called you earlier this afternoon. The phone rang several times and nobody answered."

She was answering him in a hesitant, tinkling tone of voice, telling him she had given Maria and Salvador the day off and had gone shopping with a friend, but Santiago was not listening. For while she spoke, in fact a split second before she opened her mouth, he found his stomach writhing in hot, acid, squirming pain.

It's a funny thing about revenge . . .

MOTIVATION

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

Time had no meaning for Hoke Beckett. Neither did the whispering feline-soft footsteps of the nurses nor the other sounds of the hospital recovery room that filtered into his haziness.

His eyes closed, he floated, scarcely aware of who he was and not caring.

Only the pain was important.

It tortured his nerve endings with implacable cruelty, yielding reluc-

tantly and temporarily to the pinprick of the periodically administered painkilling needle before returning slowly with triumphant insolence.

Beckett lay absolutely still, his arms at his sides, trying to override the pain with a fierce concentration on a blurred and shadowy memory—of running through a crisp, moonlit fall night across the lawn of a big house; of rounding a corner to see a ghostly silver-outlined tennis court before him, aware too late of a dark shape sprinting across the court; of yelling, the shape hesitating, flame flaring toward him, the shock of a bullet, a huge and heavy hand that slapped him in the side and knocked him off his feet; and of seeing the shape disappear into the darkness of the trees beyond the tennis court just before he lost consciousness.

The injection the nurse had given him was wearing off, the pain mounting again. Beckett accepted it with a stoicism that did nothing to dam his hate for the person who had caused it. He lay absolutely still, wondering how long it would take to recover enough to find the man who had shot him.

Beckett was awake when they transferred him to his room. Stocker, Beckett's partner, and Captain Tolley, concern in their eyes, stood on either side of his bed and looked down at him. It was hot in the room and Stocker's round heavy face glistened with perspiration.

"How do you feel, Hoke?" he asked.

Beckett winked.

Stocker turned away, passed a trembling handkerchief over his face, and walked out.

Tolley said, "He feels bad because he's convinced himself he should have seen the guy before he had a chance to down you. Then when you were hit, he emptied his piece but the guy got away." He touched Beckett's shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll have him by the time you walk out of here."

I hope you don't, thought Beckett, I want him for myself. "What was it all about?" he whispered.

"You thought you were on a possible burglary because the silent alarm went off in the station," said Tolley. "But it was more than that. We found a woman dead in the house, shot with the same piece that was used on you. Her name was Hayes. It looks like the guy broke in through the patio doors, thinking there was no one home, ran into the

woman, lost his head, and killed her. He was taking off when you and Stocker arrived."

A tall young woman with short brown hair and wearing a white hospital coat came in as Tolley was talking. She pushed her hands deep into the pockets of the coat and glared at Tolley. "You had better leave, Captain," she said. "He's not ready for visitors."

Tolley touched Beckett's shoulder again. "I'll see you later, Hoke." He indicated the young woman. "Do as she says. If it hadn't been for her, we'd be lining up an honor guard for you."

The woman seemed vaguely familiar but Beckett couldn't place her.

"I'm Dr. Leslie," she said.

Beckett remembered then. He had last seen the hazel eyes above a surgical mask.

She took his pulse, her long thin fingers cool on his wrist. "I want you to sleep," she said. "If you need anything, ring for the nurse."

After she had gone, Beckett stared up at the ceiling. The pain was still with him, centered now in this left side. He closed his eyes and concentrated again on the night before.

Meridian County lay just to the west of the city, big and sprawling with well over a half-million residents and a per capita income among the highest in the country. North of the county seat, the homes were large and expensive, hidden away at the end of long driveways. Most were left over from an era when extreme wealth wasn't necessary to afford house servants and a chauffeur. But now the limousines were gone along with the chauffeurs and the house servants who had been reduced to a housekeeper-cook and a twice-a-week maid. But the people who lived in the homes were still well-to-do and the homes were still targets for burglary. There had been a series of break-ins in the area in the last few weeks and Beckett, impatient with arriving after the houses had been looted and finding nothing to work with, had decided to join the stepped-up patrols. The radio call had come in shortly after midnight. Some of the homeowners had installed alarms that fed into headquarters and one of them had gone off.

Beckett and Stocker had arrived simultaneously with two uniformed men who had taken the front of the house, while Beckett and Stocker had taken the rear. No more than four or five minutes had elapsed since the alarm had gone off and the break-in artist should have still

been inside—unless he had sensed something wrong, in which case he should have been gone.

Beckett felt himself drifting off to sleep. There was something about that shadowy figure that nagged at him, but Beckett couldn't isolate it or hold it and he dozed off.

When Dr. Leslie came by the next morning, Beckett was sitting on the edge of the bed, having maneuvered himself there slowly and painfully.

She studied him stonily. "All right," she said. "You've proved something. Now lie back down."

"No," said Beckett.

She folded her arms. "I don't think you understand. You may think you have a simple gunshot wound, if there is such a thing. You don't. The bullet was deflected by a rib, punctured the lower lobe of your left lung, and destroyed your spleen. You were on the table for five hours. If you're under the impression you can walk out of here in a day or two, forget it. You'll be here for a week or more, and when you leave your mobility will be limited for a few more weeks. After all the work I did on you, I don't intend to lose you."

Beckett smiled. "You're a fine surgeon and an attractive woman, neither of which gives you the right to consider me stupid."

Her lips thinned.

Beckett held up a hand. "Relax. Some people recover more quickly than others. No one knows better than I what I can and can't do. If I sit up, it's because I feel I can sit up. If I walk, it's because I feel I can walk. All I ask is that you trust in my common sense. Do we have a deal?"

He could see the shadow of a smile.

"All right," she said. "But at the first indication that you've overextended yourself, the deal is off."

Tolley came in. "What deal?"

"The day I walk out of here, I buy her the best steak dinner she ever had," said Beckett.

"Watch yourself, Doctor," said Tolley. "That means he intends to invite you to his apartment."

She laughed. "In his condition, I have nothing to worry about. Besides, I prefer French cuisine." She pointed at Beckett. "I'll leave in-

structions for the nurses to allow you a little latitude, but watch yourself."

After she had gone, Tolley said, "No one's told you, have they?"

"Told me what?" said Beckett.

"You picked a good time and place to get burned. Dr. Leslie lives next door to the Hayes house. When she heard the guns, she thought someone might be hurt and ran over to see if she could help. She rode in with you, radioing instructions to the hospital so that no time was lost when you arrived. I've talked with the chief of surgery. In his opinion, her treatment and the time she saved made all the difference."

"In that case, there's no way I can ever repay her," said Beckett. "Now help me to stand up."

"You're crazy," said Tolley.

"Maybe," said Beckett. He pulled himself erect.

"Hurt?" asked Tolley.

"Like the hammers of hell," whispered Beckett. He lowered himself to the bed, perspiration washing down his face.

"Why push yourself?" asked Tolley.

Beckett pressed a hand to his side. "Someone shot me, remember?"

"Revenge isn't your style. Neither is hate."

"A little hate is good for the circulation," said Beckett.

"So is love," said Tolley drily. "Look around you. I think this hospital has a corner on the most attractive nurses in the county."

"Tell me about the dead woman," said Beckett.

"There's nothing to tell. We're still trying to piece it together."

"She was home alone?"

"Her husband is a vice-president of a manufacturing concern. He was working late, which wasn't unusual for him. It was the housekeeper's night off. I have an idea that the man thought the place was empty and he expected no trouble."

"But why kill her instead of just backing off?"

Tolley shrugged. "Who knows? She could have surprised him and he panicked. What is it with you, Hoke? You're about thirty hours away from being dead and the only thing on your mind should be getting well. Now lie down and rest. I'll be back this afternoon."

"Bring the file on the case," said Beckett. "I'd like to look at the photos and read the reports."

"No chance. You're out of this."

Beckett gingerly stretched out on the bed. "All right," he said, "I'll be in the office the day after tomorrow."

"Like hell you will. The doctor said a week and it will be a week, even if I have to handcuff you to the bed."

"Then bring the file."

Tolley shook his head and walked out.

Beckett relaxed. The pain in his side was insistent and throbbing but the sharp edge that had made it almost intolerable was gone. He closed his eyes. The memory of that dark running figure was a little clearer but he still couldn't isolate what bothered him about it.

How can you hate a shadow? he thought.

Tolley came in after lunch with a manila envelope.

"I talked to the doctor," he said. "She saw no reason you couldn't go over the file."

Beckett held out his hand.

Tolley opened the envelope and handed over Stocker's report first.

Stocker had a talent for remembering everything he saw and describing it precisely. He placed the figure at ninety feet, which surprised Beckett because he thought the shadow had been closer, but Stocker would have measured the distance in daylight. And the distance would account for Stocker's failure to hit a moving figure at night with his short-barrelled .38. It also placed the shot that had downed Beckett in the lucky category, unless the shadow had been an expert marksman.

Stocker described the figure as disappearing into the blackness of the trees beyond the tennis court. On the other side of the trees was a road that angled sharply back across the rear of the house.

Beckett held up the report. "It says here he probably had a car on the road. Did anyone hear it take off?"

"Nobody listened," said Tolley. "Stocker was closest and he was only concerned about you."

Beckett grunted and was rewarded with a stab of pain.

Tolley handed him several photos which showed a dark-haired woman, who appeared to be in her thirties, slumped in a large easy chair, the book she had evidently been reading fallen at her feet. She was wearing loose-fitting lounging pajamas.

"He shot her as she sat in the chair?" he asked.

"There's a possibility she stood up, was shot, and collapsed into the chair again."

Beckett leafed through the photos. "I can't believe she didn't hear him working on that patio door."

"She was listening to a stereo and he wouldn't have made much noise. All it required was a thin instrument to pry the latch loose. Even though the door does stick badly when you try to slide it open, there would have been no sharp sounds."

"What kind of an alarm is it?"

"You know the type. There's a twenty-second delay after the circuit is broken to allow the homeowner enough time once he enters the front door to reach the switch, insert a key, and deactivate the alarm before it goes off. If the switch isn't turned, the alarm sounds in the station."

"No alarm sounds within the house itself?"

"No," said Tolley. "According to Hayes, he didn't believe anyone would try to break in while the house was occupied. He had the alarm installed as a protection while they were away."

"Then what was the point in the woman activating the alarm?"

"He said his wife did that all the time. She was the nervous type. She felt that if anyone did break in while she was there, the police would arrive before much of anything happened."

Beckett closed his eyes and thought for a moment. "If she was listening to records, the burglar would have heard the music when he opened the door. He would have known someone was at home. Why go inside, knowing he would walk into trouble?"

"Listen," said Tolley. "You know some of these creeps would like nothing better than to get a person, especially a woman, alone in a big house like that."

Beckett shook his head. "I won't be satisfied unless I dig a little deeper."

Tolley replaced the reports and photos in the manila envelope slowly. "Maybe having you go down has shaken us all up and we're not thinking straight. It won't hurt to have Stocker ask some questions if it will make you feel better."

After he had gone, Beckett slowly and painfully swung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up, and tried a few shuffling steps.

Not so bad, he thought.

By evening he was walking around the room, slightly hunched over, his side throbbing.

He left the hospital five days later, walking slowly but erectly.

Stocker had asked a great many questions about Mr. and Mrs. Hayes and the answers fit together like the plot of a second-rate novel. Poor boy marries rich girl. Wealthy father installs poor boy in family business where he magically becomes the residing genius. Poor boy, who is now a successful man, seeks feminine companionship outside of home, while his unhappy wife suffers in martyred silence, unwilling to divorce him because she still loves him, while he does not want a divorce because she still controls all of the family money. The death of the Hayes woman had solved quite a few problems for her husband since she had never brought herself around to changing her will. Successful man was now also a wealthy man.

When the cab dropped Beckett off at headquarters, it took him half an hour to work his way through the well-wishers to his office. He had settled behind his desk when Tolley, who had been at a meeting, came in and stood glaring at him.

"What are you doing here? You know damned well the police surgeon won't certify you as fit for duty for weeks."

"As far as I'm concerned, I might as well sit here as in my apartment," said Beckett. "I also want to talk to Stocker."

"You're still pushing to find the man who shot you."

Beckett said nothing.

Tolley stroked his chin. "I didn't expect you to come in but I might as well tell you. Last night one of the patrols noticed a station wagon cruising the section where the Hayes woman lived. When they flashed it to pull over, it took off. It didn't get far. After they shook the driver down, they went over the car. They found a .38 under the front seat and a set of lock picks and jimmies in the rear. That was enough for a judge to issue a search warrant for the man's apartment. Along with assorted pieces from some of the previous burglaries he hadn't fenced yet, we found a notebook. In it he had listed all the homes he intended to hit and made notes about the habits of the people who lived in them. The ones he had already hit had been crossed off, including the Hayes house. I think we have our man, so you can go home and relax."

Beckett leaned back carefully in his chair. "What did ballistics say about the .38?"

"No match, but I wouldn't expect him to hold onto a piece he'd used on two people."

Beckett swiveled his chair and stood up. "I'd like to talk to him."

Tolley pointed. "Sit down and take it easy. I'll bring him in. No harm in you taking a look at him."

The man's name was Gorbo. His hair receded over a broad face that seemed to sit, neckless, on his thick shoulders, his heavy arms too long for his squat body. His hands, however, had long sensitive fingers.

Beckett studied him. "Why did you kill the Hayes woman?"

Gorbo folded his arms and turned his face away in disgust.

"You don't like the question?" asked Beckett.

"I'm tired of hearing it," said Gorbo. "I'm tired of saying I didn't shoot her."

"The Hayes house was on your list and it was crossed off."

"Why shouldn't it be? I read the newspapers. Someone beat me to it. Besides, if the house isn't empty, I back off. I don't need trouble like that. I can always come back later."

"Then why the .38?"

"I don't carry it when I work. I need it for protection. You know the kind of people I do business with." He grinned at Beckett. "There are a lot of bad people in the world."

"I can do without the humor," said Beckett coldly. He leaned forward. "Whoever killed the woman almost killed me. Sooner or later, I'll find out who pulled the trigger. When I do—" Beckett held up his hand, index finger extended and thumb cocked. He let the thumb fall. "Boom," he said softly. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Cut it out, Hoke," said Tolley. "You know better."

Gorbo stared at Beckett and ran a tongue across his lips. "It wasn't me."

Beckett nodded to Tolley. "Get him out of here."

Tolley led Gorbo out and turned him over to one of the men. When he came back, he said, "I hope you were kidding, Hoke."

"Sure," said Beckett. "I was kidding. What we need is that gun."

"And if we find it," said Tolley, "you'd better not do something foolish. I like you, Hoke, and I'd do anything for you, so don't put me in an awkward position."

Beckett's eyes locked with his. "You know me better than that," he said. He arched his back and grimaced. "I'd like to go out to the house. Is Stocker available?"

"I'd rather you went home," said Tolley.

"After I see the house," said Beckett.

Tolley threw up his hands. "Damn it, Hoke, it won't do anyone any good if you kill yourself trying to find the man who shot you."

"Sure it will," said Beckett. "I'll die with a smile on my face."

Beckett and Stocker walked across the broad lawn along the same route they had taken the night Beckett was shot.

"This Hayes," he said to Stocker. "Is he a ladies' man?"

"First class," said Stocker. "From what people tell me, he's a regular Svengali."

Beckett grinned. "I think you mean Casanova."

Stocker shrugged. "Svengali, Casanova, what's the difference? Whatever they see in him, I wish I had some. One guy told me that he has no trouble even with ones who should know better."

"You have any names?"

"Sure. I gave a list to Tolley."

At the rear of the house, Beckett stopped. He had remembered the tennis court as perpendicular to the house. Instead, it paralleled the patio and was well to one side. He had also remembered the trees as a wall but they were randomly spaced. He pointed. "Is that where he ran?"

Stocker nodded. "You go through those trees maybe thirty-forty yards and you come out on another street. It's easy to get confused, the way the streets curve around." Stocker waved. "Like the doctor's house. It sits alongside this one, but the property is real small because of the angle of the road."

Beckett began walking.

The dead leaves beneath the trees made whispering sounds and the ground beneath his feet was soft and spongy. It was evident that the leaves had not been raked from beneath the small stand of trees for years, probably since the departure from the big house of a full-time gardener. Beyond the trees, Beckett saw a small stone ranch house that had been built on a corner of the property, a triangle sold off to lessen the bite of the heavy taxes.

When he arrived at the house, he paused and looked back. The roof of the Hayes's home showed above the trees. His side throbbed and he sank into a chair on the flagstone patio gratefully, the pain nagging at him.

"Too much for you?" Stocker's voice was sympathetic.

Beckett nodded. "Bring the car over, will you? I'll wait here."

As Stocker disappeared through the trees, an expensive two-seater came up the doctor's driveway, skidding to a halt when the driver saw Beckett. Beckett smiled as Dr. Leslie left the car hurriedly and ran toward him, concern on her face.

He held up a hand. "I'm not here on a professional visit."

Her concern changed to anger. "I discharged you with the understanding you'd go home and remain there."

"You agreed to trust my common sense," said Beckett.

"A decision I regret," she snapped.

Beckett smiled. "Sit down. By now you must have gathered I refuse to behave like one of your normal patients and you'll simply have to do the best with what you've got." He nodded toward the Hayes's house. "How well did you know her?"

She sank into the chair across from him. Dressed in a bright red sweater, white slacks and jacket, she seemed less efficient and far more feminine than she had in the hospital.

"Casually," she said. "We were neighbors." She hesitated. "She was a quiet person, rather colorless."

"And Hayes?"

She shrugged slightly. "Very different from her."

"I've been told he played around. Did he ever make a pass at you?"

She smiled. "What do you think?"

"I don't see how he could have resisted."

Stocker's car crunched up the driveway.

"You didn't say what you're doing here," she said.

"Simply checking out the scene," said Beckett.

"Now that you've checked it out, go home and stay there, as you were supposed to do."

Beckett grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

The next morning, after the motherly woman who looked after Beckett's apartment, and who had also taken it upon herself to look after

Beckett, had made breakfast and gone, Beckett sat on the balcony of his apartment and watched a couple playing tennis in a court across the street—a young man and a young woman who played with an awkward enthusiasm. And watching them, the memory of the running shadow at the Hayes's house came back. Beckett straightened, knowing now what had bothered him about that memory, and his mind considered the possibilities and alternatives and found none.

He went inside and picked up his gun, swung out the cylinder to check it, and then stood rotating the cylinder slowly and thoughtfully. Finally he called Tolley.

It was midafternoon before Stocker picked him up and drove him to the municipal building.

When he walked into Tolley's office, Tolley was talking to a trim well-dressed man whose black hair and beard were sprinkled with grey.

"This is Mr. Hayes," said Tolley.

Beckett nodded.

"I'm happy to see you up and around," said Hayes. "I'm sorry you were shot."

"Because it wasn't in the plan?" asked Beckett.

Hayes's eyes were blank. "I don't know what you mean." He turned to Tolley. "You asked me to come here because you said you had some new evidence concerning my wife's death."

"We do," said Beckett. "One of the men is out with a search warrant. When he returns we expect to have more."

"I'm pleased to hear it," said Hayes.

"No," said Beckett, "you're not. You had anticipated that no one would ever know who killed your wife."

Hayes spun back to Tolley angrily. "What is the purpose of this game?"

"We believe you're responsible for the death of your wife," said Tolley.

Hayes's voice rose. "You know damned well I couldn't have done it!"

"Actually pull the trigger, no," said Beckett. "You wanted us to think it was done by the man responsible for all the burglaries, but he had a list of the homes and the activities of the people who lived in them. He knew your wife would be at home that evening and he would have

been a fool to enter the house. It was also not done by someone else attempting a burglary. There wouldn't have been enough time to force the doors, enter the house, kill your wife, and get as far as the tennis court before we arrived."

Beckett leaned against the wall, his side throbbing. "You and the woman with whom you've been having an affair entered into a conspiracy to kill your wife and use the burglaries as a cover-up. You made certain you had an alibi. Since both of you felt your relationship was secret, you assumed she wouldn't enter the picture at all."

Hayes smiled. "You realize, of course, you're giving me excellent grounds for a lawsuit."

Beckett ignored him. "Now I'll tell you how it was done. You provided your mistress with a key to your house. She entered, turned off the alarm at the switch near the front door, went to the den, and shot your wife. Then she activated the alarm again, went out the front door and around to the patio where she forced the door to make it appear someone had broken in. The alarm went off the moment the latch broke loose but she had trouble sliding the door open. As a result, she was delayed and still on the grounds when we arrived. She ran, and as she ran she knew she wasn't going to win a footrace, so she turned and fired to slow us down." Beckett fingered his side. "Which is exactly what it did."

Stocker came in, carrying a revolver in a plastic bag and placed it on Tolley's desk. "A .38," he said "Fired twice." He nodded at Beckett. "Where you said it would be."

Hayes's face had acquired a tinge of color that seemed to be reflected from the green walls.

