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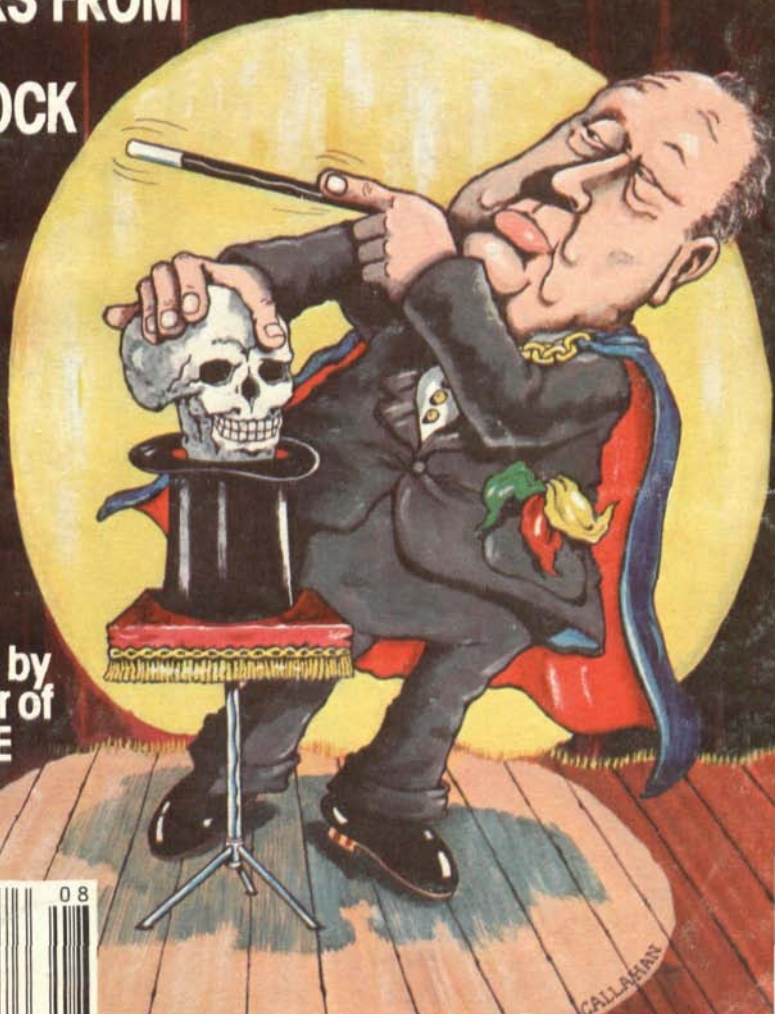

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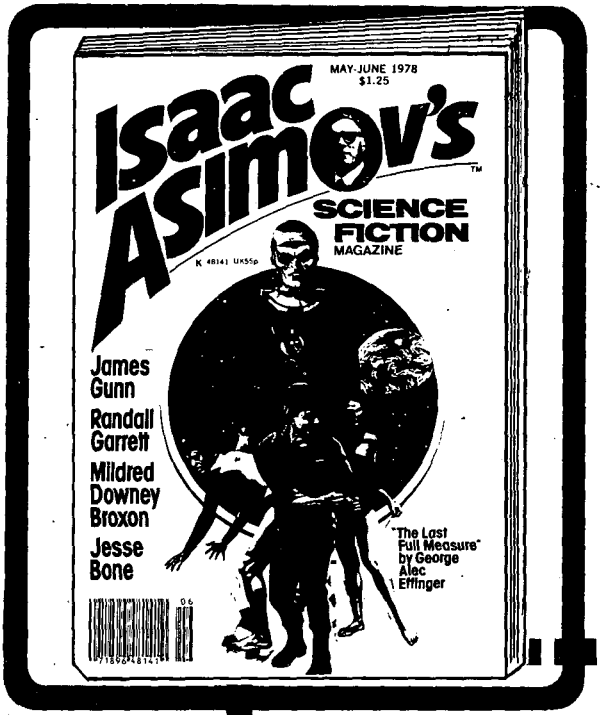

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VOLUME 23, NO. 8 AUGUST 1978

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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SHORT STORIES