"Go get her," Tolley said to Stocker.

Stocker went out.

Beckett walked a few feet to the door and turned to face Hayes. "If you're wondering how we connected the both of you, it was simple. We knew you'd avoid being seen together in this area. The obvious place to meet was the city. We also knew you'd hardly meet for dinner at a street-corner hamburger stand. With the help of the city police, it took us less than two hours to canvass the better restaurants and find the French place where you met regularly. A few more days will be all that are necessary to track down other places."

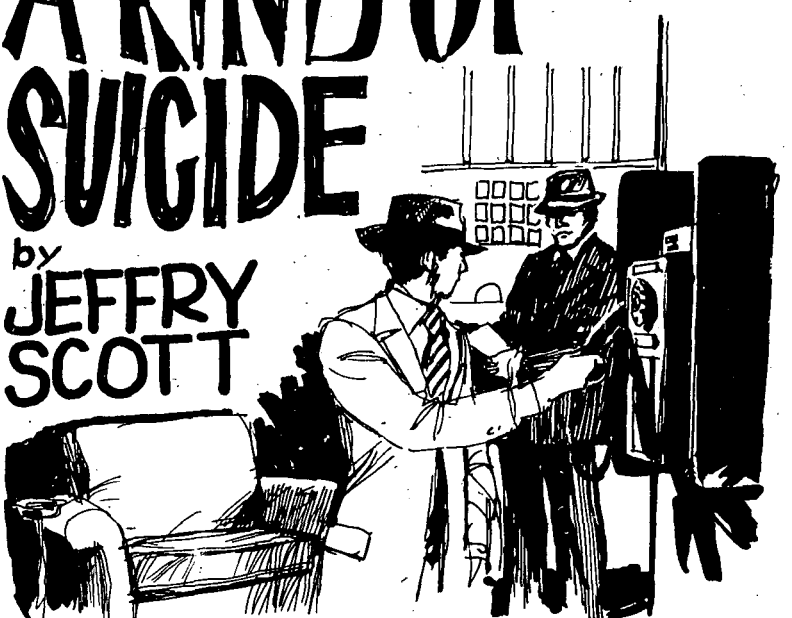
Tolley motioned a detective to stay with Hayes and walked out with

ckett. "You never really explained how you worked it out," he said.
"It was the figure on the tennis court," said Beckett. "Something thered me about it but I didn't know what it was until I saw a girl aying tennis this morning. It was the way the figure ran. It had to be woman and one that wasn't very athletic at that. Then it all made nse. All we had to do was identify the woman."
"You made that easy," said Tolley. "I would never have thought—"
"Neither would I," said Beckett. "I sat on her patio and it never ocured to me. It wasn't until I realized the figure was a woman and she as in the vicinity that I thought she could be involved. She said she eard the shots. She couldn't have. Her house is too far away, even if ie had been outside. When she shot me and ran into the trees, she alized she was on the edge of disaster. If a cop found her before she ached home, she had no excuse for being there, so she buried the m under the leaves and ran toward the Hayes house instead of away om it, which was very cool thinking. We would never suspect a doctor who was trying to help."
"I guess I'll never understand why," said Tolley. "She's successful. ie's attractive. Men and money can't be a problem. It's not like she eeds the guy."
"Maybe she does," said Beckett. "Look at her as a woman, not a urgeon. She's not the first to kill to get the man she wanted."
"You're not going to wait for Stocker to bring her back?"
"Stocker may not bring her back."
Tolley stared at him. "Why not?"
Beckett pressed a hand to his throbbing side and held it for a long ioment. "After I called you, I had time to think about it. I could have illed the person who shot me and never blinked, but how are you upposed to hate a person who turns around and saves your life? Which comes first, hate or gratitude? Anyway, I called her and told ier."
Tolley's anger showed in his voice. "You've given her hours to clean out her bank account and be on a plane for Lord knows where. We nay never find her."
"She might run," agreed Beckett. "And then again she might not. The least I could do was let her make the decision."
"Damn it, Hoke, you had no right—"
"Didn't I?" asked Beckett.

Women can be the death of you . . .

A KIND OF SUICIDE

by JEFFRY SCOTT



Micro, lips against the phone, aimed his voice straight into the plasti cup of the receiver. "It's on, that's all I know for sure," he whispered "I'll tell you when, of course I'll tell you when. First they've got to tel me, right?"

Sometimes the other lot frightened Micro. Asking questions like "Wil you tell us?" when an instant's thought would supply the answe suggested that they treated his calls as mere conversation. Or else the

were deliberately and sadistically rash over putting his life at risk. Either way, he didn't like it.

Coppers, he thought. They'd been bad enough as enemies; as employer-allies they were even worse.

But the money was good. Micro, who had been given exactly three rides as an apprentice jockey before being discharged to a lifetime of professional crime, tried to warm himself at the knowledge of all the money he was making. Big money—but then Phil Kilner was a big gangster, probably the biggest in London—and certainly the noisiest and most flamboyant. In Micro's large experience, it was all right being a successful villain providing that the success was not flaunted.

Phil Kilner could have got away with the mansion and the His and Hers limousines for him and his mistress each with a personalised numberplate. What the powers would not stand was his bragging. He had let it be known, loudly, that he owned several senior policemen and had killed four men. Kilner was a compulsive liar, but also a psychopath, so some of the boasting might be true. Whatever the case, the Metropolitan Police and two Regional Crime Squads had gone into partnership to nail him for good.

Hence the big money, from pooled funds. The first thing the team had done, exactly like Phil Kilner's criminal team, was to buy itself an inside man. Buy, and blackmail.

Micro was greedy, and he could be sent to prison without undue effort or bending of evidence. So the police walked straight up to the counter in the great underworld department store and pointed at him.

Yes, that was the way it was, Micro told himself. He hung up and turned 'round and for half a second his heart stopped beating and his lungs stopped working.

Priest was there, not ten feet away, the big hands seemingly a dead weight at the ends of his arms. Waiting. Looking.

"Gawd, you give me a start," Micro managed.

Priest smiled gently and vaguely. He was an ex-policeman, broken for his love of violence. For the past decade he had been Phil Kilner's strong right arm, not to mention boot in the guts and razor to the throat. "What you doing, Micro-son?" It was not a social query—Priest wanted to know.

"Phoning," Micro replied, his voice sounding far away.

"Yeah, well, you would be." Priest said, savoring the by-play. Micro

was so small, the rat to Priest's ravening, towering wolf. Priest enjoyed tormenting and terrifying him at any time, for no reason. Now that there was a reason, with the bullion robbery no more than 48 hours away, his taste for bullying might neutralize his security instincts, Micro thought.

Might.

If Micro said he'd been calling his bookie or his dear old mother—no. Only minutes earlier he had left the others, telling them he was going to Marble Arch for a haircut. And here he was beside a pay phone in a hotel at Baker Street, half a mile in the opposite direction.

Priest had followed him. But that was not as disastrous as it might appear. Priest was known to follow people to keep in practice, or as a spot check, or simply on a whim.

"There's this bird," said Micro, having no trouble to look sheepish and wan and hesitant, because he felt close to injury or worse and was making it all up as he went along. "She's married, see. I don't want the others to get a sniff."

"Found a nympho' then?" Priest stepped closer. "Dirty little sod," he added without rancor. "Who is she? Do I know her?"

"No!"

Priest mulled it over and Micro, nerves screaming, realized that the monster had detected a lie and come to the wrong conclusion.

The denial rang false because there was no woman, but Priest assumed that she existed and that he *did* know her.

Sweat was burning Micro's eyes when he blinked it away and saw the big man receding through the blur. Priest never bothered with greetings or farewells.

The following day Micro made another call, with even more agonizing care, and towards nightfall Phil Kilner's team ambushed the bullion wagon and blew the cargo doors, releasing a dozen dazed but fighting mad Flying Squad and Regional Crime Squad heavies who captured them emphatically.

Somehow Micro managed to turn up as usual when Kilner held the inevitable inquest. Kilner had lost some of his best men. He had also increased the chances of being informed on in return for reduced sentences. He was displeased and insanely suspicious. There were rumors that he and his teenaged mistress, Steffi, were quarreling. Kilner was a

man under pressure from several different angles and it was driving him mad. Or, rather, more mad than before.

Shirt sticking to his back, Micro sat near the door and said nothing.

When the hangdog gathering broke up, Priest walked with him to the lift. "Still knocking off that bird, are you?"

Micro nodded, felt the reaction was too tame, and amplified, "Yes, but it's dodgy. She's got sort of guilty about it, know what I mean? Wants to tell her old man. I got to keep her sweet." At the back of his mind he thought that might be an investment, explaining furtive departures and unexplained—unexplainable—absences.

Priest studied him from on high. "Women can be the death of you." The doors shut him away and the lift plucked Micro down. His finger left a steamy bloom on the control button. He felt sick and giddy and thankful to be getting away from Priest.

A month later, with the police no closer to him though they were steadily eroding and breaching his operations, Phil Kilner set up a bank job.

Criminals' security can be ludicrously sloppy. Perhaps, like compulsive gamblers, they labor under a subconscious desire to lose. More likely, as enemies of society, they regard the rest of the world as The Other Side and find it hard to be discreet within their own frontiers.

But this time security was good, information was dispensed on a need-to-know basis, and Micro had to listen and deduce feverishly to gain even a hazy idea of the scheme.

Since he had a living-in job at Phil Kilner's London apartment, making phone calls was the trickiest part of the enterprise.

But Priest had been teasing him in public. His clandestine affair was a domestic joke by then—even Kilner taunted him over it—so his sneakings out were less perilous. He believed that until the end.

His employers—the *other* employers—insisted on a meeting. Cursing them, unable to postpone it any longer for fear that they would make a direct approach and doom him out of hand, Micro took the Underground train out into the Home Counties suburbs and spent an hour with a deputy commander, two superintendents, and numerous detective sergeants on a golf course.

When he walked into Phil Kilner's apartment that afternoon, he sensed that everything had gone badly.

"Been out to see your bird again, on the sly?" Priest suggested. Phil Kilner, hunched over, had his back to the room, but the back quivered as Priest spoke.

Micro weighed his answer and was still weighing it when Priest said: "She's dead, Micro. You killed her, you silly sod. The boss's Steffi."

When Micro recovered consciousness—he'd never fainted before, it was the first and last occasion in his life—Priest told him, "Phil knew she was cheating on him, see. So I've been digging. Steffi had this flat, this little place in Chelsea, where she met the feller—you."

Phil Kilner's face was streaked with tears and sweat and mucus and he made noises for a long while without managing to form words. Micro, who had observed his rages, could make sense of the sounds. Kilner was saying that snatching his bird—*his*—was a killing matter on its own. But to boast about it to them—!

Micro squealed, "What? Me and her? That Steffi? She wouldn't look at me! She's a cracker, a beaut—I'm old enough to be her dad! I swear I never—" Then he fell silent, for he could see the way ahead, and it led directly to the crag and the abyss.

"Women can be funny," said Priest. "Maybe she was kinky. But strangling her—that was stupid, Micro. What was it, son? She get scared, want to tell Phil and take her chances he'd forgive her?"

"Look, there's nothing between us, on my mother's life," Micro whined.

Phil Kilner crossed the shag-pile carpet at a shambling run, moving crabwise through the open door of the master bedroom to root in the wardrobe. He swung 'round, holding what looked like a fat dueling pistol and was a sawed-off shotgun.

Micro remembered that the apartment was soundproof. He tried to pray, knowing that running was beyond him. "Right stupid," Priest was lecturing him, "the way things are with the law and all. I mean, we got to tidy her away, lose her, now she's dead. Else the law will stitch Phil up for it, and we can't have that."

He laughed abruptly. "Still, that means you won't never come to trial for murdering her, Micro-son. Eh?"

Blood struck salty on Micro's palette as he chewed the inside of his cheek. "Listen, I promise this is nothing to do with me."

On the far side of the room, the shotgun made a curious, reverberating gulp as a cartridge was dropped into the breech.

Almost flirtatiously, Priest said: "Well, you been sneaking out nearly every day. An hour here, an hour there. And phoning on the sly. And telling us about this bird. If it wasn't Steffi, all right, just tell us who the bird was. Phil's very fair, he wouldn't top you if it wasn't in order."

"I'll top the little bastard all right, no danger," Phil Kilner raved, his hands shaking so that he was hard put to close the shotgun after loading it.

"Hang about, Boss." Priest put a thumb under Micro's chin. "Come on, this is the Court of Appeal like, Micro-son. Just name the bird and I'll chat her. If she confirms it . . . . Otherwise, well, *somebody* strangled poor old Steffi. Somebody who knew her. Eh? So who's the bird?"

Micro looked deep into Priest's gin-bottle eyes, nigh colorless, sparkling with unspeakable humour and some other emotion—gambling lust or fear.

It was then that Micro divined that Priest had been onto him all along.

Which meant that Priest—

Phil Kilner hobbled up before Micro's train of thought was complete. He pressed the shotgun to Micro's back and severed the little wretch's spinal column.

"All in order," said Priest. "Written on his face, eh? He only had to say who he was phoning, and he couldn't." His expression was impassive, his tone judicial, but his big, strangler's hands twitched as he spoke the epitaph.

Time and tragedy wait for no man . . .

THE CALENDAR OF DEATH

by OLGA MARX

Bill Leighton, on his way home from the West Indies, stopped in Amsterdam to deliver the records of native music he'd made for van Reeder, one of the top men in Indonesian anthropology—second only, in fact, to John Michaels, Bill's teacher and friend.

Ever since John had not been well enough to travel, Bill had been doing the field work alone. He found it beautifully unpredictable and wholly absorbing. The only hardship was the lack of companionship,

not having someone of one's own civilization to talk to. It would be nice to eat a ham sandwich, he thought, and tell whomever he was with how the Mentawa comforted a pig about to be slaughtered with the promise that its skull would be wreathed and hung in the banquet tent forever after. He wondered whether John had already written that up for the journal.

Hungrily, he reached for the last issue, tore off the wrapper, stared at the cover picture, and grinned delightedly. Why, it was *his* color photo of a brown man sitting crosslegged on the ground, communing with a pig! "See p. 5." He flicked the leaves. And there it was: "The Mentawa and Their Food Animals." Only it did not say "by John Michaels," it said "by William Leighton and John Michaels"—Bill's name first.

So John had done it again. He always pushed the young ones in the department to the fore. Bill could see the smile in his eyes. "It's all your data, son," he'd say. Sure, the facts were Bill's, but the way they were presented in a clearcut pattern was not. He could hardly wait to see John and thank him. What a time they'd have over his notes, over the native carvings and puppets he'd brought. If only Liz wouldn't keep interrupting or glower because she felt left out.

Bill was first off the plane. He looked around eagerly and frowned. It wasn't John but Weston Brock, the associate professor, who greeted him, shook his hand. "Bill, I'm so sorry. I have bad news and there's no way to soften it. John's dead. He died of convulsions last Tuesday."

Bill was stunned. Everybody knew that John had an incurable disease: hypoglycemia, low blood sugar. He ate quantities of sweets and preferred to have the reason known rather than be thought a sweet-tooth. Having low blood sugar was rarer than having too much, like diabetics, but many people had it and lived to be eighty and over. The malady was not that difficult to keep under control, and less difficult if your wife happened to be a registered nurse.

"She's my health insurance," John had joked when Bill returned from Africa shortly after the marriage. And he told how he'd been taken to the hospital in convulsions because he'd been forgetting to carry chocolate with him. Thanks to the note on his condition in his wallet he'd been rushed to Emergency where a glucose injection had saved his life. The nurse on duty had been Elizabeth Conway, now Michaels. "She's called Liz," John had said when he introduced Bill as

the oldest and dearest of his young friends.

She came to the service, a day after Bill's arrival, in a subdued grey suit. People didn't wear mourning these days. Nothing, though, could subdue her red-gold hair. It framed a face charming enough to fall in love with, Bill had decided when he first met her. Later, when he watched her with the keen eyes of a trained observer, he changed his mind. There was something restless about her mouth, something greedy about her green eyes, always looking—for what? After all, she'd made it. That John was distinguished in his profession must have come as a bonus. Or perhaps not. Wives of great men did not always relish being background passages. Had Xanthippe been happy? Or Ann Hathaway? It could not have taken Liz long to discover that her husband, more than twenty years her senior, would never change his routine to allow for the travels, plays and parties she longed for. Bill had seen her breezy little plans break like ripples against the rock of John's work. When she found out that most of John's money went into financing expeditions and endowing fellowships, her exasperation had been patent. Bill remembered how contemptuous she always was of the souvenirs he brought back from his field trips once she realized that native jewelry and handwoven stuffs were but a small part of them. How disagreeable she had been about the Calendar of Death! Sybil Leek had mentioned it in her *Diary of a Witch*, and John had asked Bill to check on it.

"What's in it?" Liz had asked as he produced an envelope with three fat red seals.

"It's a fungus that grows in the roots of certain vines."

"What's it good for?"

"It's not in the least *good*! A pinch of it and you die. It's tasteless and you've no idea you've eaten it."

"Couldn't you stop saying 'you'?"

"Oh, you know the kind of you I mean. O.K., then, I'll say 'one.' So one doesn't know one's eaten it, but eighty-four days later—that's three lunar months—one gets an infection of the intestine and dies the day after. Also, it doesn't show up in autopsy. It comes in very handy if you have enemies."

Then they had left Liz and gone off to John's study and locked the envelope in the curio cabinet. Later he'd felt a bit guilty about his grim recital, felt a little sorry for Liz, and gone to help her get their

afternoon tea, which was always coffee. How pathetically grateful she seemed to be for companionship.

"You put the filter in the pot," she directed, "while I get out some cake. No, not *that* pot," she added as he reached for a big, shiny pot on a table by itself. "That's an ornament."

"It looks as if it could hold twenty cups."

"It can, but John doesn't like a lot of people milling around happily." There was an edge to her voice. Idly Bill lifted the lid.

"Do you know you have a lot of papers in it?"

"All coupons. You get them with so many things these days: frozen waffles, Woolite, breakfast foods, candies. . . They're usually worth a dime apiece."

"It looks like you're thrifty," he teased, glad they were on safe ground again.

"You wouldn't think I'd have to be, would you?" Her voice was bitter. "This lovely house, everything I need—or everything John thinks I need. But just mention a dishwasher or getting rid of the old coal furnace, not to speak of Florida or Paris."

Luckily the phone rang. In another minute she'd have started in on John's subsidies by which he, Bill, had so often profited. And now? What would happen now? he worried. The work on the Mentawa was only half done. There were rumors that John had intended to establish a substantial fund, the interest on which was to finance longer stays in those regions which were of particular interest to him. Weston claimed he had spoken about having a lawyer draw it all up in unshakable terms. But then his health had failed. He had let things slide.

Bill thought hard. When he had left at the end of July John had been fine. Why, after years of the right diet with excellent results, had something gone wrong? Was it really convulsions? Only Liz had been there.

How long had he been away? He started counting the weeks, then the days. He counted twice over. It came to eighty-five. Had she fed John the Calendar of Death the day he boarded the plane? Stop it, he told himself—see John's doctor.

"It's difficult to explain to a layman," a rather worried medical celebrity said with a disarming smile. "And it's humiliating to admit that something unpredictable can make short shrift of perfect treatment and care. Mrs. Michaels—she was one of our most competent nurses—was

so conscientious and patient. Hypoglycemia patients can be quite irritable, you know. She even broke his chocolate into handy bits and put them in foil so he wouldn't have to struggle with wrappers when he felt an attack coming on. But the intricate body went its own way," he ended abruptly.

Bill brooded. He had to find out whether the envelope with the Calendar of Death was still in the curio cabinet. Fate played into his hands. He was asked to catalogue all the objects in John's study. To his surprise, Liz gave him the keys without the slightest reluctance.

"John was so careless with them. I used to retrieve them from his suits before they went to the cleaner's."

So she had always had access to the cabinet. There was no list of the items in it. No one would know if anything was missing.

"You'll find things rearranged a bit. John loved to putter." Her sly coldness enraged him.

He took the keys. In the study he went straight to the cabinet. There were three drawers that slid smoothly along metal grooves. The objects in the top drawer had certainly been rearranged. It held only a few carved ivories and a small vase painted from the inside. Japanese women did that, John had told Bill, lying on their backs on the floor and holding the vases to the light. Nothing but kriss handles in the second drawer. Bill was almost sure they'd put the envelope in that second drawer. In the third was something new: a black coral bracelet, the ends tipped with gold. From India, Bill decided. And the gold was the 20-carat gold used even for the small rings around the feet of the temple-doves. John had placed the bracelet on a square of crimson velvet. Never good with his hands, he hadn't made a good job of it. It looked lumpy. As Bill reached under to straighten it, his fingers touched paper. He drew it out, stood with a thudding heart, and slumped into a chair. The envelope in his hand was intact. The seals had not been broken. Baffled and helpless, he slid it into his pocket.

Minutes later he followed the sound of plates being set down and went into the kitchen.

"How about some coffee? I was just going to have some."

"I'd love a cup of coffee."

"Cream with it too. No more milk or half-and-half."

How she must have resented those small economies. Restlessly, Bill prowled while she put on the kettle and disappeared into the pantry. A

shaft of sunlight struck the big coffeepot. Would she soon be giving the parties she'd dreamed of? Again he lifted the lid. Coupons, still coupons. Only that pink thing was not a coupon! He took it out and examined it. Sweet-'n-Low, it said on it. A sugar substitute. He looked into the pot. More pink envelopes. Dozens and dozens of them mixed in with the coupons. So that was how she had done it! "He'd been going downhill for weeks," they'd said. And no wonder. The coupons had all come with sugarless foods—canned fruit, wafers, candy, chocolate, the foods for people with high blood sugar—for diabetics, not for hypoglycemiacs.

"I have some lovely cakes from the French bakery," Liz said, coming from the pantry. "Napoleons, all nice and gooey inside."

He did not answer, and she approached him questioningly.

"You're at my coupons again. I'm afraid I've let them expire. So dumb of me. I save them and then forget the date. I'll dump them this minute."

Should he stop her? But what for? They'd never be accepted as proof. Suppose she said she'd bought them for herself, to reduce?

"I'll be back in a minute," she said and smiled. "The old coal furnace will be good for something before I have an oil furnace installed." There was triumph in her voice. Her mouth twitched. She was laughing at him.

By the time she returned he was quite calm.

"I've put the cake on two plates," he said. "Here's yours."

She looked at him curiously, shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly, and began to chatter.

"It'll take a few more months to get everything in order. John never threw anything away. There's such an accumulation. I don't want to lose any of this creamy stuff," she said parenthetically and went to fetch a spoon. "Two months and then another three weeks or so to get ready. I haven't told anyone yet, Bill, but I'm going to Paris—just in time for May first when they sell those little bunches of lilies-of-the-valley. I'll walk along that river—what's its name?—with a corsage of them. Goodness, Bill, don't look so solemn. Do you blame me for looking forward to that?"

"No, look forward by all means. It's the best part of any experience, they say. Do look forward, because—"

"Because what, for heaven's sakes?"

"Because you are not going to see that lilied first of May."

"And may I ask why not?"

"You've counted it out so nicely—in weeks. In days, the first of May is eighty-five days from now."

"So?"

"Have you forgotten? Doesn't it ring a bell?"

She sat very still. She was remembering. She went white, as white as the envelope he had taken from his pocket. He pushed it toward her. The seals had been broken. The envelope was empty. Frantically she reached for it, but he gripped her wrist.

"You're hurting me!"

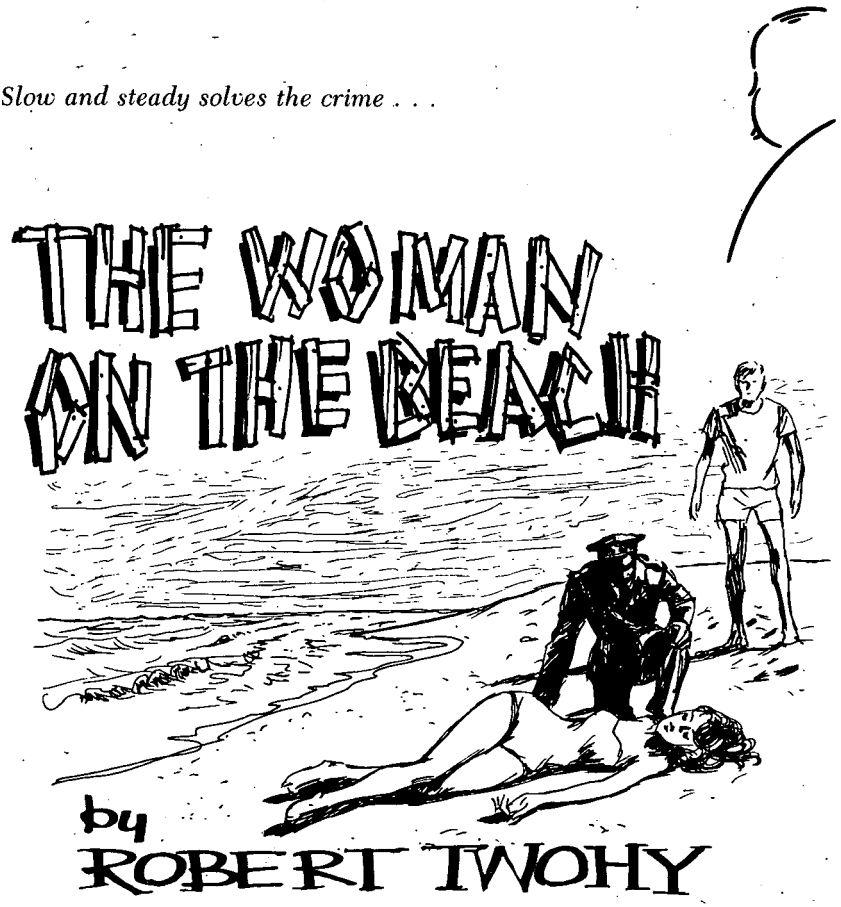
He dropped her hand. Three strides took him to the stove. He struck a match.

He returned and she had not moved.

"If there are crimes that cannot be proved," he said calmly, "there is also punishment that can never—"

His last words were drowned by her screams.

Slow and steady solves the crime . . .



One morning in April the body of a woman wearing a tan bathing suit was found on the beach south of San Vicente, which is a coastal town in Santa Barbara County. The body was found by an early-morning jogger, who drove three miles back to his home and called the San Vicente Police Department.

Sergeant Andy Cahan, a slim, red-haired young man with perceptive dark eyes, arrived on the scene. It was just after 6:00 A.M. The jogger

had driven back and was standing near the body. The morning, after a windy night, was still. Fog lay over the beach.

Cahan knelt by the body, which lay prone inside the high-water mark on the beach, about six yards from the receding surf. The face was turned so that he could see the right profile: a woman of about thirty-five, who had been attractive. She had auburn hair.

"What time did you find her?"

The man said, "A little before 5:30. I drove right home. It's a ten-minute drive. The clock in my kitchen said 5:37."

Cahan glanced back at the cleared area above the beach where his blue-and-white police car was parked. Two other cars were parked there: a late-model Pontiac and an old Galaxy. "Which is yours?"

"The Pontiac."

The policeman walked through the sand to the Galaxy. The man, a wiry fifty-year-old, accompanied him. Cahan opened the driver's door, which was unlocked, and found the registration clipped to the sun-shield: Sandra Jane Woods, 1627 Court Avenue, San Vicente.

He took out his notebook and jotted down the information. He got the jogger's name, which was Philip Stanley, and his address. He put the notebook back in his pocket and looked over the car. In the switch was the ignition key and the trunk key hanging from it on a key ring. No other keys hung from the ring. On the front seat was a clean white towel, a yellow terrycloth robe, and a green handbag. He opened it and slipped out the wallet. The driver's license matched the registration.

On the floor on the passenger's side was a pair of slip-on brown shoes. In the back seat, nothing; on the floor in back, nothing but dust and general debris, some crumpled Salem cigarette packs, sandwich wrappers, used-up match folders, and a couple of empty Coke cans, indicating only that Sandra Jane wasn't the most meticulous person in the world. He opened the glove compartment and saw some folded road maps and a couple of unopened packs of Salems. Nothing else.

He started back to the police car to radio the station, verifying the death and asking for the hearse. Stanley said, "Do you need me any more?"

"If we do, we'll let you know. Thanks for your help."

Stanley got in his red Pontiac and drove away.

Cahan went back to the body and gazed down at it. He noticed a

tiny shred of tan cardboard, visible now as the sun was higher, attached to the suit just where it ended below the woman's right hip. It seemed to be the remnant of a pricetag. So Sandra Jane Woods had put on a brand-new bathing suit to take her last swim.

He waited fifteen minutes. Then two police cars pulled up next to his, and then a hearse. From one of the police cars stepped the coroner's man, whom Cahan nodded to and from whom he got a nod back; he knew him slightly, an older man named Freeborn. Freeborn walked toward the body. "Got a drowning to start my day, hey?"

"Looks that way."

"Better than a knifing. I don't really enjoy knifings before breakfast."

Cahan smiled and walked up the beach to give information to the three policemen who had got out of the cars. Two men from the ambulance walked toward the body with a stretcher. Cahan got into his car and drove to the police station.

A reporter from the *San Vicente Press-Courier* was there. Cahan knew him—a tall, bony-faced man named Walker, of middle age, who had been on a Los Angeles paper; but hard drink had closed their doors on him. So Cahan had heard. But he respected Walker, who was shrewd and competent; apparently in the two years he had been in San Vicente, he had gotten his act back together.

Walker asked, "What's the story?"

"A drowning at Ochoa Beach." He consulted his note pad and gave the newspaperman the names and addresses, which Walker copied on a slip of paper and shoved in his right jacket pocket. "I'm going out to the victim's house. Do you want to come?"

"Sure."

"I'll be a few mintues."

"I'll go down to the ptomaine trap on the corner and get some coffee."

"Pick you up there." Cahan went in to make a verbal report to Lieutenant Blanchard, the duty officer, who had just started his shift.

It was two minutes past 7:00. Cahan's shift was over. But this looked like a morning for overtime.

Blanchard said, when he was through with his report, "Any sign of anything peculiar?"

"Nothing that I saw. She hadn't been in the water long. It must have happened last night, or early this morning. Kind of an odd time to go

for a swim, but I guess people do."

He told Blanchard that he would check out Sandra Jane Wood's house. He picked up Walker at the coffee shop and drove out to Court Avenue, a street in a pleasant middle-class subdivision. 1627 was a little run-down compared to its neighbors, with a frowsy hedge and some tied bundles of newspapers stacked by the front door. There were oil spots on the driveway. The door of the attached garage was wide open. The floor in there, with some heaps of clothes and empty cans and bottles around its edges, made Cahan remember the back-seat floor of the Galaxy.

They went to the front door. The policeman pushed the bell several times. They could hear it ringing loudly, but there was no response. "Let's try next door," he said. They walked to the next door west.

A big man in a yellow shirt answered the ring. Cahan said, "Sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you know the lady next door?"

"The nurse? Not really, but I wouldn't mind." The man had a broad pink face, in which bright blue eyes were surrounded by wrinkles of good humor.

"What is it, Frank?" A small brown-haired woman in a pink bathrobe had come up behind him.

"Cop here asking about Fireball Sandy." The eye wrinkles deepened. "Most exciting thing in this neighborhood since the last time the guppies ran. She sunbathes every weekend. You ought to see the grass under my back fence. It isn't bothered by the drought."

"Really?" said Walker with a crooked smile.

"Really. That's 'cause I peer over the fence and drool."

"Oh, Frank!" The woman laughed softly.

"She's always in her bathing suit. And that is quite a sight." The blue eyes were merry. "She's got the equipment and she's not shy about showing it."

"*Flaunting* is the word," said his wife.

The man grinned at Cahan. "You ought to see her in her bathing suit, officer."

"I did. A little while ago. On Ochoa Beach. She drowned."

The man and the woman stared. The man said, "You're kidding."

"I'm afraid I'm not."

"Oh, my God. I'm sorry." He turned away, shaking his head. "My God. The poor kid."

His wife said, her voice hushed, "How did it happen?"

"She was apparently out for a swim. Could we come in and ask you a few questions about her?"

The man said, "Sure. Come on in."

Cahan said, "I'm Sergeant Andy Cahan. This is Mr. Walker."

"I'm Frank Williams. This is Margaret."

The woman said, "I'm just fixing Frank his breakfast. Would you men like some?"

"No, thank you."

"How about some coffee?"

"Fix them some coffee," Williams said. He sat down at the table in the front room. The woman went into the kitchen and came back with a plate piled with scrambled eggs and buttered toast, which she set in front of him. She went back into the kitchen for coffee.

Cahan and Walker took chairs at the table. Cahan had his notebook out and Walker had taken a slip of paper from his left jacket pocket. Walker never used a notebook. At the end of a working day, his right pocket was filled with folded slips of scrawled-on paper.

The woman brought four cups of coffee on a tray and joined them at the table. With her husband, who dug into the eggs and toast like a professional eater, she filled them in on Sandra Jane Woods, as far as they knew her. Which wasn't much. Sandra Jane Woods kept to herself. She had lived in the neighborhood about eight months. She was a nurse at City Hospital. She was apparently a divorcée. A son, about seventeen, had lived with her awhile but hadn't been seen around lately—it was thought that he had moved out and was sharing an apartment with some other boys. Williams and his wife didn't know where it was.

"Did she have any boyfriends?" Walker asked.

"Yeah. There's this guy that often spent the night."

"Oh, Frank!" said his wife.

"What's the matter? It's true. There's no secret about it. He'd park his car in the drive, and you'd see him leave in the morning."

"Even so—you shouldn't gossip about her."

"Gossip, hell. These are policemen. I'm trying to give them the facts."

"I'm not a policeman," said Walker. "I'm a newspaperman."

"Are you Stuart Walker?" Walker nodded. "I read your stuff. You're

too good for a hick-town paper."

"I'm damn lucky to be on any paper."

Cahan said, "How about the guy you were talking about?"

"He drives a new Buick. Got a soupy motor, you know what I mean? I heard it last night."

"Did you? What time?"

"I don't know. Midnight, maybe. I can't swear it was the Buick. It seemed to stop a few seconds in front of her house, motor running—then it drove on. Does that mean anything?"

Cahan made some notes. "Do you happen to know his name?"

"No. I nodded to him once or twice, in the morning, when we were both going to our cars. Tall guy, about forty-five, grey hair, thin face, sunlamp tan, kind of distinguished-looking if you're impressed by phonies. . . Woman, go about your task! Fill the sugar bowl!"

She stuck her tongue out at him, grinned at the visitors, and went into the kitchen with the sugar bowl.

Walker said, "Why do you call him a phony?"

"I don't know. It's just that this town seems to be full of them. That's southern California for you."

Walker's lips twisted. "You could be right."

Cahan asked, "When did you first see him?"

"Oh, two months ago or so. . . Is there something fishy about this drowning?"

"It's a routine drowning, as far as we know."

Something flashed into his mind—the shred of cardboard attached to the tan bathing suit. Did that mean something?

Margaret came back with the sugar bowl and took her seat. Williams spooned sugar into his coffee.

Cahan asked, "How about her swimming? Did she swim a lot?"

Williams said, "She lived in that tan bathing suit. I mean, around the neighborhood. I guess she didn't wear it at the hospital, though it would have been great medicine if she had. For the old guys."

"Frank," said his wife.

"Yeah, you're right. This isn't the time for my bum jokes. All right—yeah, she swam a lot. She didn't wear that bathing suit just for show. She'd go off in the morning, on the weekend, and come back with her hair wet. She swam."

"Did you ever notice if she swam at night?"

"No, I didn't. You, Margaret?"

She shook her head. "She'd come and go in the evening, but I don't know where. I heard her last night."

"Heard her come home?"

"Heard her go out. About 1:00. That old car of hers makes a big roar when it starts up. It started to roar. Then I heard her garage door open. It squeaks a lot when it opens. Then I heard the car drive away."

"I didn't hear it," said her husband.

"You wouldn't have heard a-plane fall through the roof."

"She's right," said Williams. "I sleep the sleep of the pure in heart."

Walker said, "Did she usually leave her garage door open when she went out at night?"

Margaret said, "I never knew her to leave it open." Her husband nodded agreement.

Walker said, "It's open now."

Cahan made notes. "Do you know if the boyfriend ever went swimming with her?"

Margaret shook her head. Williams said, "I don't either. What's with him, Sergeant? Why are you so interested in him?"

Cahan smiled faintly. "I don't really know."

Margaret said, "Frank, it's time to go."

He looked at his wristwatch. "Leaping lizards! Duty calls. Got to push a load of hot corsets today." He got up.

Cahan and Walker got up. "Thanks for your help," said Cahan. "And for the coffee."

"Any time. So long boys." Frank strode by his wife, aimed a kiss at her lips, missed, tried again, connected, plucked a jacket from the back of a chair, and went out the front door.

Cahan said, "I'd like to get into her house and look around."

Margaret said, "Why?"

"Mostly to find out if there's any lead to her boyfriend. If he saw her yesterday, or last night, he might be able to tell us something of her state of mind before she went for her swim—if she was upset or if anything unusual happened."

"Are you thinking of suicide?"

"Not really. I'm just finding out what I can."

She pursed her lips. "If you want to get in, that should be simple

enough. She put the key under the mat. It was a very stupid thing to do—don't you agree?"

Cahan nodded. "I agree."

"Why she didn't carry it in her purse, I don't know. She carried her car keys in her purse, I'd see her pull them out when she got in the car."

Cahan said, "You spoke of a son who's apparently moved out. Maybe she left it for him, not knowing when he might come home."

They thanked Margaret and walked back to 1627. Cahan picked up the worn mat. A key lay there. He slid it into the lock, opened the door, and put the key in his pocket. They looked around a cluttered living room. Walker said, "She wasn't much of a housekeeper." Against one wall, on the floor, was a record player with stacks of records around it.

Cahan opened a door and found himself in a bedroom. He frowned at the bed, with the blanket pulled down, the sheets rumpled. He said to Walker, who had come in, "She slept in it last night."

"Last night or last week. Sometime since she last made it."

Cahan smiled. "You've got a point. . . Here's her nightgown." He pointed to a filmy cloud of blue that lay on the rug by the bed. Near it was a circular mark, about a foot in radius, the nap of the light-green rug slightly flattened, some discoloration darkening the edges of the circle. He gazed at it a moment, then shrugged and turned away. With a housekeeper like Sandra Jane, it was probably just one of many stains.

He looked back at the nightgown. "So she gets up, takes off the nightgown, puts on the swimsuit—maybe she was upset, went to the ocean to swim away her worries." He turned to a full-length mirror attached to the closet door. "What about that?"

"What about it?"

"It means something, and I don't know what. I'm missing things. There are all kinds of things, and I'm missing what they mean."

"Maybe Bart can tell you."

"Bart? Who's Bart?"

"Bart's the boyfriend."

Cahan stared. Walker stood at a cluttered desk across the room. He had been shifting papers around on it and glancing at them. He held a sheet of tan notepaper. He read aloud, as Cahan came up by his shoulder and looked at the sloping handwriting on the paper:

"Dear Bart, It's been a long lonely five days without you. Nothing has changed, has it? Can you think up a story that would get you free next weekend? I'd like to go for a drive—a long, long drive in the moonlight. I love you very much."

Walker murmured, as he put the sheet back on the desk, "It was in this. Not yet sealed."

He handed Cahan a tan envelope addressed in the same handwriting as on the note: Mr. Barton T. Currey, Main Avenue Auto Supply, 231 Main, San Vicente, Calif. *Personal*

"So there he is," said Walker. "The boyfriend."

"Looks like it." The policeman put the envelope back on the desk and went into the bathroom. A plastic hamper was against one wall. Around it was a litter of towels, stockings, and washrags. He opened it, reached in, stirred briefly through the contents, and pulled out a tan swimsuit.

"She had two tan swimsuits." He dropped it back in the hamper. "You'd think she'd get a different color and style."

"She liked tan. That was her color. Look at the notepaper."

Cahan walked into the front room, picked up the phone, dialed the police station, and asked for Lieutenant Blanchard. "Lieutenant," he said, "Any preliminary medical on the drowning victim?"

"Seawater in the lungs, a bump on the head. Probably she was hit by a floating piece of wood and knocked cold—"

"I'll poke around a little more," Cahan said.

They drove to the Main Avenue Auto Supply. It was now almost 9:30.

A young man behind the service counter said, "What'll it be?"

"Is Mr. Currey in?"

"No, he won't be in this morning."

"What's his job here?"

"He owns the plantation."

"Would he be at home now?"

"Yeah, I imagine you could reach him there."

Walker copied the address the man gave them on one of his innumerable slips of paper: 56 Ashwood Drive. Both knew the neighborhood of large, executive-type homes.

They rode through the city and climbed the hill east of it. Ashwood

was the last street on top. At 56, a new green Buick was in the driveway of the two-car garage. Cahan rang the bell of the long, low modern stone house. A tall woman wearing glasses opened the door.

Cahan said, "Mrs. Currey? Is Mr. Currey in?"

"He's having coffee on the patio. Come in."

They proceeded into a rich living room. She continued on to an open French window across the room. "Bart! Some police officers want to see you!"

"Police officers?" A man in a green pullover sweater, who was close to Frank Williams's description of him, appeared outside the window that gave onto an attractive brick terrace on which a marble-topped iron table stood. Beyond was a sloping yard, ending in poplar trees, which were backed by a stone wall. The man said, "What is it?"

"I'm Sergeant Cahan and this is Mr. Walker. Can we talk to you privately?"