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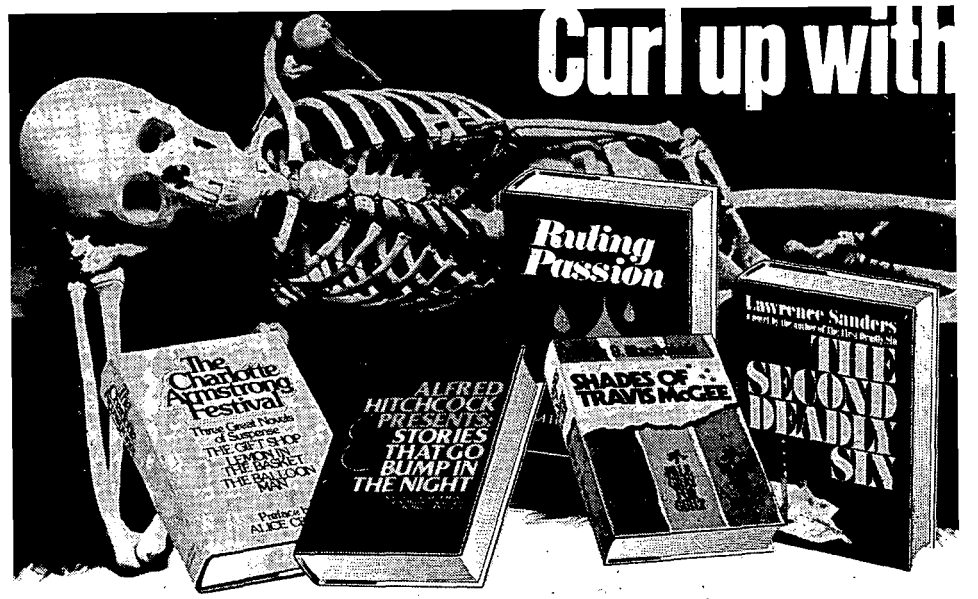

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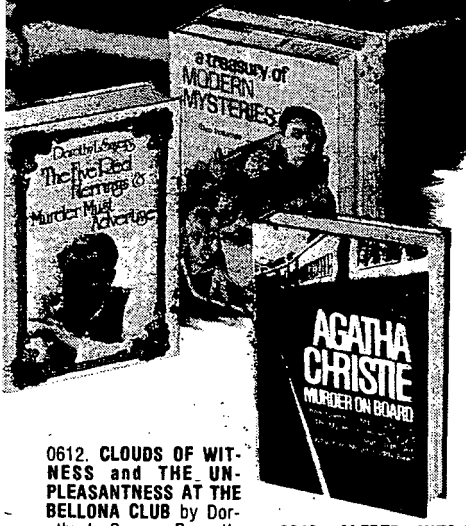

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August 1978

Dear Reader:

Although summer is now at its peak, there are stories in this issue that are likely to make the season even hotter for you.

Alvin S. Fick's irrepressible detective Ringhorn, for instance, finds himself slapping mosquitoes in the woods while trying to snare some greedy camera bugs and James Holding's library dick, Hal Johnson, recovers more than a few overdue library books.

Meanwhile, the irrepressible Ron Goulart's irreproachable Jack Bails flies you to sunny Mexico for some feverish activity and Frank Sisk keeps the summer spirit alive when his heroine decides to do a little renovation on her house before leaving for a vacation in Ireland. And a college graduation provides the background for the signing of a very special pact in Edward D. Hoch's story of an unforgettable reunion.

But do try to keep cool, won't you?

Good reading.

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More of anything is not necessarily better, Ringhorn maintained . . .

THEY ALWAYS LOOK BEST FRAMED

by ALVIN S. FICK

Although Hammond isn't a resort village, not in the same way Lake George Village or Lake Placid is, it does get seasonal spin-off from the summer people at several of the smaller lakes nearby. A couple of private campgrounds in the area with limited facilities also bring trade into town. When the racing program is on at old historic Saratoga race track during August, everything is filled up.

I look up warily when I'm out walking during that part of summer,

half expecting to see sleeping bodies falling out of Hammond's maples. Some of the natives rent their homes in the village to the New York sports. They pile kids and camping gear into the family jitney, vagabonding around the state campsites or visiting Aunt Minnie, or go stir crazy with three kids and a dog in a 16-foot trailer and can't wait for summer to end.

Meanwhile, Dad has a hundred-mile-daily round trip to his job at General Electric in Schenectady for half the time they're gone. When the improvers of the breed recede downstate after the last major stake race of the season—The Hopeful—is run on the last Saturday in August, the home folks return. They spend a few of the several hundred dollars' rental money to repair broken windows, refinish the coffee table, and have somebody come in to plug new pieces into the rugs where cigarettes were dropped.

They'll do it again next year, rent their homes to strangers—references required, of course—because in spite of what Jimmy and the boys in Washington say about the economy, things are not quite as good in Hammond as they are in villages next door to prosperous peanut patches.

And the more people you get together, friend, the more trouble you're going to have. That's not a theorem wrung out of his grey cells by Pythagoras; that's straight Ringhorn. I'm Ringhorn, and I'm a detective, of the private persuasion. I live in Hammond. I've been here for eleven years, which is long enough for the kids to yell Kojak at me when they see me on the street—even though I have hair. Maybe not enough to stuff a pillow but sufficient for running fingers through when I can find someone who meets certain criteria and has the finger-running inclination.

People ask me why I don't rent an office in Albany or Schenectady and commute from Hammond. I tell them having more of anything is not necessarily better; besides, my contacts from my newspaper days still bring me enough work to forestall hibernation and keep me from becoming an introverted village recluse. And I like village life well enough to sacrifice the office/secretary/cash-flow scramble.