"Privately?" He glanced at the woman, whose pallid face was still. Behind the glasses, her eyes, enlarged by the thick lenses, looked cold. "All right," said Currey. "Let's take a walk."

They walked across the lawn, toward the poplar trees. In their shade, Currey stopped. "What is it?"

"It concerns Mrs. Woods."

His lips tightened. "Who's Mrs. Woods?"

Cahan said calmly, "Your friend. We found a letter and an envelope addressed to you on her desk."

"What the hell were you doing at her desk?"

"Making an investigation." The policeman paused. "Are you prepared for some bad news?"

Currey took a deep breath. "Go ahead."

Cahan told him.

"Oh, no," he said softly. He put a hand to his forehead.

Glancing back at the house, Cahan saw Mrs. Currey watching them.

He said, "I'm sorry. You understand I have to ask some questions. Were you over on Court Avenue last night?"

"What? No."

"Somebody thought that you stopped for a few seconds in front of her house."

"Somebody is wrong. I was in L.A. last night. I drove up to the ball game. I took a couple of friends. We do that every once in a while.

After the game we went to some night spots. I didn't get home until after 3:30."

"Did you see Mrs. Woods at all yesterday?"

"I haven't seen her in almost a week."

"Do you have any idea why she'd go for a swim at 1:00 in the morning?"

"Why not? She liked to swim."

"Did she often go late at night?"

"Now and then."

"Did anything upset her recently? Can you recall anything unusual?"

"Well, things run their course, you know. They're good while they last, but they don't last forever."

"You mean you were breaking up?"

"Things were winding down."

"Was that your idea, or hers?"

"What is this? A cross-examination?"

"No. I'm trying to get at her state of mind."

"Who knows a woman's state of mind?" He glanced toward the house. His wife had gone. He muttered, "I'll have to tell her it's something to do with business. She doesn't know anything about Sandra. You didn't tell her anything, did you?"

"No."

"That's good. It could be a wild row. It's happened before, with other girls. But this time I've been careful. She thinks I've been making overnight business trips. She doesn't know anything about Sandra."

Cahan said, "Did you buy Mrs. Woods a new swimsuit recently?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"She was wearing a new one when she was found."

"She must have bought it herself. Anything strange about that?"

"I guess not. Do you have a key to her place?"

"A key? No. Why should I? I never went over there except when she was home."

"Those friends you went to L.A. with—were they with you all night?"

"Sure. They're San Vicente men. I drove them home. So we were together from about 1:00, when I picked them up, until after 3:00. Do you want to check with them? What is this? Do you always cross-examine people when someone drowns?"

"Not always. Thanks for the information. Sorry to spring it on you like this."

"I just don't want my wife to know."

He walked them back across the sloping lawn and into the house. His wife was not in the living room as they went through it to the front door. Currey said in a hard voice, "I don't want her to know. I don't want another of those rows."

As they drove back down the hill, Walker said, "Do you believe him? About last night?"

"I guess so. He wouldn't mention witnesses if he didn't have them."

"I suppose not. He's more bothered with the idea that his wife might find out about Sandra than he is with her death. If he'd known I was with the paper he'd have been really shook up."

Cahan dropped the newspaperman off near the Press-Courier Building, then went on to the station. It was 10:50. Blanchard was out of his office again, so Cahan spent some time writing his report. As he dropped it in the basket on Blanchard's desk, he had a sudden conviction that a steak sandwich, niftily turned out at Pease's Restaurant in the Millview Shopping Center, was what he required. He drove to the shopping center, parked, and sauntered past bright modern shops toward the restaurant. Swimsuited figures in a window caught his eye. He stood a few moments rubbing his jaw, thinking of Sandra Jane Woods lying on the beach with a shred of a pricetag on her right hip. Pricetags were attached to the waxen figures in the window. On a sudden impulse, he strode into the shop.

A small young woman with soft brown eyes smiled at him. "May I help you?"

"I don't know." He felt a little embarrassed, it seemed pointless—but he was here. "Look, Miss. Suppose a young woman bought a new swimsuit—"

"Did she buy it here?"

"Here or someplace else. That's not the point I'm getting at. Suppose she bought a swimsuit, see, then went for a swim—are you following me?"

Her smile was puzzled but receptive. It was also, thought Cahan, beautiful. "So far, Officer."

"O.K. And then she drowned. And her body was washed up. And on

the right hip, here, you found a scrap of a pricetag—what would you think?"

"I beg pardon?"

He laughed, a little awkwardly. "Do you get the picture?"

"Yes, I get the picture, but—well, what? What would I think?" She looked at him with her soft eyes and shrugged. "I'd think it was a little strange."

"Why?"

"Because any woman putting on a new swimsuit is going to inspect it, every inch of it, for what it does to her figure. She'll turn this way and that in front of the mirror, if she *has* a mirror."

"She has a full-length mirror."

"Then it's a little strange."

"That's what I thought," said Cahan. "But I didn't know why."

"I don't see how she could leave a pricetag on her suit. It just isn't what most women would do."

"Thanks." He smiled at her.

"Did I give the right answer?"

"You gave the right answer."

"Then you won't arrest me?"

"I'm not the arresting officer. But if I *was* the arresting officer, I might start with you. If you were arrestable. Are you arrestable?"

"That's a leading question. I don't answer leading questions during working hours."

"Do you answer leading questions over dinner?"

"It depends on who's asking the questions."

He liked her smile. He liked her warm eyes. He liked the tilt of her chin. He liked the way her small figure filled the white blouse and the neat brown skirt. He couldn't see anything about her that he didn't like. She was the best thing he had seen in many days.

He said, "How could I ask you leading questions? I don't even know your name."

"Lisa Girard."

"All right, Lisa. My name is Andy Cahan and I'll be by at—what time?"

"We close at 6:00."

"I'll be by at 6:00 to take you someplace for dinner and start asking leading questions."

"A good citizen doesn't argue with the police. Today I'll be a good citizen."

"You already have been."

"Have I? With that routine about swimsuits? I've never heard that line before."

"I just made it up." He took her hand. "I'll see you at 6:00, Lisa."

He forgot about a steak sandwich at Pease's. He got in the car and drove back downtown, thinking about where he would take her. Did she like lobster? He'd never dated a girl who didn't. John's Sea Grill was the place to take a lobsterphile, if she was a girl who meant something to you. Cahan had a strong feeling that Lisa Girard was going to wind up meaning a great deal to him.

He drove to the Press-Courier Building, walked in, and went past the front classified-ad counter, down an aisle into the rear where the editorial desks were. In a glass cubicle he saw Walker hunched over his typewriter and went in. Walker, a cigarette stuck to his bottom lip, glanced up. The policeman said, "There's a new angle."

Walker's eyes narrowed. He sucked on the cigarette. "Suicide?"

"Murder."

The newspaperman gaped. Cahan turned. "You want to come with me?"

"Where?"

"To see Currey." He walked back down the corridor. Walker grabbed his jacket and came after him.

In the car, Cahan said, "I didn't ask him the right question."

"The names of the people he said he was with last night?"

"No." Cahan smiled. He felt lighthearted. That's what meeting a girl like Lisa Girard could do. That's what solving a crime could do. He said, "I'm going to play Kojak. I'm not going to tip you off on the question. You have to guess it."

Walker grinned. "O.K., Kojak. I'll ask about murder. If it's murder, someone hit her on the head, then drowned her. Right?"

"Right." They headed through town, going west.

"So someone had to be swimming with her. Currey?"

"No."

"Who?"

"Nobody."

"What?"

"Nobody was swimming with her. Because she wasn't swimming at all."

Walker stared. Cahan said, "She didn't put on her swimsuit. Somebody put it on her dead body. She was dead before she left the house."

They started up the hill, toward Ashwood. Walker was silent for a few moments. Then he said, "How about the seawater in her lungs?"

"Seawater isn't only in the sea."

"Meaning?"

"You can take a bucket of water out of the sea."

Walker nodded. "You could. Go on."

"This is speculation. Let's try something. Let's imagine that you're the killer. That way, maybe it'll be easier for you to tell me if it seems to make sense, if the actions would seem logical for a killer."

Walker smiled his crooked smile. "I don't know much about being a killer. All I've ever killed is time, and a few thousand fifths of bourbon. But all right—in a good cause, I'll be a killer. So what do I do?"

"You've decided that Sandra Jane Woods rates death. So you drive to the beach and fill a bucket with water. You drive out to Sandra's, stop a moment, take the bucket out of the car, and set it behind her hedge."

"Which would explain why Frank Williams heard the Buick stop for a few seconds."

"Yes. You drive the car around the block and park it, then you walk back to Sandra's, pick up the bucket of water, and let yourself into the house with your key. You come into the bedroom. She's asleep. You set the bucket by the bed."

Walker said softly, "Where the circle was, on the rug."

"You noticed it? Yeah. Then, with a weapon of some kind that you've brought in your pocket, a wrench or a heavy screwdriver, you hit her on the head and knock her out."

He turned onto Ashwood. "Then you pull her to the edge of the bed, put her head in the bucket, and she drowns. And her lungs are full of seawater."

They were half a block from Currey's house. The Buick sat in the driveway. Cahan pulled the police car to the curb and cut the motor. He looked at Walker. "Are you with me?"

"So far. I have some questions, but I'm with you. Carry on, Kojak."

"You take off her nightgown and put a swimsuit on her. A new tan swimsuit, recently bought by you."

"Why?"

"Because you were up on her messy life-style and were afraid that you might not find her regular one in the mess. Or maybe because you were afraid that she might have been out for a swim that evening and her suit would be sopping wet. It's hard to pull a wet swimsuit on a living body, let alone a dead one. Anyway, it's you, the murderer, who pulled the new suit on her—because no woman would wear a swimsuit with part of the pricetag still on it." He grinned. "I have that on the highest authority."

"I didn't know about the pricetag."

"Neither did the murderer. The murderer missed it.

"O.K., now you drag or carry her body from the bed, through the kitchen, and into her car, probably in the back seat. You go back to the house, find her handbag in the front room, get the car keys and the house key, and put the house key under the front mat. The key that you've let yourself in with is still in your pocket. You empty the bucket into the toilet and carry the handbag, a terrycloth robe, a towel, and a pair of shoes to the car, planning to leave them on the beach. You take the bucket and the weapon you hit her with.

"You drive to the beach. It's a mile drive. You carry or drag the body from the parking area down to the surf. You're dressed for it—boots, old jeans, something like that. You drag her out into the water and leave her floating there."

Walker was watching him intently. He went on: "You go back up the beach, kicking away or smoothing your tracks, and leave the towel, the robe, the shoes, and the handbag in the car. You walk back a mile to where the Buick is parked and drive it back to the beach, to Sandra's car.

"You remove the bucket and the weapon from her car, drive on home and put the bucket and the weapon where they belong, probably in your garage. And you've managed something that looks very much like an accidental drowning—except that you missed tearing off all the pricetag."

Walker said, "Is it time for questions?"

"Fire away."

"The key that I opened the door with—how did I get it? Did Sandra give it to me?"

"No. You got the key by spying on her, by parking down the street and learning her habits and routines. You found out that she practically lived, when off duty, in a tan swimsuit. In the same way, you found out her habit of putting the house key under the mat. You got her working hours from the hospital and knew when it would be a good time to steal the key."

"Steal it?"

"Right. One day when she was at work and the neighborhood was quiet, you went up to the door and kicked the mat with your foot, as if maybe it was an accident in case someone happened to be glancing that way. You bent as if you were straightening it and got her key. Then you went to a locksmith and had a dupe made."

Walker said, "There he is."

Currey had come out of the house and was staring. He walked toward them.

He said, as he got to the car, "I saw you through the window. Do you want something?"

"One question I didn't ask you. Do you drive another car?"

"My wife has a Falcon. In the garage. Now and then I drive that."

"Which one did you drive last night?"

"The Falcon. Easy on gas, easy to park. Why do you want to know?"

"So the Buick was here."

"Sure. I left her the keys—she said she had some shopping to do. What are you getting at?"

Cahan started his motor. "Just getting things clear." He nodded to Currey, and the car moved away.

Walker said, "So it wasn't him. He's a crumb, but it wasn't him."

"He wouldn't kill a girlfriend. He'd just walk away from her." He smiled a faint smile. "A triangle has three sides. His wife was the third."

"What do you do now?"

"Give it to Blanchard. We'll go after witnesses—people on Court Avenue, like the Williamses, who might have seen the Falcon parked around there. People on Ashwood, who might have seen what time the Buick drove away last night and what time it came back. Locksmiths. Clerks in stores where they sell swimsuits. We'll check on those quar-

rels Currey spoke of. Maybe his wife has a psychotic history. Maybe this isn't the first of his girls she's attacked. Maybe she's killed before. We'll search for the bucket and the weapon, though she might have gotten rid of them. We'll check that dark spot on the rug for salt. There are things to do now that we know what to look for."

"No story for me to write yet."

"Just that a woman drowned. But there'll be more. We'll bring it home."

"You're quite a Kojak, Andy."

"Not me." He smiled. "I'm just a cop who asks leading questions, especially when the person I'm talking to seems receptive."

He drove back downtown, thinking that after he reported the latest to Blanchard he'd stop for a sandwich, then go home and have a good nap before getting ready for the special evening that lay ahead.

Corbett was losing the Christmas spirit fast–and furiously . . .

MIRACLE IN SMALL CLAIMS COURT

by **Duffy Carpenter**

With Christmas just four days away, I should have been festive, but I wasn't. I was spitting angry with the human race. Psychologists say that there are people who suffer from holiday depression due to loneliness. That wasn't my problem; I was surrounded by people. People with their own axes to grind. Even in my own family.

"Jeff Corbett, if you have any idea of using our own money to make up the deficit in your fund drive, you're crazy." That's my wife Sally,

who was reading my mind, as usual. She is not a selfish woman, but it rankles her when I get mixed up in civic affairs at the expense of spending time with her and our three kids.

Normally, she just has my part-time twice-a-week tour as a Small Claims Court referee to complain about. Then I went and signed up as a district captain for the annual Christmas Charity Drive, which went over like a case of pellagra at home. In fact, the way the contributions were trickling in, I was convinced that the entire concept of charity was going over like a pandemic of pellagra.

I had simply mentioned to Sally that I was $1,200 under quota, but as I said she was reading my mind. After fifteen years of marriage, she's an expert at uncovering my innermost thoughts. For the life of me, I never know what *she's* thinking.

"Those quotas were too high to begin with, Jeff. Good Lord, when things are booming it's easy to be generous, but times are tough."

"You hit it right on the head, honey. Generosity—true charity—shouldn't be easy. That's what makes it a virtue."

"You're starting to sound like someone out of Charles Dickens. Look, darling, I know you mean well, but you have to be realistic. Your own company didn't hand out a bonus this year. Speaking of your company, you'd better get on your horse, it's late. What's today?"

"Tuesday."

She sighed. "I'll see you tonight then. Later tonight."

My Tuesday and Thursday evenings are spent at Small Claims, where most of the litigation is over small amounts of money, but you can sue for up to $1,000. In my state, a referee doesn't have to be a lawyer. I qualify because I have an MBA, twenty years' business experience, and have passed a court-supervised examination. My wife would be quick to add that I do not get paid for my services. Our eating money comes from the non-bonus-paying corporation where I'm a vice president of marketing.

Court convenes at 7 P.M., but I always get there early to go over a docket, to see what kind of crazies I'm to be faced with. This particular Tuesday, the case load looked rather mild, with most of the plaintiffs going for amounts in the $100 range. One, however, stood out: Tilapia Fish Importers *vs.* Fungo Swingers, Inc., with $950 in contention. It was down for the fifth hearing of the evening.

By 8:15, I had disposed of four cases: nondelivery of a Christmas item, lost dry-cleaning, defective carpeting, and a woman who wanted her money back on a guaranteed bust developer. The last one went in the plaintiff's favor since she walked in with *prima facie* evidence of the program's failure. I was now ready for the fisherman *versus* the Fungo man—at least I thought I was. The door to room 407A opened and in they walked—well, one of them waddled—to find justice at my hands.

The waddler turned out to be the defendant, Emil Sarton, president of Fungo Swingers. Despite his shortness and corpulence, he cut a mean figure. The little dude wore a leather leisure suit, a purple cashmere turtleneck, and a gold medallion hanging from a neck chain.

I don't know what a fish importer is supposed to look like, but Mr. Tilapia was holding up the fish part. He looked like a man who has spent most of his life on the water. His long lean body projected a salty ruggedness that matched his craggy features. They were quite a pair—Sarton looking like he had never seen daylight and Tilapia seeming rarely to have set foot indoors.

I opened with my usual spiel, telling them that they had the choice of a referee, whose judgment was final, or a judge, whose ruling could be appealed to a higher court. In turn, they agreed to my arbitration.

"Fine. Well, Mr. Tilapia, suppose you begin, since you're the plaintiff. Please try to be brief."

"Certainly," he said, taking a sheaf of papers from his coat pocket. His voice had a touch of accent I couldn't place, but if he wanted to get out of the fish business, he could probably make it as an operatic basso. "The claim is quite simple. Mr. Sarton contacted me several weeks ago to supply special imported foodstuffs for a party—"

"Excuse me," I interrupted, "your suit may be improperly drawn. You are serving papers on a corporation. A 'party' is a private affair, and you would have to serve him as an individual. Didn't the Clerk of the Court explain that?"

Mr. Sarton raised a pudgy hand, showing a wrist encircled with a silver slave bracelet. "The party was part of my business—that is my business, arranging parties. You see, Mr. Corbett, Fungo Swingers is a group of enlightened people who want to get the most out of life. The members pay a handsome fee to belong to my organization, and they demand the best. The high point of the annual activities is the Party of the Year, which is what Mr. Tilapia was referring to. This year's was

going to be the greatest ever—until he messed it up. That's why I don't think I owe him anything."

"That's what we are here to determine," Tilapia intoned from somewhere in his stomach. He addressed me: "I appreciate your allowing the plaintiff to go first, Mr. Corbett, but I think you will have a clearer picture of the problem if Mr. Sarton explains."

I gave him an incredulous look. Either he had a sure case or he was a first-class dope. Then it dawned on me. "Mr. Tilapia—ah—I don't want to put this indelicately, but do you understand English that well? We have an interpreter service, and—"

He smiled, showing the whitest damned teeth I ever saw. "I speak English as well as ten others, Mr. Corbett. Please, I am not offended. I offer to let Mr. Sarton state his case first merely as an expediency."

"Very well." I nodded to Sarton. "Go ahead. How did this man 'mess up' your party?"

"Well, it all started back in November right after our Thanksgiving Bacchanal. I sat around wondering how I could top that way-out bash, and I mean it was *way out!* It was beautifully orchestrated, if I do say so myself. The theme was The Pleasurable Puritans." His eyes rolled in his puffy cheeks. "Wow! The costumes those fillies came up with were a gas and a half. You see, the whole idea was built around—"

"Mr. Sarton, if Mr. Tilapia wasn't involved in this November party, it's not pertinent."

"He sure wasn't. That's why it was a success. But it is pertinent, Mr. Corbett, because I had to top it for the December affair. That's when I had the Lupercalia brainstorm. Wow! What a way to end the year! A Roman orgy! Food, frolic, and f-u-n, if you know what I mean." He gave me a fat wink.

"Now I don't know much about Roman times," he continued, "so I start looking around for an expert. Someone told me about Tilapia, and I got in touch with him. Well, he was quite impressive, quoting Ovid and a bunch of other names I forget. So I figure he's the man for the job and I contract him for it."

"You had a written contract, gentlemen?"

"Yes," Tilapia said, pushing his sheaf of papers forward. "It's a simple agreement stating that I would supply an authentic repast. I also pointed out to him that the Lupercalia was actually in February, but—"

I was reading the contract and it seemed to me that it would stand a legal test if all the conditions had been met. I asked Sarton the obvious.

"Met the conditions? Well, let me tell you, Mr. Corbett, they were *not* met! No, sir, sardines and bread and some wine aren't my idea of a Roman orgy!"

"Sardines and bread?"

"Yes siree, Mr. Corbett, that's what he came up with."

I looked at Tilapia in a new perspective. He could be a very clever con man and I didn't like the idea of aiding him in collecting on a scam. At the same time, I had no great respect for Sarton, either.

"Mr. Tilapia, $950 seems like a lot of money for sardines and bread."

"If I may, sir, I think this case rests on two proofs. First is the value of the goods, and second, their acceptance as authentic. The first proof is validated by these wholesale invoices which show that the fish were specially imported. They were caught with nets in the east Mediterranean and processed according to the method of Roman times. The bread was also authentically made in stone ovens and flown in for the affair. As far as the wine is concerned, it too was imported from the Middle East."

I looked at the invoices and they were in order, complete with customs stamps and signatures. This guy had an angle, but I was damned if I could figure it out.

"I think there is another factor here, Mr. Tilapia, and that is the *authenticity* of the menu."

He gave me those beautiful teeth again. Along with the smile, I got another piece of paper. It was a Xerox copy of a book page describing the food served at a Lupercalia in 31 A.D. to the Roman Legion on duty in the Middle East. Attached to that was an affidavit by a professor of Roman History attesting to the fact that fish, bread, and wine were served as the main fare. The professor's name was familiar to me since I had once served on a review board with him out at the Community College. It looked as if Tilapia had covered all the bases, but I wasn't just going to hand it to him.

"It seems that your case is based on the concept of *caveat emptor*, Mr. Tilapia—that Mr. Sarton 'could have known, would have known, or should have known' what was authentic. What had you envisioned, Mr. Sarton, as a Roman—ah—meal?"

"I didn't have any idea. That's why I hired him."

Now Sarton was playing dumb, despite my bending over backwards to help him. At this point, both parties repulsed me—Sarton for his sleazy business and Tilapia for his dubious guile. But I had to be fair.

"Did your clients complain about the food?"

"No, they liked it all right. Some said it was delicious. In fact, the food was so good they spent all their time eating, and the fun and games went down the drain.

"To make matters worse," Sarton went on, "I'm not getting many bookings for next month's party. Somehow everyone has lost interest. I wouldn't doubt that he drugged the food."

"Now that isn't an issue for this hearing, Mr. Sarton," I said. "Those allegations are a police matter. As for a judgment, I will have to find for Mr. Tilapia on the basis of his contract. The selection of the food was left to his discretion and he fulfilled the requirements and substantiated his costs. I will issue an order that Mr. Tilapia be awarded $950. That's all, gentlemen."

If I was angry then, I was livid as I drove home. I am sophisticated enough to accept the foibles of people, but to have them dropped in my lap at Christmas time was too much. I had made up my mind to cover the $1,200 Christmas fund deficit with my own money, no matter how much hell Sally raised.

I must have taken my temper out on the front of the house, because the wreath fell off as I slammed the door. I was picking it up when Sally came into the foyer.

"Here," she said, taking it from me, "I'll put it back up later." She reclosed the door and looked at me.

"Jeff, I've been thinking. If you want to use our money for the fund, go ahead. Sitting here wrapping the kids' gifts, I've felt so guilty—Lord, we have so much."

I reached down and kissed her and she kissed me back. "An hour ago, I was ready to write off the human race as not worth a damn," I said. "You've rejuvenated me, darling."

"So will some eggnog. Was it a bad night at court?"

"It was the pits, as the kids say. I had one case you wouldn't believe."

"Come tell me about it," she said. "Oh, I almost forgot. Someone left an envelope for you. Here it is on the table."

I picked it up. "I hope one of our neighbors decided to get some Christmas spirit."

When I tore open the sealed envelope I couldn't believe all the green inside. I quickly counted the tens and twenties and gave a low whistle.

"950 bucks. Who dropped this off, hon—Santa Claus?"

"It wasn't a neighbor. I never saw the man before. He just told me to give it to you and left."

"An anonymous donor—" I stopped. $950! The same amount I had awarded Tilapia. "Sally, this could be awful."

"How can a $950 contribution be awful?"

I described Tilapia to her and she confirmed that the man who delivered the envelope fit the picture.

"Don't you see, Sally? I can't accept this. It would look like collusion. I guess the old con man had a change of heart, but it's . . . What's the matter?"

Sally had walked to the window and was looking out. "Hold me, Jeff," she said in a low voice.

"Sally, are you all right?"

"Yes. Jeff, you're not very religious, so you don't see it."

"See what?" I peered out at the snow-covered lawn.

"Not out there, Jeff. Are you sure Tilapia was the man's name?"

I nodded.

"Darling, don't you know what tilapia is?"

I shook my head.

"Tilapia is the type of fish Christ used to feed the multitudes."

"Oh, baby, that's just a coincidence."

"I know, Jeff. Just hold me."

I did. I held her then and I held her all through the night. We cried like happy children who live where doubt has no address.

Men and women die, but sorrow never does . . .

DEAD END

by ALVIN S. FICK

What a surprise it was to see Sweets yesterday—and not altogether a pleasant one.

By the time I got my chair turned around in the kitchen after I heard him knock and rolled through the arch into the living room, he had walked in.

It was just like Sweets to do that, just walk in. He stood there in the center of the room looking around, his pudgy face divided by a wide

toothless grin that made his head look like a Bender melon split by a cleaver. Not a bad idea, that.

I had come back from a ride down to the Heron Valley overlook just before his car pulled up in front. "You've put on weight, Sweets," I said. I looked at the bulge above and below his narrow belt. He eased into a rocker facing the couch. Aside from my bed and a dresser, that's about all the furniture left in my house. When you live in a wheelchair, that's the first move you make—you get rid of all the road hazards.

"It's been near four years, old buddy," Sweets said. He shifted his weight in the rocker. It creaked in protest. I noticed that the pressure within had tested every fiber in his soiled chino pants. The stitching down the front had surrendered in the struggle and the zipper was exposed, a silver snake that caught the light from the west window. It was like Sweets to go around that way. My distaste for him spilled over into my voice.

"Don't old buddy me, Sweets. What do you want? What are you after now, after all this time? I have nothing left."

"That ain't no way to talk to an old friend. Ain't I the one who told the boys they should build the ramps for you? Ain't I the one who said you need a low counter in the kitchen for cooking and eating? Ain't I the one who hung those bars on chains in the bathroom so you could get in and out of the tub—take care of yourself?"

I couldn't help but mimic him. "Yeah, and ain't you the one that got careless setting off that dynamite charge in the quarry that put me in this chair for life?"

Sweets wriggled his button nose as if he smelled something bad. It twitched side to side, a pink crabapple adrift on a sea of bread dough.

"That was a accident. That was five years ago. You shouldn't oughta hold a grudge like that. Lord knows I wouldn't hurt a flea."

Wouldn't hurt a flea. When he was eleven, after having been punished by his father for beating his dog, Sweets had let a mean bull out of its stall into the barnyard. There it gored and killed the old man, who was patching a watering trough. Everybody thought the bull had broken the tie rope, but a few days later in school I heard him bragging how he had cut the rope and rubbed dirt on the frayed ends.

Wouldn't hurt a flea. I remembered how Sweets used to catch flies when we were kids in the one-room country school we both attended.

He'd pull off their wings, then tie a thin thread to one leg.

"See my pet," he'd say. He would draw a blob of ink from the inkwell with his pen and wet the fly with it. Then he'd walk the fly across the paper on his desk, or on the nice white collar on the dress of the girl in front of him.

"Chinese writing," he used to say, and his laugh shook fat even then.

Why the girls took to him so, I never understood. But if I did not understand then, his success with women when he grew older was even more of a mystery to me. He'd had three wives—my Norah among them. His first, Charlene, fell from a boat and drowned when the two of them were fishing in Heron River. Ellie hung herself from a rafter tie in the attic of their house. I stopped taking the *Heron Falls Gazette* when I read Norah's obituary six months after she left me for Sweets. The story said she fell down the cellar stairs with a load of laundry in her arms and hit her head on a protruding rock in the fieldstone foundation.

Sweets. What a name. Did I tell you how he got it? His last name is Sharger, but the kids in school found it hard to say and seeing it was so close to the kitchen staple and how the girls loved him, they hung Sweets on him.

My life has always been tied to his in some way. My dislike for him, begun in boyhood, hardened into something deeper long before he hit the switch that sent a piece of rock into my spine, long before he took away my Norah. I never held anything against her for leaving half a man. The bitter part was her going to Sweets.

"You still in the quarry?" I said, desperate for any topic to get my mind off Norah.

"Yep." Sweets brightened. "Been foreman ever since Jeff Bellins died."

"Jeff's dead? He was younger than either of us."

"One of those things. An accident. You know better than most that stone quarries is dangerous places." He stared at my wasted legs.

"How did it happen?"

Sweets' voice turned slick and oily. "He was careless. I seen it all happen. He was standing by the big flat belt that drives the crusher. He must of leaned over to look at something and the belt caught his clothes—pulled him kerspang right into the pulley. Tore him up fierce.

I was only a step away but I couldn't do anything for him. Poor guy. He yelled just once."

"How long ago was this? How did Debbie take it?" I remembered Jeff's slender little auburn haired wife. She was nearly as pretty as Norah and ten years younger.

"Yes, Debbie. I felt terrible sorry for Debbie. Guess I understood better than most how lonely she was. Let's see, that was a couple of months after Norah passed on, and we both—me and Debbie—took to leanin' on each other. We had happy times together so we up and got married."

"Is she out in the car? Is she with you? I'd love to see her."

The corners of Sweets' mouth turned down and for a moment I thought I detected a hint of moisture in his eyes.

"I wish I could. Sure wish I could. But she took sick less than a month back. Got off her feed and just kind of pined away." Sweets seemed genuinely moved. "I buried her two weeks ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Sweets."

"Well, we got to go on living." His mood changed. "I just came over to see how you're getting on. It don't pay to lose touch with old friends. That's the way I've always felt about your family. A day or two ago I got to thinking on it, the way I haven't seen you in years. Then I got to wondering about your brother, Harry. He moved to California, didn't he?"

I nodded.

"And Hester, your younger sister, where is she now? I suppose she's off and married with a slew of kids."

"No, Hester isn't married. She's up in Augusta. She has a job with the state." The moment the words were out I wished my tongue had been paralyzed too.

"Say! I bet she's on Debbie's Christmas-card address list I threw out when I was cleaning her dresser this morning." He brushed away an imaginary tear. "I haven't burned that trash yet. When I get home I'll dig that list out and sit right down and write Hester a letter. Maybe I'll phone her. That would be nice."

My insides felt knotted and cold. I hoped he hadn't noticed the way I'd gripped the arms of the wheelchair.

He rambled on. "I ought to drop in on her someday just for old times' sake. She was just a pretty little snippet when we was getting

out of school, but I bet she's a real lady now."

The fear in my belly was a coiled cold serpent. "Sweets, why don't you wait a day or two?" My mind raced in search for something to delay him. "I have some pictures of Hester taken when she and some of her girl friends were on a swimming party last summer." I struggled to keep my voice calm. "She's a real beauty."

Sweets heaved his bulk out of the chair. "Are they in your bedroom? I'll go and get them. What drawer are they in?"

I rolled my chair across his path.

"That's not necessary. I have them in a box somewhere in the closet. Tell you what. You come by tomorrow and I'll have them out to show you. We can call Sis on the phone from here. It will pave the way for your visit if I tell her you're coming to see her."

"Good!" Sweets rubbed his hands together. "I'll bet little Hester is a livin' doll." He gave me a good view of pink gums and a tip of tongue wetting his lips.

"And, Sweets, as long as you're coming over tomorrow, could you bring a load of wood in your pickup for my Franklin stove? Do you still have the old pickup? It's getting toward fall and I could use some firewood." I added, "I just got my disability check. I'd pay you well for some wood."

He stood by the door with his hand on the knob. "Well, I don't know. The brakes ain't so good on the pickup."

Sweets paused while the cold coil in my belly turned slowly.

"I guess if I'm your friend I can haul a load of wood for you. After all, we're almost family." The quality of reeking old motor oil was back in his voice.

"Good, then. I'll see you tomorrow," I said to his back as he walked out the door.

As soon as he was gone I rolled down the front ramp to the sidewalk and on out to the narrow blacktop road. I live around a bend on this dead-end highway, the last house on the road the town extended a quarter of a mile some years ago to a small picnic area. It's beside a scenic view that looks out over Heron Valley and the mountains beyond. I'm about the only person who goes there any more. Every day, weather permitting, I wheel down to the overlook, poking here and there among the grass and weeds with the stout walking stick I always carry across my lap. It's like an extension of my arms.

The seclusion and beauty of the place have been my joy, and the exercise has given me tremendous arm and shoulder development that makes getting around in the house easy. Even swinging on the bars in the bathroom seems like play to me.

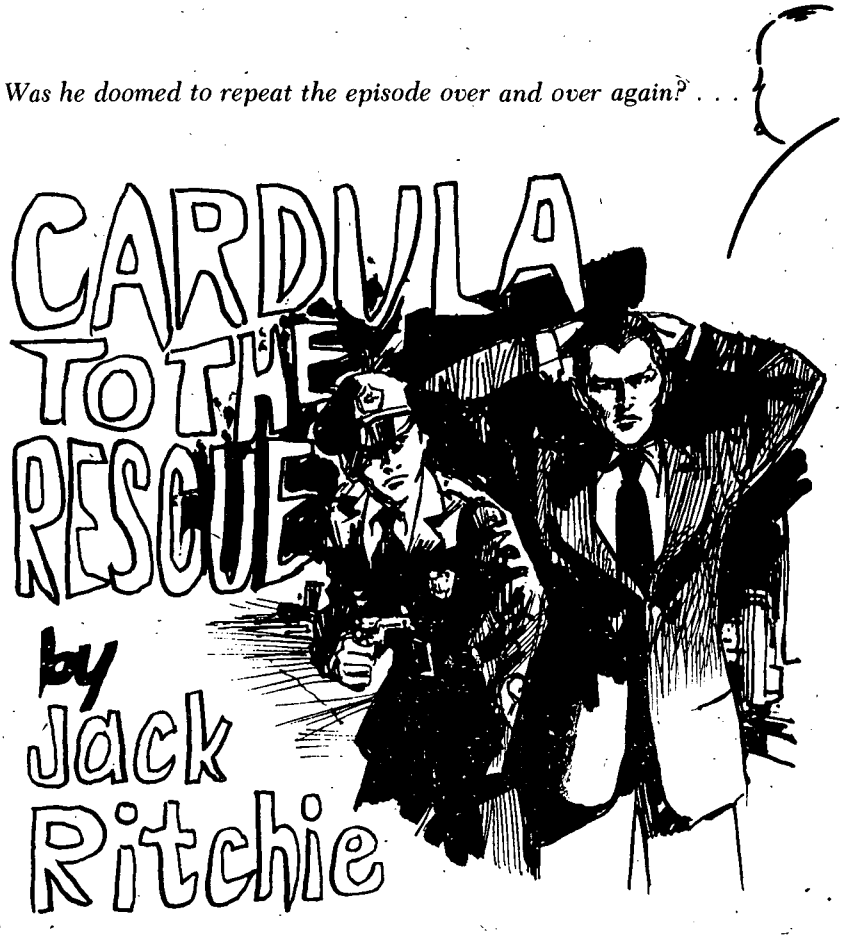
The town paved a turn-around area at the end of the road and erected posts and crossbars around it. The dropoff at the ledge is perhaps six hundred feet. It's so abrupt no trees grow on its face to obscure the view. Grass and weeds grow in the cracks in the amesite. The wood posts are rotten at the base. They cracked ominously when I set the brakes on my wheelchair and pushed against them.

When I got back to the house I had a sandwich. A little later I drank a glass of scotch over ice before I went to bed. I slept well.

This morning I brought the bottle and a couple of glasses into the living room. I think Sweets and I should have a few drinks to celebrate our renewed friendship. Today I feel calm and at peace with my narrow world as I wait for Sweets. Surely he'll be so happy at the prospect of seeing Hester that he won't mind giving me a ride in his truck down to the scenic overlook where we can admire the view across Heron Valley.

While I wait, I've been jamming my stick against the baseboard by the front door. I'm certain it's just the right length to reach a pickup gas pedal.

Was he doomed to repeat the episode over and over again? . . .



Half a block ahead of me, the masked man sprang from the shadow of a public telephone booth and pounced upon the woman's handbag.

She clung desperately to its straps, thereby initiating a grim tug-of-war.

Even at this late hour, there were perhaps a half a dozen pedestrians within aiding distance, but they quickly turned their faces and scuttled away.

I sighed. People simply do not want to become involved any more.

I dashed forward and grasped the hoodlum's right wrist with sufficient firmness to rearrange the bones of his carpus. He shrieked, of course, and released the handbag. I then lifted him high overhead and tossed him some thirty feet onto a metal trash container at the curb. It collapsed under his weight and he lay inert among the ruins of metal, paper napkins, and old newspapers.

I turned to the woman, who was approximately in her middle twenties and had dark hair and violet eyes.

"Madam," I said, "I trust that you are not injured?"

Her eyes were still wide. "I don't think so."

I indicated the phone booth. "I shall summon the police immediately."

Her eyes flickered. "I don't think that's really necessary. I mean, there was no harm done. After all, he didn't get the purse. Why bring the police into this?"

I noted the initials E.W. on the brooch she wore. "Madam, you are indeed generous-hearted. However, the odds are that this scoundrel has snatched dozens of purses and will continue to snatch more until some public-spirited citizen, such as yourself, sees that he is put behind bars by testifying against him."

I spied the lights of a police cruiser down the block and waved.

"What the hell are you doing?" she demanded.

"Flagging down a squad car."

She glared. "Why don't you mind your own damn business." Then she turned and disappeared into a dark alley between two buildings.

I blinked and then moved to the still-unconscious man amidst the debris. I pulled the nylon stocking from his head. He seemed to be in his middle thirties.

The squad car drew up to the curb and two officers got out. They surveyed the situation and one of them addressed me. "What happened?"

I explained.

He looked about. "I don't see no lady."

I cleared my throat. "She seems to have disappeared."

He studied the unconscious purse snatcher. "I don't see him wearing no stocking over his head."

"I took it off. It must be somewhere in that rubbish."

He sighed.

"Mister, you're in big trouble. That trash container is city property and they don't come cheap."

The second officer walked back to the car to call an ambulance.

The first officer continued to eye me suspiciously. "All I see here is one man standing and another on his back. I don't see no lady or no stocking mask. What's the real story? I think maybe we'd better take you down to headquarters until we get this straightened out."

"Officer," I said, "I am a licensed and bonded private detective. Cardula is my name." I reached for one of my cards and found myself staring into the barrel of his quickly drawn service revolver.

"Don't try nothing," he snapped. "Hands on the top of your head."

I did as directed and he proceeded to search me, but found no weapon. "Put your hands behind you."

I felt—and heard—handcuffs being snapped upon my wrists. "Now see here," I said, "this is absolutely ridiculous."

He shrugged. "So it's ridiculous. In which case your lawyer should be able to get you out in the morning."

Morning? That would never do.

I waited meekly until the arrival of the ambulance diverted his attention and then I broke away and dashed for the aperture into which the woman had disappeared.

In the darkness, I quickly shed the handcuffs and took refuge in a blind window high up on the building wall.

Below me the two officers dashed into the alleyway, their guns drawn and their flashlight beams playing about.

One of them picked up the handcuffs. "How the hell did he get out of these? They're still locked."

They continued down the passage to its other end and disappeared around the corner.

I quickly departed from the scene and went back to my office.

I found my man, Janos, waiting at the locked door, ready to drive me home.

"Janos," I said, "You have no idea what a jungle it is out there."

As we made our way back downstairs to the parking lot and our Volkswagen minibus, I related my experience.

Janos frowned thoughtfully. "That is strange indeed, sir."

"Of course it's strange, Janos. Here I try to do my citizenly duty and I'm seized by the police."

"I mean that it is most unusual for a purse snatcher to be masked."

We entered our vehicle and Janos began driving. "What would a young woman be doing wandering around downtown at nearly four in the morning?" he wondered. "You don't suppose that she was a . . ."

"No," I said. "She looked quite respectable. Though to tell you the truth, Janos, I don't suppose that these days that is a criterion at all." I watched cross traffic as we stopped at a corner. "Janos, did you know that I can now distinguish between blood types A and B simply by the way they walk? I am quite certain she was a B."

Janos made a turn towards the freeway. "And how did your investigation of Mr. Decker go?"

"Fine," I said. "Just as Mrs. Decker suspected, her husband did not leave town on a business trip. He simply took his suitcase to the apartment of a Miss Leslie Schwendtke and he was still there when I broke off my surveillance at 3:30 this morning."

I live in a quite large Victorian mansion situated some thirty miles from the city in a comfortably desolate countryside. When we arrived home, I went directly downstairs to my quarters. I read a bit—stopping at ten minutes before sunrise—and then went to bed.

The next evening, Janos drove me directly to Miss Schwendtke's apartment and I resumed my surveillance.

At eight-thirty, Decker and Miss Schwendtke left the apartment for a motion picture theatre. I followed, of course. After the movie, they had a late dinner and a few drinks and then returned to the apartment. The lights went out shortly thereafter, but I remained on duty until 3:30 A.M., when I called it quits for the night and began my return to the office.

As I walked the street I'd used the night before, I thought I saw a familiar figure approaching.

Yes, as she came closer I recognized the same woman who had almost had her handbag snatched the previous morning.

She had nearly reached the point where the incident had occurred when a masked man sprang from the cover of a public telephone booth and grabbed for her handbag.

Once again she clung to it stubbornly and again the nearby pedestrians hurriedly disappeared.

As before, I swept down on the hoodlum. I grasped his larcenous right wrist and flung him through the air.

Too late, I realized that he was going to descend squarely on another metal trash container. It collapsed under him and he lay there senseless.

I turned to the woman and found her glaring at me.