Take my old Dodge van, for example. On second thought you'd better not; I'm sure to need it, the way I needed it a week ago when the phone beside my bed rang just as I was slipping off into my second delta sleep of the night.

I looked at my watch on the bedside stand. (I don't own an alarm clock; I gave the one I had away the day I walked out of the *Union-Star* city room for the last time.) It was 4 A.M.

"Ringhorn."

"Ringhorn?"

"That's what I said. We could go on like this until 6 A.M. Then I will want to stop to have breakfast. That will take only about forty minutes because I'll have the eggs and sausage on low while I'm in the shower."

"Boy, it's Ringhorn all right. You haven't changed much."

Then the voice became agitated. "Listen, this is Jim Hazzard. Remember me? I used to be in GE's Research and Development Section. You wrote a story about me and the work I was doing on the Lexan Plastics program."

With my customary 4 A.M. wit I said, "Let me guess. Your travel alarm says it is now 9 P.M., but you suspect it may be later than that so you want me to rush over with my tool box and fix it, right?"

"I'm serious. I have a bad problem."

"O.K., name it. I can be serious too." Things began to jell. I remembered Hazzard had left GE shortly after the article was published and had gone somewhere in the Midwest with 3M Company. Good engineer too.

"I'm being blackmailed." He paused. "I'm calling from a phone booth by a gas station. I didn't want to call from the motel. My wife and kid are asleep in the room, and I didn't want to phone from the lobby."

"Why did you call me?"

"We subscribed to the *Union-Star* after we left the area. I read where you quit to set up a detective agency."

I sighed. "Couldn't this have waited a couple of hours?"

"No. If I don't come up with five hundred dollars at noon today—"

"You don't have it, and can't raise it by then."

"Right." I could scarcely hear him although the connection was fine.

"Where is this phone booth?"

"Near the intersection of Route 29 and the main street in Saratoga." I could hear the creak of the phone-booth door as he looked out for another landmark.

"Just south of there is an all-night diner," I said. "Go and have some

coffee. I'll be there in about an hour." I hung up.

As I eased out of bed I thought, If he can't come up with five hundred for a blackmailer, how is he going to pay me? (Chalk up another reason for staying out of the high-rent district.)

A quick souse under the shower, a faster than that shave, and I was on the road in 22 minutes.

At 5:15 things are just beginning to come to life in Saratoga. Bread trucks out, exercise boys trying to snitch fifteen minutes more sleep before morning workouts at the track, yawning cops passing in the cruiser, and—incongruously—a bent-over old lady pulling a two-wheel shopping cart just as I parked by the diner. So much for the 24-hour supermarket.

Hazzard was eight or ten years my junior. His dark hair was neatly styled; his sport jacket was off the rack but off a very high-priced rack.

"Tell me about it." I did not wink at the waitress when she brought the coffee to the booth. Sometimes I'm a waitress-winker, but not at 5:15 A.M. and not at a nice white-haired woman who could be at home in bed waiting for the mailman to drop a social-security check in the mail slot on the porch.

"I'm embarrassed."

"Don't be shy, Hazzard. You've been up to something, you little devil. Out with it."

"A week ago my wife—that's Debra, maybe you remember her—and I and our nine-year-old son Tim came here for a two-week vacation. We do it every year, get motel reservations a year ahead and all that. Debbie goes to the flats with me but she doesn't care much for the trotters. Last Friday night she and Tim and some of her old girl friends from Troy went to the Performing Arts Center while I went to the trotting track alone." He stopped talking and started diddling with the spoon in his saucer.

"Go on. We haven't much time if noon is your deadline."

"Well—I picked up a girl while I was there."

I resisted the temptation to say "Aha!" or "Just what I expected!" I waited. Nothing. Finally I said, "Hazzard, you're a big boy. I'm not going to spank you."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. She told me there wasn't a chance we could find a motel room within fifty miles. We went out on a country road in

my car." He stopped while the waitress mopped the counter opposite our booth. She left to draw two coffees for the two boys in blue who had come in and were sitting at the far end of the diner, in need of that little lift to finish their shift.

"I don't know the back roads so I drove where she suggested. After we parked on this side road maybe ten or fifteen minutes a car coming from the opposite direction drove up and parked bumper to bumper. A couple of guys jumped out and yanked open my car doors. They had flash cameras and took some pictures. You know, Ringhorn."

"Sure. An old scam but it still works. Maybe not as well or as often as it did before so many people started experimenting with all those things Freud talked about."

"What can I do?"

"How much did you give them?"

"Three hundred. They let me keep forty-four dollars. I told them I had to have some money to keep my wife from finding out. Of course I'm winging the vacation mainly on credit cards, but I had to have a little cash."

"What about this noon?"

"They said I had to bring five hundred more, or else. I couldn't reach my bank over the weekend. I can't have the money ready by noon. I don't know what to do."

I felt like saying poor fish. But he wasn't a bad guy. I had gotten to know him, and had met his wife while I was writing the Lexan piece. A staff photographer and I went to their home in Niskayuna for some pictures of his home life to balance the technical side of the article, which was pretty heavy. I vaguely remembered her as a short slender woman with large luminous eyes, a Russell Sage College girl he met while he was getting his degree at RPI.

"Walk down to the end of the counter and talk to those two young men wearing the wide leather belts studded with silver bullets. Well, maybe they aren't silver."

"Oh Lord, I can't, Ringhorn. I thought about it. I love Debbie. But even though I know she'd forgive me it would crush her. We have a good thing going between us. Can't you do something? If I tell the police there's no way I can keep it from her."

"I'm not married, Hazzard. But I wonder if it's not better for you to face this now—together—rather than for you to walk around with a

shabby little secret that might erode your relationship. I don't know, it's your decision."

"I can't hurt her that much. Can you do something? If you can—do it."

I bit my cheek to keep from saying a really good relationship could survive a jolt or two. Yet even if he told his wife, the blackmailers could threaten to send pictures to his employer. He took my hesitation to mean a concern over money.

"You'll get your fee, whatever it is. I'm doing very well at 3M."

"Ordinarily I don't work without a retainer." Suddenly I realized *I* would have to provide the front money.

"This is a hell of a way to make a living," I said. I took out my wallet and pushed two hundred-dollar bills across the table. "When you meet your playmates this noon give them this. Tell them it was all you could borrow from a friend but that your bank will transfer funds you can draw this afternoon. Tell them you will meet them tomorrow morning somewhere—anywhere—because you won't be meeting them at all, not if things go right." I thought, even if things don't go right you won't be meeting them—then you'll be talking to the police, maybe even be giving them a description of the thugs who pulled the plug on a mild-mannered ex-reporter.

We talked another ten minutes, then Hazzard left. I offered no suggestions on how he could slide into bed beside his wife at 6 A.M. without some tall explaining. He'd think of something. After all, he thought of me.

That's how I came to be sitting in the back of the Dodge with a pair of binoculars, a half a block away from an A&P parking lot, watching through the one-way porthole window. I saw the '77 green Buick with New Jersey plates pull into the lot. That might not mean anything; there are lots of Jersey plates in Saratoga in the summer.

But when it drove into the empty slot next to Hazzard's Ford wagon it proved something, especially when a big beefy guy in a striped tank top and Bermuda shorts got out of the passenger side, walked over to Hazzard's car, opened the door, and got in. I had a good look. I thought, if I keep on running into that kind in my work I'll have to spend more time with Wes Abbott at the YMCA.

I could see the driver clearly. He was wearing pilot's shades, had a

notch out of his left ear—a pit bulldog type, I'd bet—a long nose mashed to one side. Let's face it, he had a class A cliché malefactor face. That's what my friend the county investigator in the sheriff's office calls them—malefactors. Sometimes he uses another word that sounds vaguely similar but isn't quite the same.

I focused the glasses on someone in the back seat. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like a woman.

When Tank Top got out of Hazzard's car he leaned over and stuck his head inside through the open window for some parting words, probably telling Hazzard where he could get those 8x10 glossies framed. They'd look nice on the dresser in the bedroom he shares with his wife. They always look best framed.

I used that minute to slip out the back door of the van. I kept to the curb side where they couldn't see me. I got into the blue Chev Malibu I had rented and pulled out into the street. Tailing on foot is half art-half instinct that relies on ingenuity, improvisation, and yards of patience as well as skill. In a car it's different because you don't know what other drivers who aren't part of the act are going to do next.

Following a car in Saratoga isn't quite what it is in Boston or Atlanta or Philadelphia. They went to a restaurant, and not a first-class one either. I was pleased they weren't going to blow my two hundred on the first meal. Save some for the track, kids; I like horses.

After five minutes I was sure they were staying for lunch. I drove down the street to a drive-through hamburger place where I picked up two and a coffee shake. When I returned, parking beside a fireplug, the Buick was still in the restaurant parking lot. I ate my lunch. A prowl car made me move and by the time I had turned around and was coming back the Buick was pulling out into the street.

I followed them south through Ballston Spa. Down Route 50 in Glenville they drove in at a small motel. The passenger in the back got out. I drove into the gas station next door where I kept busy putting air into the Malibu's tires. She stood beside the car talking. I knew I should have studied lip reading instead of learning how to conjugate Latin verbs. She went into Number 9. The Buick U-turned in the parking lot.

I felt a wave of schizophrenia coming on. I thought it over while the gas-station attendant squeezed in two and a half gallons. A pint of it splashed on the pavement. He had freckles and red hair and looked so

much like a refugee from an Our Gang movie I couldn't get mad at him.

Sometimes when you can't decide what to do, don't do anything. At least don't do either of the two obvious things that are tearing you asunder with indecision. I didn't stay and I didn't follow. When you work alone the options are limited.