"Damn you!" she snapped. And once again she turned and disappeared down the narrow passageway she had used the night before.

I watched her departure, shrugged, went to the recumbent figure, and removed the stocking from his head.

I blinked. Really, this was too much! It was the same man who had attempted to snatch the woman's purse earlier. I put my hand to my forehead. Was I losing my mind? Had I somehow inadvertently passed through a time warp? Was I doomed to repeat this purse-snatching episode over and over again?

If I turned now, would I see a squad car approaching?

I turned. I saw lights on the roof of a car down the street. Was it a squad car? Or a taxi?

I didn't wait to find out. I rushed to the passageway just in time to see the young woman reach the opposite street and turn to the right.

I flew quickly after her, seeing her again when I reached the opposite street. I followed her, keeping half a block behind.

She walked two blocks and then entered a large apartment building. I watched her enter the elevator and the lights above the door indicated that she got off at the nineteenth floor.

I went to the bank of mail slots in the foyer and studied those in the 1900 series. One contained a last name beginning with the letter W, and that was a Richard Walker and Elizabeth Walker in 1903.

I took the elevator to the nineteenth floor and found door number 1903. I looked about for a suitable hiding place and discovered an unlocked utility closet. I returned to 1903, pressed the buzzer, and quickly retreated to the closet, leaving the door open a fraction of an inch.

Who would answer the door? Richard Walker? Or a servant, if he had one? No. I thought that at this hour of the morning—nearly four—the one who answered the door would most likely be the one who was still awake, and that should be the young woman I had been following.

I was correct.

She opened the door and peered up and down the hall. Frowning, she closed the door again. I heard the bolt being shot home.

At the office, Janos was waiting, and as we drove home I told him about the second purse-snatching incident.

He was thoughtful. "This assailant, he was masked again?"

I nodded.

Janos sighed. "We have here a number of coincidences. First, there is the coincidence of your being at the same point, at the same time, two nights in a row."

"That isn't a genuine coincidence, Janos. I was watching the Schwendtke apartment. I quit at my usual time in such a case, and took the shortest route back to the office."

Janos frowned. "But then we have the coincidence of your tossing that man upon a trash container two successive nights."

"That also isn't as much of a coincidence as it first appears, Janos. When one throws anything one instinctively or unconsciously aims at something—a tree, a rock, a tin can. The trash container was simply the nearest logical target."

Janos pursued the point. "This trash container, sir. Was it the *same* trash can as last night?"

I pondered. "No, Janos, now that I remember it, there were two trash containers at the curb some fifty feet apart. Last night I destroyed one and tonight the other."

Janos was greatly relieved. "For a moment I had fears that you might have broken through a time warp and were doomed to repeat this episode over and over again. However—if I remember the rules for such situations correctly—it would have had to be the same trash can both nights."

Janos increased his speed on the freeway. "But we are still faced with the coincidence of this woman being on the street at the same early hour twice in succession and twice having someone trying to steal her handbag. And both attempts, apparently, by the same man."

"Janos," I said, "I could have sworn that he was a hospital case the first time I threw him through the air. I was at least positive that his right wrist would have to be put into a cast. Yet the very next night he reappears, hale and hearty."

Janos brightened. "I believe I have the answer to that conundrum, sir. This was not one and the same person twice, but two different people who happened to be twins. Or possibly two of triplets, or quadruplets or quintuplets."

I agreed.

"You're right, Janos. Tomorrow I'll be at the same place at the same time to see if we are dealing with twins, triplets, or whatever."

I began the next evening, however, by resuming my surveillance of Miss Schwendtke's apartment. At ten, Decker left alone, carrying his suitcase.

He found a taxi downstairs and I followed as it drove him back to his own residence and, possibly, the arms of his wife.

I returned to my office, typed a report to Mrs. Decker, and, along with my bill, mailed it to her.

I spent the next few hours waiting for new clients—of which there were none. Finally at three A.M., I decided that instead of waiting for the Walker woman at her usual place, I might just as well begin the episode by following her from her apartment.

It was fortunate that I did, because when she came out of the building at three-thirty, she turned instead in a new direction.

She again carried the large handbag, however, and this time she stopped at the lighted display window of a book store. She appeared to be studying the book jackets, but now and then she glanced covertly up and down the almost deserted street.

Finally, she turned and went quickly to the metal trash container at the curb. Opening her handbag, she pulled out a large brown package and pushed it through the swinging top. Then she walked briskly away, without looking back.

I frowned. Trash containers seemed to play an inordinately large part in this case.

My eye caught a movement down the block. A tall man carrying a briefcase stepped onto the sidewalk from the darkness of a doorway where he had evidently been lurking.

He approached the trash container, reached inside, and groped about until he pulled out the brown package. He quickly slipped it into his briefcase and departed.

I followed as he turned down a side street and slipped into an auto-

mobile parked at the curb.

He drove for some twenty minutes, turning constantly and doubling back in an obvious effort to throw off anyone who might be following him. Finally, he headed for the industrial valley of the city and stopped in front of a large grimy warehouse.

After he entered the building, I myself found an opening through which I could slip.

The warehouse appeared to be filled to the rafters with bales of paper pulp.

From the advantage of height, I watched the tall man move down an aisle toward a corner which was separated from the rest of the building by eight-foot partitions.

I looked down into the enclosed space and saw two battered desks, some filing cabinets, and several chairs.

And tied securely to one of the latter was a man of about fifty, greying at the temples.

A heavy man wearing a gun in a shoulder holster greeted the tall man. "Well, Maxie, how did it go *this* time?"

Maxie patted the briefcase. "Like clockwork, Pete." He removed the package, tore off the paper cover, and poured bundles of currency onto one of the desks.

While they counted the packs of bills, I put two and two together. Obviously this was a kidnapping. The man tied to the chair bore a certain resemblance to the woman in apartment 1903, and I deduced that he was probably her father.

He had been kidnapped and a ransom had been demanded.

Elizabeth Walker had left her apartment with instructions to deposit the money in a certain trash container on a downtown street.

But two unexpected things had happened. One, the purse snatcher had made an appearance, and, two, so had I. And in the ensuing action I had destroyed the very trash container into which she was to deposit the ransom money.

She had had no recourse but to return to her apartment and await further instructions from the kidnappers.

The tall kidnapper, Maxie, had probably been watching from a doorway and seen the incident. And acting on the wholly logical assumption that the purse-snatching could not reoccur in a hundred years, he had phoned her again and instructed her to repeat the errand

the next morning, this time dropping the package into a trash container further down the street.

But once again history had repeated itself and another trash container had been obliterated.

Maxie, however, was not one to give up on trash containers, and a third time he directed her to another location. This time the transaction had gone off without a hitch.

Below me, they finished counting the money.

"Well, Pete," Maxie said, "it's all there. We had the damndest time, but it worked."

Pete seemed to study him. "I been thinking things over, Maxie, and I just don't believe it."

"Don't believe what?"

"This story you brung me twice about the purse-snatcher and the gent in black clothes who tosses him like a rag doll thirty feet or more onto trash cans."

"I know it's crazy, Pete, but it happened."

Pete eased his gun from the holster. "No, Maxie. I'll tell you what really happened. The first time you picked up the money all right, but you hid it somewhere and come to me with the story about the purse-snatching. And then when you phoned the Walker dame again, you told her that the fifty grand was nice but that we wanted another fifty before we'd let her old man go."

"You got it all wrong, Pete."

Pete shook his head. "And the first time went so good, that you figured why not try it just once more. So you hid the second fifty grand too and came back to me with the same story you used the first time."

"Pete, I swear . . ."

"So you call the dame a third time, and once again she comes up with another fifty grand. But now you figure you can't pull the same deal any more, so you finally bring the money here." Pete glowered. "I say that you got a hundred grand packed away somewhere and now you even got the nerve to expect to get half of this last fifty thousand. In short, Maxie, you wind up with a hundred and twenty-five thousand, and I get a lousy twenty-five. Now somehow that don't seem to me to be fair." The automatic moved ominously.

Maxie paled and quickly held up a hand.

"All right, Pete, all right. So that's the way it went. But if you kill

me, the money's lost." He licked his lips. "I'll show you where all of it is, just don't, don't . . ."

I nodded admiringly. Fast thinking on the part of Maxie. To continue claiming innocence would simply have led to his immediate death. But by confessing to a double-cross of which he was not guilty, he not only spared his life for the precious moment, but also gained time and the possibility of turning the tables later.

However, I thought that it was about time for action on my part. I left my rafter and dropped down to the cement floor directly in front of Pete.

He swore with surprise at the suddenness of my appearance and pulled the trigger of the automatic, the bullet ricocheting off my mesosternum.

I flicked the weapon from his hand and then dealt him a side-handed blow which rendered him distinterested and oblivious to all further proceedings.

In the meantime, Maxie had broken a chair over my head. I turned on him and heaved him high over the partition walls. He disappeared from my sight and landed somewhere in the warehouse proper with a satisfactory crunch.

I untied Walker and used the desk phone to call the police.

Walker was still wide-eyed. "You must be wearing a bulletproof vest."

I glanced at my watch. I could not wait for the police to arrive. They would insist on detaining me for questioning and that wouldn't do this close to daylight.

"Who are you?" Walker asked.

I smiled sparingly. "At the moment I prefer to work with a certain degree of anonymity."

"But you deserve a reward."

Reward? Well, perhaps something, I thought. After all, I had put in some time on this job, authorized or not. And my suit and shirt had been ruined by that bullet.

Perhaps he could slip me a few hundred from the ransom money? But no. He would need all of it for evidence when the police arrived.

I consulted my watch again. "I'm sorry, but I cannot remain a moment longer. However, I shall get in touch with you again. Perhaps tomorrow evening."

When I left, I passed Maxie senseless upon the remains of a metal trash container.

I frowned. Now *that* was a coincidence.

I arrived at my office to find a worried Janos. We wasted no time reaching the minibus and arrived home three minutes before sunrise.

At sunset later in the day, Janos drove me to the Walkers' apartment building.

On the nineteenth floor, I pressed the buzzer at door 1903.

Elizabeth Walker answered the door. Her eyes widened. "Good heavens, it's *you* again!"

Walker came to my rescue. "Elizabeth, this is the man I was telling you about."

She allowed me to enter, but with some reluctance.

The Walker quarters were large and it was obvious from their furnishings that they had enough money to be worth kidnapping.

A middle-aged, sullen-faced woman in a cloth coat appeared from one of the side doorways. "I'm going now," she announced curtly. "I'll be back about nine."

When she was gone, Walker said, "That was Maggie. She's a bit surly, but live-in servants are hard to find these days." He turned to his daughter. "Where is she going?"

"To the hospital to see her brothers. You remember them, don't you? They pick up Maggie every once in a while to take her to a movie or something."

Walker nodded. "Oh, yes. The twins."

"It's the strangest coincidence," Elizabeth said. "First one of them had some kind of an accident and broke his right wrist and some ribs. And the very next day exactly the same thing happened to the other twin. Maggie's tight-lipped about the whole thing and I probably wouldn't know about the accidents at all except that she was out both times when the hospital called."

I had, of course, been listening with a great deal of attention. "When you went out to deliver the ransom money, did Maggie know why you were going out and where?"

Elizabeth nodded. "After all, she was in on the ground floor as far as the kidnapping was concerned. When she went to answer the door, those two kidnappers forced their way into the apartment."

In on the ground floor? Was she a part of the kidnapping conspiracy? No, I didn't think so. Pete had spoken of a fifty-fifty split. There had been no mention of Maggie or her brothers.

Nevertheless, Maggie must have seen the opportunity to profit from the kidnapping herself. She had dispatched one of her brothers to the point where the kidnap money was to be delivered. He was to snatch Elizabeth's handbag and Maggie and her brothers would be fifty thousand dollars happier.

But that attempt had failed and so had the second. I wondered if there would have been a third try if Maggie's brothers had been triplets.

I sat down and proceeded to tell the Walkers why they should begin looking for a replacement for Maggie.

Like the man said, "Don't confound the language . . ."

A MATTER OF LANGUAGE

by LAWRENCE TREAT

Chief Calvin Spurgeon, huge, bumbling, and as old-fashioned as the night stick and police whistle he'd been brought up on, sat in his office and wondered whether they'd kick him out and put a younger man in charge if he muffed this one.

Chances were he would, and they would, and then the state police would take over and their modern computerized staff with all its scientific gadgets would go to work. They might succeed and they might

not, but they were a lot better equipped than his small town force of a dozen men, most of them just traffic trained.

Still, Spurgeon wasn't giving up. Police work was an art and a profession, and after you'd devoted a lifetime to it, you knew a couple of things that no electronic equipment could duplicate. So, waiting in his office and reviewing the meager evidence that he had, Spurgeon was neither confident nor despairing. All he knew was that he'd do the best he could, and that his best was usually pretty good.

Officer Baker brought the dapper Frenchman to the door, and the Frenchman nodded and dismissed him as if Baker was a butler who'd ushered him in—and, still playing his role, came forward and smiled a kind of condescending apology for being a trifle late.

"Monsieur," he said, in stilted but reasonably adequate English, "I am so happy to oblige, to help you. Your task, it is difficult, but you must pursue it, you must illuminate this little mistake."

"You call murder a little mistake?"

"Ah, but who says it is murder? My good friend Monsieur Norton has disappeared and I am desolate, but I do not give up the hope. Perhaps he returns."

"And perhaps he never existed."

"You joke," the Frenchman said. "You Americans—always the joke."

Spurgeon had the theme then, had his fight plan. The Frenchman was suave, urbane, supremely sure of himself, and he wanted to provoke a battle of wits. Well, let him. The more he talked, the more likely he was to give himself away, for a man who loves words will sacrifice almost anything for the sake of a pun or an epigram.

It would be no easy job, however, to break the Frenchman down. From all accounts, he was a brilliant scientist and a consummate corporate politician. He had been living in town for the last month while working as a consultant to the big chemical company. And if he seemed a little sorry for Spurgeon, all the better. Help him along. Give him a taste of Spurgeon's high school French. Spurgeon had brushed up on it the year before when he'd been in France, and he knew how to say *oui* and *non* and *merci bien*, plus a few basic phrases. So he would spout them in a flat American accent and let the Frenchman laugh and give full play to his Gallic wit.

"Tell me," Spurgeon said, "exactly what happened."

The Frenchman shrugged. "If I but knew! Monsieur, to be there and

not know what happened is a stupidity for which I am deeply ashamed. And for which I apologize."

So that was his defense. It was a familiar one. *I don't know. I don't remember.* And the only way to break it was to pick at it piece by piece, until the lies showed through.

"How well did you know Norton?" Spurgeon asked. "He came here to see you, didn't he?"

"I knew him and did not know him all together and at the same time. I knew him through his son and through mine, and I ask you—is that knowing a man?"

"Tell me."

"I saw him for the first time on the day he disappeared, but I knew his age, where he worked, what kind of cigars he smoked, what he did on weekends, and what time he went to bed. He played golf bad, he liked gardening, and he was a cinema addict. He was generous to his wife and family, he went skiing once in his life and broke his ankle. He drank scotch how-you-say? Neat. And he gave moneys too big to waiters and doormen. In my mind I have a dossier. But do I know him?"

"How did you get all that information?"

"Through his son, and through mine. Monsieur, for one year we exchanged sons. His for mine. Through the international what do you call it? Student exchange. The international good will."

"And Norton's son told you all about his father?"

"But yes—his son, Mark, told me much. And my son, André, when he returned from America, sang the praises of Monsieur Norton. Sometimes I think he like Monsieur Norton more than me, his own father."

"What makes you think that?"

"André," the Frenchman said, "had the talent. Mark is a nice garçon, a nice boy, but distinction? No. He is like his father. He will be a man of affairs, he will enter the bank like his father and think money and give and refuse loans, and that will be all. But André—" The Frenchman half-closed his eyes, and dreamed some dream that was too personal to voice. "André," he said, "had the talent even greater than mine, and mine is great."

"So Norton came to see you?"

"Of a verity. I am too occupied to go visit him, so I write the letter and ask him to come here. I love him, Monsieur. We are sympathetic,

he and I, because of our sons."

"Didn't you ask him to bring his wife?"

"She live in a wheelchair. Very sad, Monsieur. She have an accident and spent the rest of her life sitting. What kind of wife is that?"

"So Norton came alone. Where did you meet him?"

"At the airport. We know each other immediately. I smile and say, 'My friend,' and he smile and say the same thing, and we embrace. Which is much embarrassment for him. You Americans do not embrace, you think it funny."

"Did you take your car to the airport?"

"But of a certainty. He is my guest. We embrace and I bring him to the car and we sit next to each other while I drive to my apartment. It is not a grand apartment, but it has a kitchen where I cook. I am a very good cook. I am a very good scientist and a very good driver and a very good cook, and I make first a Quiche Lorraine and then a Boeuf Bourguignon, and I give my friend the scotch. Just the scotch."

"No wine?"

"The wine later. But because he is a friend and he likes scotch, I take the scotch also, and my mind turns. It whirls. And my English escapes me, so now and then I speak French."

"Norton understood French?"

"He speaks the words. He is pleasant, he is most amiable, and we talk of international amity. And then we have another scotch. But I do not tell him yet."

"Tell him what?"

"I permit him to talk first. I am the host, he is the invited, so I ask him about Mark. Mark is in college now. He is on the tennis team and he has a girl and he is on the list that you brag about."

"The dean's list?"

"But of course. He is, according to his father, a boy with a gift. A paragon. To me, Mark is a good enough boy, with a future in the bank. But to Monsieur Norton, his future is in the sky. He will be president of the bank and then a minister of finance, and his career is certain. Over the scotch, you understand."

"How about the dinner?"

"Yes, the dinner." The Frenchman smiled. "An excellent dinner."

"Norton enjoyed it?"

"Who knows? Monsieur, over the quiche he asked me about André,

and I tell him." The Frenchman sighed. "America, it is not good for a boy who is merely in the *lycée*."

"That's high school?"

"Yes. And at eighteen, what would you? When his friends take the drug, he take the drug. First a little of this and then a little of that, and after a while the drug hard. So when he comes back he has the habit, and it is the fault of Monsieur Norton, is it not?"

"You accused him of not supervising your son properly?"

"I accuse him of nothing. All I do is confide my anguish to Monsieur Norton—and he keep saying yes, how good, how glad he is!"

Spurgeon said, "You're leaving something out. What?"

"With the scotch, how can I know?"

"You know damn well Norton didn't say he was glad your boy had the drug habit."

"But he kept saying it. *'Ca, c'est bon. Tres bon. Je suis content, je suis heureux.'* And what would you?"

"You spoke in French?" Spurgeon said.

"When I am excited, when it concerns me deeply, I lose the English. I speak French because it is my language and because it is the best and most beautiful language."

"So you told him about your boy, André, and Norton kept saying he was glad. Is that it?"

"As I have told you."

"And because he insulted you, because you thought he had no feeling, no civility, you killed him and then disposed of the body."

"But he said—" The Frenchman broke off, and tears came to his eyes. "André was a fine boy. Who dared teach him the drug? I find him with it one evening and I tell him it is bad and he is bad, he is stupid and sick and worthless. I confess this my tragedy to Monsieur Norton, and he smile and say how good it is, and then I tell him how André make the suicide, and Monsieur Norton smile as if this show how superior Mark is. It is the insult which I cannot forgive."

"Tell me more about André."

"He suspended himself, and with what? With my best cravat. My cravat kills him, and thus he accuses me with his last breath. Monsieur, that is my failure and my tragedy. But when I tell it to my friend, when I confess what is deep in my soul, he says he is glad. So I lose my head, I go out of my mind."

"And killed him."

"Monsieur the Commissioner, I am innocent until proved guilty. So you prove I have the guilt, but I think you cannot. I know your American law, I have studied it, and it says I am innocent."

"Do you think so? You just told me your motive, and that's what I was after. All I had was one of Norton's buttons and some hairs of his that were found in your car, plus the fact that you left your house around midnight and drove out to the country somewhere. I guessed that you took the body and disposed of it, but I didn't know why until just now."

"So Monsieur Norton lose a button on the way from the airport," the Frenchman said imperturbably. "And of course his hairs are in my car. Every hour we lose a hair. It is the fate of all men."

"Most of his hairs were on the back seat, not merely next to you in front. What did you do? Strangle him?"

The Frenchman bounced to his feet and paced the room. When he returned to his chair, he was again in command of himself, affable, suave, condescending.

"Monsieur," he said, "you have such good laws in America. It is not like in France where they accuse and give no rights. Here the law protects. I am not only innocent until proved guilty, but there must be a body also. There can be no murder without a *corpus delicti,* and you have nothing but a button and a few hairs and some hopes. But the corpse? No."

"But you made a little mistake," Spurgeon said. "The *corpus delicti* means the body of the crime, the essential evidence that a crime was committed. And your statement of the circumstances, plus those hairs and the button, are all I need. They constitute the *corpus.*"

With an effort of will, the Frenchman maintained his composure. "I do not regret," he said. "For his impoliteness he deserved to die."