I went home. For the entire half hour on the way I told myself that she was going to shower, do her nails, comb her hair—whatever. I also convinced myself that she cared nothing for the races and that Tank Top and Goggles had gone back to Saratoga to invest my two hundred on the afternoon card. I hoped they were good handicappers.

After a snooze on my living-room sofa, I showered and put on the dark blue blazer with the brass buttons, white imitation Gucci loafers—*good* imitation—cream slacks with faint blue squares, and a sports shirt with a wide collar and long tips. I checked the Smith & Wesson, then put it into the belt clip behind my right hip. Thus girded I went out to do business with some people from New Jersey.

I drove into the gas station at 5:45 and had a chat with Freckles. It turned out he had been watching the motel next door with an avid and, in my opinion, healthy interest for the past few days. He knew exactly who I was describing.

"She's something else," he said. I agreed. "Slacks are better than skirts any day." I agreed. "Especially since they've gone back to longer skirts." I agreed again. We had a regular thing going there. With that kind of amicability between us we could have solved half the world's most vexing problems.

I poked a folded ten-dollar bill into the pocket of his blue coveralls and said, "Park the Malibu alongside the station. I'm going into the station office. As long as you say she hasn't left this afternoon, there's no harm in both of us watching a good thing."

I really liked his grin.

The Buick arrived at 6:30. The two of them went into Number 8. At seven they came out and went into Number 9. At 7:05 all three came out. She had sprayed on another pair of slacks, haze-pink ones with the faintest hint of sequins that glinted in the late afternoon sun as she slid into the front seat between them. She looked great. Red tripped over a

hose and nearly fell flat.

I followed in the Malibu. Route 50 is a two-strip blacktop whose capacity is usually overtaxed, and even more so in summer when the trotters and the Performing Arts Center are in full swing. It's a typical strip city with small shopping malls, fast-food chains, gas stations, and supermarkets interspersed with houses. There are several side roads. Cars coming on between the Buick and my Malibu kept widening the distance between us. Passing to narrow the gap was impossible.

I lost them in Ballston Spa.

Skillful fellow, Ringhorn. I prowled through Saratoga grumbling to myself. The traffic was moving so slowly I had plenty of time to scan parking lots, with particular attention to those adjacent to restaurants. I didn't have many alternate ideas other than to go back to the motel on Route 50 and wait. Maybe I could get a job pumping gas with Red.

Just as I was about decided I would have to work out a new game plan, I spotted the Buick at a popular restaurant and watering hole on the outskirts to the north.

The menu at The Shandaken is good but not memorable. The U-shaped bar occupies almost as much space as the dining room and is separated from it by a wide arch. There are small tables scattered along both sides of the U, and although it is possible to be served a sandwich there, dinners are available only in the dining room. After a bit of friendly conversation, the waitress agreed that the rule was a bit stuffy. She brought me a J&B on the rocks, then a little later a salad with house dressing, followed by a crab quiche and coffee.

Her little skirt twitched jauntily when she walked. I remembered reading a mystery story where the author described what this girl had: "legs turned on God's divine lathe." If I could write like that I would have stayed in the newspaper business.

I think the tip I left compensated for the bending of the rules. At any rate her smile was radiant.

I went to the far end of the bar. It showed clearly that I was alone and that I was going to be at the bar a while. Besides, it was close to the hall leading to the rest rooms. If my hunch was correct, sooner or later pink sequined slacks would pass by.

They did. I watched with appreciation that did not go unseen. The bar was crowded when she came back down the hall. She stood a moment acting dismayed, as if she had intended to stop for a drink. Most

of the people on our side of the bar were paired up. On the other side, four well-dressed men were in animated conversation. I watched her eye them speculatively. She might find it difficult to separate one sheep from the flock.

I did my best mental sheeplike "baa" and stepped away from the bar.

She smiled and stepped forward. "Oh, thank you," she said. She sounded class, and looked it from the top of her auburn hair to her toes.

I ordered her a drink, and being a foursquare gentleman would not let her pay for it. I asked her if she was alone and when she said yes, for this evening anyway, I suggested we might be more comfortable at a table in a quiet corner. We were. We were downright cozy.

As the evening wore on, I became maudlin and she became confiding. I showed her pictures of my wife and two teenage children. (If my sister ever finds out how I use those snapshots she sent me!) Her hand was on my arm and she leaned forward—all of her—with unfeigned interest when I told her about my electronics firm in Toledo.

"Toledo," she said, in such a modulated ladylike tone. "I have an aunt who lives in Toledo." I gave her one of my Ace Electronics business cards. It's easy to be president of an electronics firm. All you need do is go to see Frank Patelli, Hammond's job printer.

"Oh," she said. "I know where Bascomb Street is."

There is no Bascomb Street in Toledo. At least I couldn't find one. I was tempted to throw her a couple of quickies from research about Toledo, but why scare the rabbit out of the pot when the water is already getting warm? I told her my wife and kids were staying at a camp in the Adirondacks with relatives while I had my annual fling with the ponies.

I said that wall-to-wall bodies in The Shandaken were winning the skirmish with the air-conditioning. She responded that a nice ride in the country might cool us off, especially me since I was "such an impulsive boy."

We rode. She tried to sit close. We both said we deplored those consoles between the seats of cars. There was a Buick at a discreet distance behind us as we drove south through Saratoga. I suggested my motel. She said no, that she knew some people who lived across the street from it. I don't know what I would have done if she had said

yes. She said she was vacationing from New Jersey. My goodness! A word of truth. I suggested her motel.

She shook her head sadly, her long auburn hair undulating nicely in the light from the street lamps. "I'm with my mother. She's probably up watching TV."

I gave her my Desperation Look Number Five.

"You're so sweet," she said. She tried to snuggle up over the console. "I'll think of something."

She did.

"I used to live in Ballston Spa. That's how come I have friends living near your motel." I think her next pause was the kind they call pregnant. "I know all the back roads around here."

The Buick was nowhere in sight.

"I don't know the roads at all. I only know the way from the motel to the track, and from the track to The Shandaken, and from The Shandaken to the motel."

The spot she picked was remote. Seven miles north of Route 29 we stopped on a narrow side road bordered by dense woods, a mixture of spindly pine, hemlock, and mixed hardwoods—farmland gone to seed thirty years ago. We parked on the grassy shoulder.

I grinned at her and wondered if she sensed any tenseness in me. If she did I hoped she related it to anticipation rather than the apprehension I felt.

"I wouldn't unbutton any more buttons if I were you," I said. "You might take a chill in the night air." I grabbed her purse from the floor by her feet and threw it to the ledge by the back window. It did not feel heavy enough to contain a gun, but then a hatpin can kill you.

She stopped with the buttons. I thought she was going to swallow her fist. "Cop" was the word she repeated most often in the torrent mangled by the knuckles pressed to her lips.

I opened the door so the courtesy light went on and flashed the photostat of my license too quickly for her to catch my name.

"Not cop. Private detective. Your friends will be along momentarily, I expect. I don't relish tying you, but I wouldn't say you're the most trustworthy person I've ever met. If you struggle I might get angry and be tempted to punch out your lights."

She held out her hands.

"Lean forward and hold them behind you." I used the long strips of

old bedsheet I had tucked under the seat. Then I went around to her side of the car and tied her ankles. She pleaded about the gag, but sometimes I get these stubborn streaks. When I lifted her and deposited her on the back seat she was warm and soft-firm to the touch.

I tied her to the seat belts so she couldn't sit up.

Then I did the sneaky thing any private detective would do in similar circumstances. I checked my gun and went and hid in the brush bordering the ditch. During the nine minutes I crouched among the tall weeds and high bush cranberry I began to have second thoughts about my career. Why was it that so many of my cases seemed to reach zenith accompanied by mosquito music? I slapped and scratched while I tried to figure it out.

Those two in the Buick were cute. The stretch of road where I parked was at the foot of a long shallow grade, topped at the upper end by a sweeping curve. They cut their lights on the far side of the curve, so I barely saw a flicker of them through the trees. They rolled up to the front bumper of my rental Malibu with their engine dead. They must have pulled the bulb on the interior light in the Buick. They were out of the car as silently as eels parting dark water.

There was enough moon behind the partial cloud cover for me to see that each of them was carrying something in his hands. They were eerily quiet. If Hazzard had left his engine running to keep the air-conditioning on, he wouldn't have heard a thing.

The shorter of the two, the one with the mashed nose, came around to the ditch side of the car. They yanked open the back doors, and electronic flashes started popping. They both fired off a couple of shots with their cameras before they realized Andrea was alone in the back seat.

"Stand very still," I said to the one on the ditch side. "What you feel poking your spine is not a finger. It's a gun. Keep both hands on the camera."

The one on the road side began to back away from the open door.

"Tell your friend to stand still too. You better hope he listens to you. You and I are going to walk forward around to the other side, slowly. Now lie across the hood of the Buick." When he did so I waved the gun at Tank Top, who still stood beside the Malibu.

"You too, on the hood."

I relieved them of the cameras, then reached in on the driver's side

of my car and turned on the headlights. I patted them down. The little guy with the mouse-gnawed ear had a gun in a shoulder holster. I took it. The other one had so much muscle he probably thought he didn't need a gun.

I retrieved Andrea's purse from the Malibu. She was mewing and wild-eyed on the back seat. When I pulled the gag aside she started to swear. I put it back.

"If you'll stop the noise I'll take it off," I told her. She nodded. I tugged her out and untied her, then walked her over to her friends. The hood of the Buick was getting crowded. I tossed her purse into the back seat of their car, then pulled the keys from the ignition. I put the muzzle of the Smith & Wesson behind the right ear of the bigger man.