"Wrong again," Spurgeon said. "Your friend was being the height of politeness and was trying to say things that would please you. But he had no idea what you were saying. He'd memorized a few phrases, but he didn't understand a word of French."

The Frenchman drew in his breath and clamped his lips tight. Then, with a supreme effort he said, "But I should have guessed. Because that accent of his, it was abominable. And if he murder the language, then I murder him. Why not?" And the Frenchman managed a smile.

There was evil in those Reedsville woods, and extraordinary beauty . . .

THE SWEETEST VOICE IN THE WORLD

by Janet Green

It began with a telephone call.

I employ talent scouts all over the Western Hemisphere and they rarely let me down. Chuck Cochrane, never. If the child really was as good as he had told me, I ought to go and see for myself.

"Another Nazavari—"

The words were sweet. Sign up a child with that talent and who knows what you've got in five years' time? Of course sometimes the

talent disappears with the first wisdom tooth, but in my business risks go with the assets.

Slowly I cradled the receiver and sat swinging in the chair behind my father's desk. Mine now. Had been for some time.

"Another Nazavari—"

I studied the notes scrawled on the blotter. It would mean a domestic flight and then a drive in a rented car. It could have been Paris, London, Rome, Madrid—endless cities around the world. The tip off, the call, the hunch carries me to them all. Why hesitate now?

I decided to go as quickly as possible. I might even bring the child back with me. Turn her over to Ida Forster, the best children's coach in the business.

I smiled, remembering.

"*Auntie* Ida."

I had known many "aunties" before, standing straight, the top of my head touching my father's elbow. But out of the whole bunch, Ida topped the list with me.

The place was called Reedsville. It matched Chuck's description. I hoped the child would do the same, as I crossed a dusty porch and went into a hallway that made me want to finish before I'd even started.

The hotel clerk—I have to call him that, because he was all there was—took me up to a room against which I closed my eyes. When I opened them, he was waiting, my bag hanging from his tired hand.

I gave him five bucks and said I wanted some information. He set down the bag and when I put the question, he brightened. In fact, he came to life.

The family Cole lived way up in the woods, he said. They'd moved there recently. Moved overnight. Before that, they'd been around Reedsville, or more on its edge like, a year come Labor Day. Strange folk. Just the two of them and their little girl.

At the mention of the child, a slight flush mounted his cheeks, and I sensed a kind of anger in him, an urge to talk that needed no encouragement from me.

It wasn't as if she went to school, he said. There'd be companionship there. But the mother was what you call *educated* and put the kid to books herself. The child was bright and pretty as a picture. But she

never went nowhere, except walking between them, like a little dog on a rope.

Again the flush mounted to his cheeks, but it was deeper now.

"An only child with overprotective parents," I ventured.

"*No*, they was hidin' somethin'. The whole town knew it."

"Now come on—"

"It came out! What they was hidin' came out at the county fair!"

Well, I knew about the county fair. Chuck had told me. But not all. Now the clerk gave me the whole picture.

He was full of talk about what happened there. He couldn't believe his eyes, he said, when he saw that kid run alone, breathless and excited, onto the fairground. Lord only knows how she'd shed her folks. That was his first thought. But to see her fairly burstin' with joy, eatin' it up, made his own heart beat faster. She'd never seen such a sight, you could tell. It was packed, mind—folks came from all over to the county fair. City folks, even.

"They put on an amateur contest," he said. "Do it every year."

But that time, he added with a rush of words, the crowd was in for a big surprise. Biggest one they'd had in years. During a break, the child had stepped suddenly and with no introduction onto the platform and sung. She had sung like nobody's business. She had the sweetest voice you ever heard—better than the kid that sang on TV back in the fifties. The big discovery. . . He frowned, trying to remember.

"Nazavari—" I prompted softly.

"That's it. You never hear of her now."

"She's singing in London this season—Covent Garden Opera House. Then Milan—Italy. Next season she'll be at the Metropolitan in New York."

"She sure growed."

"She did."

The clerk stood a full moment. Then he was off again on the kid's voice. That's what her folks had been hidin'. That's why they'd moved overnight to the cabin in the woods. They buried her, in his view. Well, she'd be competition for the birds there, he'd lay odds on that. And nobody but the birds to hear her. It was a criminal shame. Anyone with half an eye could see how that kid loved to sing.

He paused again. "But she needs—she needs—"

He looked at me. He didn't know how to put it. But I did.

"An audience."

"That's it, someone to sing to. Fat chance. If they could, they'd throttle that voice."

"But why?"

"They're afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Afraid of losin' her, I mean. What you just told me about—"

"Nazavari," I prompted again.

"That could happen to her. She wouldn't be like no little dog on a rope then. She'd be free."

"There are some people who don't want to be free. But we should all have the right to choose."

I was leading him but I didn't expect the reaction I got.

"You're dead right!" he said with passion. "She's a hand short. A helping hand. There was a guy in a check suit and elevator shoes tried to get to her, But they got the rope back on her and by mornin' she was gone."

"You keep saying that."

"I keep thinkin' it." He looked at me. "A check suit and elevator shoes—"

His voice held a direct question. I felt he deserved an answer and gave it.

"Cochrane's the name. Chuck Cochrane. He likes to stand higher than his boots. He's what we call a talent scout."

"That's what I figured." He shook his head and sighed. When he spoke again, there was genuine compassion in his voice and the same expression reflected in his red-rimmed eyes.

"She sits by the lake most afternoons, singin' into the water. Quiet like, mind—they don't want no one to hear."

"Loud enough for you to hear—"

"I've got sharp ears. Ain't many can hear from the roadway."

"How do they live?"

"He's some kind of an electrician. Does odd jobs." He glanced at me, and then added grudgingly: "Folks are always satisfied."

We looked at each other. He broke the silence.

"Take the long track. You'll avoid the cabin then."

"I don't want to avoid the cabin."

"Mister, if he sees you he won't let you near her."

"Maybe I shouldn't waste my time—"

"Don't you want to hear the sweetest voice in the world?"

He was shrewd, that clerk. He knew I wanted like hell to hear.

Before I could answer, he pressed his advantage.

"She's a prisoner. Like in the fairy tales. A princess in an ivory tower—only it's a cabin near a lake with only the birds to sing to."

"That's not a fairy tale, it's a horror story."

"You said it, Mister. It ain't healthy. It smells."

"Has anyone complained to the cops?"

"No need. They been up there more'n once."

"Then they don't like it,"

The clerk frowned and for the first time his eyes slid from mine.

"No law against keepin' your child to yourself," he muttered. "I reckon they went there for somethin' else."

"What?"

"Searchin', maybe. Pickin' up. They was doin' it all over. We had a little trouble here. Finished now, far as we're concerned."

"What trouble?"

"Well—" He sighed. "Let me put it this way—that track ain't no Lovers' Lane these days."

I couldn't get any more from him but it didn't seem all that important. My job was to find the child, so I said: "All right. Will you show me where I turn off?"

"Will do. But mind." He pointed a finger. "Don't leave the long track. He's got a gun. He took out a license a month ago."

"For God's sake, he can't use a gun on me. What am I doing? Taking a stroll through the woods—"

"Plain mean he is, Mister. And don't you forget it."

The clerk put me on the long track, repeated his warning not to leave it, and I went on alone.

I hadn't gone far when I saw a shadow between the trees. I stopped and stared. The shadow was that of a man. He was very still, but alert, watching me. He wore some kind of a hat.

I shook my head clear, and when I looked again the shadow had gone. I walked on.

The track narrowed and then I reached a place where the trees massed and deepened.

I stopped again and looked all around. I saw the shadow, the man—there—there . . . and there. He seemed to be in ten places at once. The woods were getting to me. I was seeing things. But no—he was here now—nearer—much nearer—then over there—now here again—there.

It wasn't an illusion. He *was* in ten places at once. And always wearing a hat.

Fear runs through the blood many times before the mind becomes aware. So I don't know how long I stood, learning the taint of—what? I couldn't find the word. Till finally it came to me. Evil. This wood was an evil place and that man was expecting me to turn and run.

I almost did turn and run. I only hoped I could find the way. The trees were so dense where I was standing, they seemed to be pressing in on me. And my knees were weak. But I wanted to get out.

And then the sound reached my ears and I forgot everything. I just stood and listened.

It was like all the sweet singing birds in the world put together. Lovely. Wonderful.

There was nothing I would have turned back for now. I walked as quickly as I could toward the sound.

Soon I glimpsed water between the trees. The sound was clearer. And strangely mature. I couldn't believe I would come upon a child. But there she was—a small girl, sitting on the bank, singing into the water.

I broke softly from out of the trees and came slowly up behind her. I halted a little distance away, sensing that if I went further I would be stopped. Then I put the question gently, but as loudly as I dared.

"Do you enjoy singing to yourself?"

The voice ceased and the child turned and looked at me. Her eyes were big and blue and filled with calmness.

"I'm singing to the frog."

"Does he understand?"

"Of course. He's really a prince. If I sing into the lake every day, soon he'll come up beside me. Then when he turns into a frog again I'll go back into the lake with him. Forever."

How easily children say "forever," I thought.

And then I was suddenly afraid again, but for the child this time—the voice. If she went in the water, it *might* be forever.

"No, you mustn't do that!" I almost went nearer, but instead, I retreated a pace or two. "How old are you?"

"Fourteen years, two months, and four days."

She stood up then, and she was as graceful as she was beautiful. I wished that I could pull her away from that lake, right away, forever.

But I didn't go closer. I knew that evil wood was listening. Watching.

"You've got your wisdom teeth then," I said lamely.

"Of course."

She smiled, an odd conspiratorial smile coming from a child.

"I know I look younger than fourteen."

Well, I couldn't argue with that. She did. Nazavari was the same. She didn't look her years until she was seventeen. And by then she was ready. Trained.

"That's why the prince won't take me with him," she sighed.

"I thought you said he was a frog."

"Not when he comes on the bank. He's a prince then."

"Listen," I said harshly, "prince or frog, you must never go into the lake with him. Do you hear me? Never!"

"I must!" She stamped her foot.

I was glad to see that. Charm and youth are fine, but strength is all important when there's work to be done. And talent is nothing without work.

"He belongs there," she added with the same strength. "And I belong with him!"

"You don't!"

I put out my hand and took a step toward her. It was a stupid thing to do, but I did it and there was no going back.

"Turn around, Mister! Sharp!"

The voice was high and shrill—with hysteria, I thought vaguely—but I didn't turn all that sharply. I was looking at the child and she was looking back at me. There was something behind the calmness in those eyes. Something intent. Like a message—

I saw it spark and then there was only the calmness.

She's intelligent, I thought. She'd understand what I had to offer if I could get her to myself. Clever little girls soon understand. "Let's pretend doesn't last forever," I said, to start the ball rolling. And then I turned.

Tall and gaunt, the man was holding a shotgun. It was pointed straight at me. And he was standing at just the right distance.

"He'll shoot if you move," the child said. "You were lucky to get so close. It isn't as if *you* can turn into a frog and jump in the lake." I heard the sulky note in her voice and knew she didn't like what I'd said to start the ball rolling.

"You—you're not wearing a hat," I said to the man.

"The hats are here."

I turned my head and saw two men. They were both wearing hats and both had a hand on their holsters.

The realization hit me like a rocket. Cops! The woods were lousy with deputies.

"Go away," the child said behind me. "I want to sing to the frog again. I have to concentrate. It's hard to sing quietly. But Ma doesn't like me to sing too loud."

Now why did she say "Ma?" I didn't pay much heed, because I wanted to have the last word, so I said quickly and without looking at her, because I was damned scared: "Life isn't all fairy tales, honey."

And then when the deputy who'd spoken jerked his head toward the track I'd come from, I went like a lamb.

As we passed the tall gaunt man, I saw that he hadn't moved a muscle, but was standing rigid. Motionless.

There was no expression in his face and I wondered if he had ever smiled in the whole of his wretched life.

Between the trees one of the deputies frisked me, Then said I could lower my hands. I supposed I was what they call "clean," so when I heard the child singing again, I said: "You can't let that voice end up in the lake."

"Or the child."

The words were so laconic, I glanced at the deputy.

"Keep moving," he said. "Just keep moving—"

I went with the two of them and didn't speak again until I could no longer hear the child's voice. Then I glanced around.

"I thought there were ten of you."

"Fair guess."

"But why?"

"Ask the sheriff."

"Where the hell does the sheriff come into it?"

A stupid question, with the sheriff's deputies all over the wood. I wasn't surprised when this one didn't answer.

There was a sheriff's car waiting at the end of the track and I got in the back without being told and settled down between two more deputies already there. As the car moved off, I stared through the rear window.

The thought of the lake, the woods, and all those deputies surrounding that one child was chilling. She wasn't an heiress or anything like that—except to me, of course. Why was the gaunt man allowed to keep a child like that hidden? Phantasizing, dreaming her life away? It only needed one deputy to take away his gun, the sheriff to tear up the license, and someone—me, for instance—to let air into the girl's life.

I looked through the window again.

"Bad enough in daylight," I said. "God knows what it's like at night."

No one answered.

I was glad to reach the sheriff's office. I wanted to establish my identity—make clear the fact that I'd come to help the child, not harm her—and I wanted to ask questions.

"There we are," I said and laid my wallet on the sheriff's desk.

He emptied it out, and transferred his gaze to me.

"Joe Hogan—"

"That's right."

"What were you after?"

"Ten percent. That girl's another Nazavari."

"That girl's dead, if we don't take care."

He flipped my identification papers across the desk and the young deputy standing at his elbow picked them up and crossed to the door.

"Ask for Chief Peterson," I said before he left the room. And then, more urgently, to the sheriff: "What do you mean she's dead if you don't take care? Get her out! Get her away! If she stays there, she'll end up in the lake, looking for the frog. She'll never be deader than that."

The sheriff didn't answer.

"She's as good as a prisoner there!" I shouted.

"She *is* a prisoner."

"But why? For God's sake, why?"

"Mr. Hogan, if I get the right answer from New York, you'll get the right answer from me."

Uneasy, helpless for the time being, I sat, looking at the big bland man in front of me. A strong, red-blooded American. The kind that goes with good bourbon.

"Can I have a drink of bourbon?" I asked. "Straight?"

The sheriff laughed. "You know better than that."

"I need a drink. That wood made me feel as if I believed in werewolves. I smelt evil there."

The sheriff's smile faded abruptly.

"Evil was done there."

His face reflected genuine disgust now. I wished I knew why. I wished the young deputy would hurry back.

"I did say Chief Peterson," I said and shifted in my chair.

"You did."

"We shoot pool," I added lamely.

The sheriff stared silently past my shoulder.

The door opened and the young deputy came in and setting my identification papers beside my wallet, he nodded to the sheriff. The sheriff nodded back and the deputy went out of the room.

"Give Mr. Hogan some bourbon," the sheriff said. "Straight."

Another deputy who had been there all the time—I'd accepted him as part of the furniture—moved to a cabinet and did as he was told.

I swallowed the golden brown stuff thankfully.

"Now please," I said. "Explain that evil to me."

"Do you care about the child herself or just the voice?"

"They're one and the same," I told him. "You can't separate them."

"Mr. Hogan, I must have your word that what I'm going to tell you will go no further. The girl's life may depend upon it."

"The girl's life depends on that damned lake."

"You don't understand."

"I understand the creative soul." No use picking and choosing words. I had to get through to the sheriff somehow. "I understand the imagination that lives in the heart of a born artist. That child believes there's something in the lake she belongs with."

The sheriff sighed. "It's better to let her mind dwell on what she imagines," he said, "than on what she actually saw. I've got men all around her. I had to bring in extra help. They're not going to let that

child go into the lake. I'd prefer her in custody, under armed guard. But her folks won't allow that so I'm doing the best I can."

"Custody! Armed guard! She's a little girl!"

"A little girl that saw a murder," he said levelly. "Your word, please, Mr. Hogan?"

I couldn't speak for a moment and then I said with a long gasp: "O.K."

"There was an old woman, a harmless old body, who used to gather wood, take it home to burn, keep herself warm. She was found with a wire twisted around her neck and tied tight in front. Not a pretty death, Mr. Hogan. And slow. She put up a fight."

I thought of the hotel clerk's words—"We had a little trouble here." And then I thought of what the sheriff had just said—"A little girl that saw a murder . . ."

I swallowed. "She's a witness—"

"An eyewitness," he told me. "The only one. She saw it all. From beginning to end."

"That's dreadful."

"It could be worse. We got him. Name of Billy Grant. He comes here to fish. Fancies himself. A weekend's fishing is a flash hobby for a city boy. He has very powerful friends around him, Mr. Hogan. Very dangerous friends."

"But why would he want to do a thing like that?"

"Well, they do say the fish doesn't feel the hook in its throat. Personally, I don't believe that. I would guess he plays with the fish once it's caught, like he played with that old woman."

I felt horror spread through my blood, as fear had done in the wood. "And you're relying on the child to identify him."

"She described him. And she hasn't forgotten a detail. It's her testimony that can put him away for life."

"Why did she just stand and watch? Why didn't she run home?"

"The girl's old for her age. She knew she was safe as long as she stayed hidden in the trees. She figured if she ran, she might trip and fall. There's a lot of stubble in that wood."

I remembered the intelligence behind the calmness in those blue eyes and nodded slowly.

But I couldn't let it rest there. I knew now why the tall gaunt man seemed rooted in anguish. Sitting in that chair, I felt the same emo-

tion. "Are you sure you've got enough men?" I said anxiously.

"You counted them."

"I saw them too."

"You were meant to."

"I nearly turned back."

"I know."

"Why did they let me go on? They let me get right up behind her."

"They didn't let you get near enough to push her in, did they? And the law is curious. You stood, you looked, you shivered—"

"Werewolves—"

"Then you heard the child's voice. You listened. You stopped shivering and went on as quickly as you could, although the track was getting rougher all the way. Like a man with a mission, Mr. Hogan. That was strange. It could have meant you went on because you heard a *child* singing. A child you'd come to *get*."

"Oh, my God, me, Joe Hogan, a hitman!"

"You'd talked for sometime with the clerk at the hotel. We questioned him."

"Oh, I did, I did. He told me—"

"I know what he told you. The county fair, the move overnight, the cabin. The child hidden in the forest. Town gossip, that's all."

"No!" I was suddenly stubborn. "That happened *before* the murder. They did it to hide the voice."

"The theater is still a sink to some people, Mr. Hogan. Maybe they don't want her—discovered, as you'd call it."

"It's a sin."

The sheriff shrugged. "Overprotective parents. An only child—"

I remembered I'd said that to the clerk. But only to draw him. I've never yet met parents too protective to be bought or persuaded.

"There isn't a body in the county knows that child's the sole eyewitness except her folks and us," the sheriff said.

"And the dangerous friends."

The sheriff nodded.

"And now me. Why did you tell me?"

"You were never going to let go that voice unless I told you the truth, Mr. Hogan."

"I'm not going to let it go now."

"What?"

"This won't finish," I told him. "Not even when you've got the boy put away for life. I can take her, change her name, have her trained. Make her into a star, hide her in a blaze of notoriety. No one dare touch another Nazavari. No one."

"I doubt her folks will agree," the sheriff said.

"It's different now," I persisted. "I'm offering her an escape, her only chance."

He was silent.

I leaned forward.

"Look, I don't go around with my eyes shut. I know what you mean by dangerous friends. I shoot pool with all kinds in New York. It's part of my business."

"Sounds more like mine."

"What else do you do if you need backing for a brilliant untried performer? I wouldn't like to tell you where the original backing came from for Nazavari."

I fell silent for a moment. It hadn't done her any harm. They'd asked for no payback. Just the usual percentage—and the right to watch, listen, and feel proud. There's pride in every kind.

I had another thought.

"And on top of all that, what about that damned lake? To my mind that's twice as dangerous!"

The sheriff had been thinking, turning over in his mind what I'd said. Now he sighed heavily.

I knew I'd got him worried. So I waited.

"There's a lot in what you say, of course," he said. And then suddenly: "Right. You can see her folks. But under guard."

"That's O.K."

The two deputies watched in silence without the slightest visible emotion, but I could sense their interest. And no wonder. I never worked so hard in my life as I did with that man and his wife.

The woman was tougher than the man. She did the talking while he nodded or shook his head in corroboration of everything she said.

I wasn't surprised the kid had said "Ma" and left out "Pa."

Stringy and small, with greyish tow-colored hair that reminded me of dirty straw—it would once have been as the child's was now, pure gold—she stood like iron. Obstinate. Unrelenting.

All her responses came down to the same thing. It was like a litany, a litany of ferocious hate.

They weren't afraid for the child. They could keep her safe. They'd always kept her safe. Once the trial was over, she'd soon forget. They'd *see* to it that she forgot. It only needed time—and them. Her safety lay with them.

I brought up the lake. Surely to God they recognized the danger there. Didn't they worry about the frog and the prince and all the rest of it? Didn't they think she might disappear one day?