"You owe me two hundred bucks." I lifted his wallet from his hip pocket. The two big ones were gone, but I found four fifties. I put his wallet back. There wasn't much left in it.

"Lost Hazzard's money at the track?" I said. The girl turned her head to look at one, then the other. It was obvious there would be discussion about that later.

It took some one-handed juggling to advance the film on one of the cameras I had left on the hood of the Malibu. It took even more to wave my gun around with proper menace while I took a picture of the three of them.

"If I guess correctly, you were too chintzy to load new film after you photographed Hazzard with Andrea." The expression on the face of the beefy one told me I was right, the undeveloped film was in the cameras. "As for the shots you just took of Andrea alone, it's a pity I'm not into bondage."

"Who are you? What is this?" Words began to erupt from the vicinity of the crooked nose.

"He's a private detective," Andrea said.

"Let's make a deal." The big guy raised up from the hood and gestured with his hands.

"Down, Rover," I said. "I have the best deal possible. A nice picture for the State Police and the sheriff, prints on the cameras, your license number—the works. But I won't turn them over if you check out of your motel and take your road show somewhere else, far away. But if I see you around, or if you approach Hazzard after he gets home, I dump everything. You've had a nice day or two at the track on his money.

He deserved that. Any rooster that wanders into a strange henyard runs the risk of being plucked. After the prints are lifted I'll give him the cameras. They look like good ones. He can sell them or take up photography."

I threw the gun I took from the little guy—minus the shells—into the woods. When I threw the Buick keys after it all three moaned in unison.

"Now let's take a walk down the road." We strolled a couple of hundred feet. "Sit down." I looked at the big guy. "Stay there. I'd hate to have to shoot you in the foot. Those shoes look expensive." I started to back away. "When you hunt for the keys, check on the mosquitoes. I'd like to know if they're as big here as they are in New Jersey. Just send a postcard to my office in Toledo. Andrea has the address."

I went back to The Shandaken, wondering what time the nice waitress finished work. Tomorrow was time enough to get in touch with Hazzard. He could, I decided, send me seventy-five a month until his bill was paid. Picture me with a steady income. My bank could never stand the shock.

Oh, yes. Karen at The Shandaken. She went off duty at 1:30 A.M., and the night was still young.

Remember, I had a nap in the afternoon.

They'd get ten cents on the dollar if they were lucky . . .

WEEKEND GUESTS

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

We hadn't been in the house more than five minutes when Pete called. We were in the living room and I was trying to get Roz to calm down when the phone rang. I put her on the couch and went over to answer it.

"I can't talk to you," I told him. "We just this minute walked in and we got a little shock. It seems we had company."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean somebody came calling while we were spending the weekend at the lake. Forced the front door and turned the place upside down. Everything's a mess. Roz is hysterical, and I'm not too happy myself."

"That's terrible, Eddie. Did they get much?"

"I don't know what's missing yet. They left such a mess I don't know where to start taking inventory."

"That's terrible, it really is. Look, I don't want to keep you. I just called to check that we're set for tonight."

I glanced over at the couch. "She's pretty shaky," I said, "but she can always stay with friends if it bothers her to stay here alone."

"How about if I pick you up around nine-thirty?"

"Fine," I said. "I'll be waiting."

I was out in front when he drove up in a large white panel truck. He pulled over to the curb and I opened the door and swung up onto the seat beside him.

"Well, you look real good," he said. "A few days in the sun didn't hurt you any. Is Roz all brown and beautiful?"

"She got a burn the first day and after that she kept out of the sun. I never burn. I just lie there and soak it up like a storage battery or something. We had a great time, but what a shock to come home and find some yo-yos turned the place inside out."

"Did they make much of a score?"

I shrugged. "They didn't get much cash because I never keep cash around the house. I generally have a couple hundred dollars down at the bottom of my tobacco humidor and it's still there. Let's see—they took Roz's jewelry, except for what she had with her, and how much jewelry do you take to the lake? The insurance floater covers her jewelry up to ten thousand dollars, and I'd guess what she lost was probably worth two to three times that. So in that sense we took a beating, but on the other hand I didn't pay anywhere near fair market value for her stuff, so it's not that bad."

"Still, those were pieces she was crazy about. Did they get those ruby earrings?"

"Yeah, they went."

"That's a hell of a thing."

"She's not happy about it, I'll say that much. What else? Her full-

length mink's in storage so they didn't get that, but she had some other furs in the closet that I don't know why she didn't put in storage. They're gone. They left the TV-stereo unit. You know the set—it's a big console unit—and for once I'm glad I bought it that way instead of picking up separate components, because evidently they decided it would be too much of a hassle to cart it out. But they took a couple of radios and a typewriter and little odds and ends like that."

"Hardly worth the trouble, it sounds like to me. What can you get for a second-hand radio?"

"Not much, I wouldn't think. Isn't that our turn coming up?"

"Uh-huh. So the jewelry was the main thing?"

I nodded. "But they took a lot of stuff. They took one of my sport jackets, can you imagine that?"