No. The woman couldn't have been more emphatic. The child was at a difficult age, the age when children don't know what to do with themselves. It was only natural for her to invent her own games, nothing but make-believe to pass the time.

Near enough to what I'd told the child myself.

So then I came down to tacks.

Her voice! They had no right—oh, I knew they were her parents, but even so they had no *right* to keep that voice to themselves. The child was gifted. Her voice belonged in a much wider arena. It belonged to the public.

At this the woman's eyes blazed. For a second they were like blue ice. And set too close together. I couldn't bear them.

"Never!" She bit out the word again. "Never!"

I stared at her and she stared back.

There was something else about her I couldn't bear—something I recognized—

Instinctively, without even thinking, I said: "Were you ever in the theater?"

For a moment I thought she was going to throw herself at me, claws bared.

Then her eyes went blank, she folded her hands, and said calmly, "No."

I wanted to get away from that woman as I'd wanted to get out of the wood. But it was the child that mattered. The voice.

I turned to the tall gaunt man—after all, he was the father—and saw that he was standing in a trance of terror—that's all I can call it—holding onto the table.

"Why are you holding so tight to that table?" I asked.

It seemed a long time before he said, "I'm tired."

His voice was cracked, drained, and old. But I pressed on. "You're tired now. How do you think you'll feel when the deputies have gone and you're alone with her?"

He opened his mouth twice but no word came forth.

The woman stepped quickly in front of him and looked up at me. "That's what we want. To be alone with her. Just the three of us."

Her expression was hard and set.

"So that you can put her on a rope again, like a little dog," I said. "She wants more."

I'd seen it in the child's eyes. I *knew* she wanted more.

"She'll grow out of it," the woman said. "I know."

Not if I can help it, I thought. Deep inside that child's mind, there was a seed of knowledge that told her what she could be. If I could reach that seed, I knew she was clever enough to take it from there. I'd started the ball rolling beside the lake. Now I determined that, given the chance, I'd kick it right to the back of the girl's mind. "Ma" would be glad to be shut of "little Madam" before I was through.

I sighed hopelessly, as if I'd given up. Then I smiled at the woman—ruefully, I hoped.

"Will you let me say goodbye to her?"

"No," she said.

I looked automatically at the man. Anywhere just not to see *her*. But his eyes were fixed on his wife. And there was no sympathy or human warmth in them, just dumb misery.

It was the woman or nothing. I steeled myself and turned to her again.

"It must have been a nightmare," I said. "I'm so sorry if I've made it worse . . ." I paused and then added, with all the charm I could muster: "Please let me say goodbye. You see, I know what I'm losing. And what you're keeping."

The man released a loud sob and the woman whipped around like an asp whose tail had been pricked and said something to him I couldn't quite catch. But again I had that feeling of recognition.

I tried to hold onto it, but the woman had put herself right up against me and was looking into my face.

"Go then," she said. "You know where to find her. Say goodbye and then leave her in peace."

More like in the bloody lake, I thought. But I did just wonder

briefly why she didn't want the man to speak. She'd given way so suddenly.

When I walked between the two deputies toward the lake one of them looked at me and said: "Tough work, yours. It must pay well."

"In ulcers."

I can be as laconic as the next, although it's not really me.

"You can't do any more," the other deputy said. "I don't know why you're wasting your time with the kid. She's got no say."

As he finished speaking, we heard her singing.

"That's why," I said.

The deputies grunted. They were sick to death of the sweetest voice in the world. Their loss, my gain, I hoped.

"You wait here," I said casually.

We were standing now with the tree behind and the lake in front. The deputies hesitated.

"The three of us might frighten her." I left the words in the air for a moment.

They grinned. They weren't fools, but they agreed to let me talk to her alone. They were sorry for us both—the kid stuck here, me with my mission unaccomplished.

So as they watched, I came up behind the girl and slipped quietly down beside her.

The singing stopped and she turned her head.

She was wonderful. Her eyes were so intent and her face was really beautiful.

"I heard what you said to Ma." She spoke very softly. "I heard every word."

"How did you get here ahead of us?"

"I've got a secret way. Much quicker than the way you came."

"Do you understand why the sheriff is taking you to the city soon?"

"Of course." She was looking at me disdainfully now. "I have to say what I saw and who I saw."

"And then come back here—"

"Yes."

"Do you want to come back here?"

"I want to be with my prince."

"He isn't real." I leaned just a little closer. "He's *not real*. You be-

long in a world of *real* princes. A world of gaiety and light. Pretty dresses. Parties. Dances. And when you're old enough, great cities, beautiful shops, grand houses. Theaters. People standing up, clapping their hands, shouting for you. Big bouquets of flowers in decorated baskets, all yours. And everyone loving you, showering gifts on you. Jewels. Sapphires, as big and blue as your eyes. I can take you into that world."

She stared at me, with the same calm, intent look.

"You can't."

I knew she was thinking of what she'd heard back in the cabin, so I gave it a moment and then said carefully: "Do you ever fly into a temper? I know you can stamp your foot. I've seen you. But do you ever scratch and scream and fight?"

"Sometimes."

She gave me the odd, conspiritorial smile I'd seen before.

"Well, that's what you have to do now. And keep it up."

"Keep it up?"

"That's right."

The child bit her lip. Her teeth were very white and even. Then she looked at the water and sighed.

"When the frog's down there, he's real."

"Honey, there are fifty—a *hundred* frogs down there."

"But only one prince."

There was a doubtful note in her voice now.

"I can give you princes to choose from." I knew I was repeating myself but even the cleverest kids need telling.

"Princes to choose from," she echoed, while her eyes searched mine.

"Yes, honey. That's what I can give you. And nothing's going to stop me."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. I promise."

"I knew from the beginning you'd come to take me away."

"Hogan always keeps his word. That's what my friends say about me."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later."

She spoke with such wisdom. And I responded.

"That's a sensible girl."

We looked at each other. She was studying my face. She trusted me.

And I vowed then and there that I'd never rest till I saw her free and happy.

"Make it a big temper," I murmured. "And don't let go. That'll settle it."

The last word spoken, I stood up, turned, and trudged with deliberate despondancy toward the deputies.

I had asked to be taken back to the hotel, so when the sheriff's car stopped I climbed out and walked with the same despondent steps into the hallway I'd wanted to run away from.

The clerk took me up to my room, although I said there was no need.

But I *was* exhausted. The whole episode had been a strain on my nerves and muscle and selling power. My voice was hoarse too, my throat sore, and I could feel a headache coming on.

The space between the four drab walls seemed so small. And there was something else troubling me, something that I could hear. A buzzing—An angry furious noise that filled the room.

"There's a wasp," I told the clerk.

I felt the threat before the thing stung my wrist.

"She's a witch!" I said. "I knew she was out to get me."

I meant the woman, not the wasp, and the clerk didn't know what to make of me. Come to that, I didn't know what to make of myself.

The clerk caught and killed the wasp, then opened the window wide to let some air into the room. He looked at me nursing the wounded wrist with my other hand. "I'll get an onion," he said. "Best thing for a wasp sting, raw onion."

I sat on the bed and pressed my fingers against my temples, trying to make the headache go away.

The wasp sting hurt like hell.

The clerk returned with a raw onion cut in half and rubbed it on my wrist. But the onion smelt and the bite stung more.

"That won't last," he said. "It will be gone by mornin'. Have a good night."

His red-rimmed eyes seemed thoughtful as he went into the corridor and closed the door.

I looked at the key stuck where it ought to be. So easy to cross and lock myself in. But such an effort. I elected just to clean my teeth and

swallow a couple of shots from the bourbon bottle the clerk had thoughtfully provided along with the onion. Then I climbed between the clean, rough-dried sheets.

The pillow was hard, the bed much harder, but it didn't matter. I stretched out thankfully.

The last thing I remembered was the red-rimmed eyes that belonged to the clerk, and the smell of onion—and then I dropped into the dark.

I had a dreadful nightmare, the kind you struggle to wake from. I dreamed I was in that evil wood, in the place of that old woman, and it was so real I could feel the wire around my neck. I could feel the pain and the fear. And I knew the child was watching. Run, run! I screamed inside myself. And then: No, don't! Stay hidden!

I must wake up, I *must*! I screamed inside myself again. I've got to save the girl!

And then—then I knew I *was* awake. The evil was in the room *with* me and the wire *was* around my neck.

They say a man's whole life passes in front of him when he's drowning. It's true, I'm sure, because mine was passing in front of me now, as the wire tightened. My father telling me my mother, his dear pretty French girl, had died when I was born. Mother! help me! Christ! I tugged at the wire. Me, Joe Hogan, crying for my mother—spangles, lights, clowns, horses, cats, the Big Top! Papa Gaudin! MAXIE! . . . the best bravest strong man I ever knew . . . gone. JULES! Jules . . . gone. Femina, you bastard, where are you? I helped you, you help me. Myrtle . . . where's that bloody chimp? Fenella . . . come get your Uncle Joe. Ida . . . Ida . . . Auntie Ida. Orchestras. Opera. Dad! Dad! Nazavari . . . Nazavari . . . you got me into this. Pythons, poodles, wasp, onion, red-rimmed eyes, red-rimmed eyes . . . No! Ice blue, set too close together. Milwaukee accent. Cruel, cruel . . .

I couldn't get my breath—I was choking—and then through a thick red blur, I heard the woman's hateful voice saying, "You look like the fish on my prince's hook. Opening and shutting your mouth. It's funny. Do it again."

It wasn't the woman—it was the child! The *child*! That horrible child with the odd conspiritorial smile and the strength in her that when she grew to her mother's age those big blue eyes would show too close together and with the same spark behind the blue ice. Like a message, I'd thought. Damned right. A message of hate that was coming home

to roost now. *Now*! And that voice was speaking again, the song all gone . . .

"You were prying around like that old woman. And you smell the same. Nasty."

Oh, my God . . .

"You've done this before," I croaked.

"Lots of times."

"The old woman wasn't doing any harm."

"Yes, she *was*!"

Somehow I had to make the clerk's sharp ears function. So that he'd hear—please, God, let him *hear* . . .

"What wrong did she do?"

The wire slackened. Just a little.

"She wanted to kill the frog—tear off his legs and eat them. My prince told me. Frighten her off, he said, or I won't be able to come back."

That's when it fell into place. And I'd bought it. The prince swimming under the water, coming up onto the bank, teaching her the games people play, teaching her . . .

"Make it a big temper," I'd said. "Don't let go . . ."

Then the wire tightened, and I croaked hurriedly: "You told the cops your prince did it."

"What's it matter? He can turn into a frog again and jump back in the lake. When he comes on the bank, I'll be waiting."

Any moment, she would twist the wire and—and tie the knot.

Desperation gave me the strength to remind her, "Your prince taught you a different game with the fish. Slow . . ."

"Yes," she said, "It was lovely."

And the wire slackened a little.

"You played it with the old woman . . ."

"Oh, yes."

She giggled. That child giggled. The sound was horrible.

"I'll play," I managed to say.

"You don't know how."

"Teach me . . ."

"Cry. Pray. Beg."

Poor soul—I spared a thought for that old woman before I said, "I can't hear you."

"*Mercy*!" she bleated in a gross parody of an old woman's voice—a terrified old woman.

That did it.

"You'll never see your prince again," I said. "Because I'm going to take you away."

I don't know how I got the words out but they must have sounded convincing because they drew the reaction I wanted.

"You won't! You won't!"

"Yes," I gasped.

"You *won't!*" The wire bit into my throat. "Because you'll be dead!"

"I can't hear . . ."

"Dead, dead, DEAD!"

I heard the shout. It sounded very far away.

"What did . . . you say?"

"Listen, will you! LISTEN!"

I heard the stamp of her foot. Like it was going into cotton wool.

And then the red blur closed in and I was out.

I sat in the sheriff's office with a bandage around my neck.

There was a lot of coming and going but my attention stayed mainly on the clerk.

He'd sat up all night, he told the sheriff. Listening for me. Didn't like the look of me, thought I was talking wild.

"I'd never have believed it," he said. "I seen it with my own eyes though. I had to throw the coverlet over her, like she was a mad dog or somethin'. It's all there."

He jerked his head toward the deposition he'd just signed.

"She . . . she didn't seem like no princess in an ivory tower then." He swallowed. "Hunched up on that bed, twistin' the wire."

"Forget it," I said. "Try to forget it."

The clerk shook his head.

"Sweetest voice in the world," he sighed. "That's a memory I'll hang onto. I don't want to lose that."

He slumped a little. The sheriff inclined his head toward the door and the young deputy took the clerk out of the room.

We sat in silence for a moment.

"Try Milwaukee," I said.

"What?"

"I recognized the woman's accent. But my mind was too set on the child to place it at the time. And those ice blue eyes. A relic of German immigrants, way back."

"Germany—"

"Hitler's Germany."

The sheriff seemed in shock.

"She said she'd done it lots of times before," I heard myself say.

"I don't doubt that."

"Are you looking into it?"

"What do you think?"

The sheriff stared past my shoulder and I knew he was thinking of how the tall gaunt man had wept—a sound I'll remember long after I've forgotten the sweetest voice in the world.

"Check the theater records in that area," I said. "You may turn up something."

"Milwaukee—"

"I'm only guessing," I added, to be on the safe side.

He nodded.

My guess turned out to be right.

The man had been a theater electrician, The woman a young blonde clerk working her way through college—a calm, controlled girl with big blue eyes and few friends. The man—he would have been handsome and rangy then—appealed to her, but he fancied another girl—a cheeky, teasing little usherette who died suddenly, got herself strangled in a fly rope when she was playing hide-and-seek. A tragedy. But her own fault. She'd no right to be there. Verdict: accidental death.

The electrician left Milwaukee after the inquest and disappeared. The blonde clerk—she had never come into the case at all—gave in her notice, saying she was getting married and moving away.

"Did she tell him before or after he married her?" I wondered aloud.

"I would guess he learned slowly," the sheriff said.

"Lots of times," I murmured.

"We've turned up several incidents," the sheriff said. "That's why they moved so frequently. Overnight. Not that folks believed the child could have done such things, with her—her—"

"Purity of expression," I prompted.

"That's it."

"But her mother—" I paused. "Her mother was afraid someone would do as you've done—chase up Milwaukee and connect it with her."

"You should be sitting in my chair," the sheriff said.

I let that go. God knows I never wanted to see him or Reedsville again.

But there was something puzzling me still.

"Who was she going to pin it on when they found me strangled?" I asked the sheriff. "And why, if she knew her prince was locked up, did she keep on singing into the water?"

"I wouldn't know why she wanted you dead, unless you told me."

"I won't rest until I know."

"What better time than now?"

The sheriff rose. and I followed. We both knew where we were going.

She was in a small room with bars and padded walls.

The sheriff put the first question.

"What were you going to say when we found Mr. Hogan strangled, the way we found the old woman?"

"I'd given that a lot of thought," she said. "I was going to say Ma did it."

She was calm, deliberate and open, as I'd seen her at the beginning.

The sheriff seemed silenced forever, so I asked the next question.

"Why did you keep singing into the water when you knew your prince was locked up?"

"Well—" she spoke slowly with studious emphasis "—after I had that game with the old woman, I told Ma about the frog and my prince and everything."

"Why?"

"Ma's my teacher. She taught me to read and write. So I knew she'd tell me what to do."

We waited. Then she looked at us and said: "It was easy. I just had to make out I thought the frog was still there. So I kept on singing to him."

"Your father's very unhappy," I said, because I couldn't stop thinking about that wretched man and his wretched life. "Aren't you sorry?"

"Him!" the child scoffed. "He's a sick rabbit. He cries."

Her eyes went wide. Then she added dreamily: "I had a rabbit once."

I plunged for the door. And the sheriff came with me. Thankfully.

But I couldn't help myself—it's this thing with me of having the last word or the last look—I glanced back.

The child was twisting her hands together, as she'd twisted the wire around my neck. She caught and held my gaze. "I wish I had something to play with," she said pettishly. "Something real."

I shuddered. The sheriff opened the door and pushed me into the corridor, where someone in a white coat stood waiting.

"What'll happen—"

My voice trailed away. I didn't really want to know, but a quiet voice told me. "We shall restrict her hands. Otherwise, eventually, she'd destroy one with the other."

The sheriff took my arm. And we supported each other out of that awesome building.

The sheriff gave me two straight shots of bourbon. And did himself the same favor. Then he said: "They let Billy Grant go today. You'd better get back to New York. You'll be told if you're needed. You may not have to go into court. The child's insane."

"Is that a fact?"

He didn't answer, so I had the last word.

The sheriff had offered to send for my bag and the rented car, but I wanted to see the clerk alone. I owed him considerably more than five bucks and I meant to settle up.

He didn't want to take the money, but I pressed it into his pocket and told him to be silent.

When we shook hands, he held onto my wrist. He said he ought to rub the wasp sting with raw onion again, it wasn't healed.

I looked into his red-rimmed eyes, knowing that something inside him would never heal.

I said I was pressed for time. The truth was, I would have passed out right there in the hallway if I'd smelled that onion. . .

In New York I sat at my desk, talking over the 'phone to Chuck.

He said he'd never get over it, that he felt responsible. I told him to *please* forget it, as I must.

When he said he was thinking of trying another business, I really went to work. I couldn't afford to lose a good talent scout. After I calmed him down and he promised to be sensible, I cradled the receiver, sat back, and put my fingers to my eyes. That rotten headache had begun to plague me again and I wanted to relax.

I had asked not to be disturbed, but two men came in without announcement, closed the door, and crossed to stand in front of the desk.

I knew the type. I shoot pool with them sometimes.

They were both about the same size and one of them put a hand inside his breast pocket.

I sat up quicker than I'd ever sat up in my life. I thought he was going to bring out a gun.

But instead he laid a fat envelope on my desk.

"The boss said to give you this. Young Billy's his sister's one and only."

They nodded brusquely and made for the door.

"How is young Billy?" I asked.

"He suffers from migraines," the man who had spoken before said shortly.

"I'll bet," I said. "After what he put into that kid's head about the frog's legs."

"Don't bet on anything, pal." The reply was hard. "Count your winnings."

I sat, staring at the closed door. I was determined not to look at the envelope. But I did glance at my father's slogan hanging in its worn and freckled frame on the wall beside my desk.

HOGAN NEVER SPLITS COMMISSION.

I said the words aloud and then picked up the envelope, weighed it in my hand.

In my business, if one doesn't work out, you move on to the next.

This envelope was heavy enough to pay for something.

What? Who?

It didn't take long to remember two young tumblers I'd seen in Ida's gymnasium.

"I can't keep them much longer, Joe," she'd said. "They're gettin' to eat too much."

They were good, those little tumblers. Perhaps the best in the world.

I drew the telephone toward me and put in a call to Auntie Ida.

I told her she could go on feeding those little tumblers till they were ready for Papa Gaudin. I always try to help kids. I take after my father in that way. "Sign up a child with real talent and who knows what you've got in five years?" he used to say.

He was right. After all, he had discovered Nazavari.

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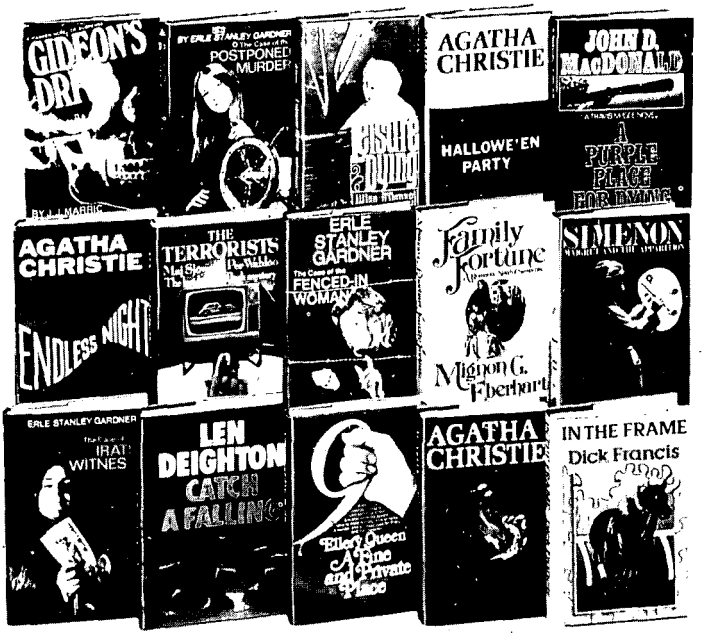

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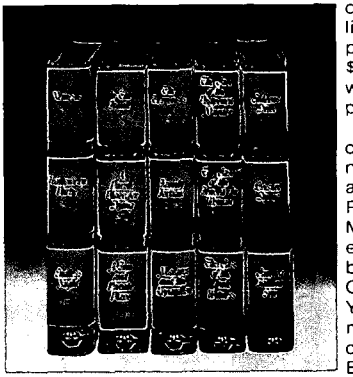

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