"That's amazing! Which jacket?"

"The Black Watch plaid. The damn thing's three years old and I was sick of it, but I guess some penny-ante burglar doesn't care if he's wearing the latest styles or not."

"Amazing! Did you call the police?"

"I had no choice, Pete. I'll tell you something, the worst part of this isn't what you lose when they rob you. It's the ordeal you wind up putting yourself through. We walked in there tired out from all that driving and the place looked like a cyclone had hit it. I called the fellow who takes care of my insurance and he told me to report the burglary to the police. He said nothing would be recovered, but unless it was offically reported the company couldn't honor a claim. So we had these two plainclothes bulls over for half the afternoon, and it was a big waste of time for everybody. They were asking me things like do I have the serial number from the typewriter. Who keeps track of that?"

"Nobody."

"Even if you wrote it down you'd never remember where you put it."

"Or the crooks would steal the notebook along with the typewriter."

"Exactly. So they're asking me this garbage because it's their job, and in spite of myself I'm feeling guilty that I don't know the serial number. And they're asking about the bill of sale for this thing or that thing, and who's got copies of things like that? Watch out, there's a kid on a bicycle."

"I see him, Eddie. You're jumpy as hell, you know that?"

"I'm sorry."

"I know not to run over kids on bicycles. It's not as if I never drove a truck before."

I put a hand on his arm. "Sorry," I said. "I *am* jumpy as hell and I'm sorry. Those cops, I finally told them enough was enough, and I poured drinks all around and everybody relaxed. They said off the record I could forget about seeing any of the stuff again, which I already knew, and I let them finish their drinks and got them out of there. Then I took Roz upstairs and got a handful of Valium into her."

"Not a whole handful, I hope."

"Maybe two pills."

"That's better."

"I had one more drink for myself and then I put the plug in the jug because I didn't want to get loopy. I almost called you and cancelled out, but I figured that would be stupid."

"You sure?" He looked at me. "I could turn the car around, you know. There's other nights."

"Keep driving."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Absolutely. But can you imagine guys like that?"

"You mean the cops?"

"No, I don't mean the cops. They're just doing their job. I mean the guys who ripped us off."

He laughed. "Maybe they're just doing their jobs too, Eddie."

"That's some job, robbing people's homes. Can you imagine doing that?"

"No."

"Roz kept saying how she's always felt so safe and secure where we are—a good neighborhood and all—and how can she feel that way now? Well, that's nonsense, she'll get used to it again, but I know what she means."

"It's such an invasion of privacy."

"That's exactly what it is. People in her house, getting dirt on her carpets, going through her things, sticking their noses into her living space. An invasion of privacy, that's exactly what it is. And for what?"

"For ten cents on the dollar if they're lucky."

"If they get that much it is a lot. If they net two grand out of everything they took off us it's a hell of a lot. and in the process they gave

us a bad day and put us to a lot of trouble. I don't know what it's going to cost to replace everything and clean up the mess they made. Going into people's houses like that—suppose we were home?"

"Well, they probably were careful to make sure you weren't."

"Yeah, but if they were sloppy enough to rob us in the first place, how careful do they figure to be?"

We kicked it around some more. By the time we got to the gate I was feeling a whole lot calmer. I guess it helped to talk about it, and Pete is always easy to talk to.

He pulled the truck to a stop and I got out and opened the padlock and unfastened the chain, then swung the gate open. After the truck was through I closed the gate and locked it again. Then I climbed back into the truck and Pete cut across the lot to the warehouse.

"No trouble with the key, Eddie?"

"None."

"Good. What'd they do at your place, kick the door in?"

"Forced the lock with a crowbar or something."

"Slobs, it sounds like."

He maneuvered the truck, parking it with its back doors up against the loading dock. I climbed down and opened them, and while I was standing there the automatic door on the loading dock swung up. I had a bad second or two then, as if there'd be men with guns up on the dock, but of course it was empty. A second or two later the night watchman appeared through a door a dozen yards to our left. He gave us a wave, then took a drink of something from a brown paper bag.

Pete got out of the truck and we went over to the old man. "I thought I'd run the door open for you," he said. "Have a little something?"

He offered the paper bag to us. We declined without asking what it was and he took another little sip for himself. "You boys'll treat me right," he said. "Won't you, now?"

"No worries, Pops."

"You didn't have no trouble with that key, did you?"

"On the gate? No, it was a perfect fit."

"When you go out you'll break the chain so they won't know you had no key, right?"

"That takes too much time, Pops. Nobody's gonna suspect you."

"They're gonna ask me questions," he whined.

"That's how you'll be earning your money. And they'll ask you questions whatever we do with the lock."

He wasn't crazy about it, but another sip from his bottle eased his mind some. "I guess you know what you're doing," he said. "Now be sure and tie me tight but not *too* tight. And I don't know about tape on my mouth."

"That's up to you, Pops."

He decided on the tape after all. Pete got a roll of it from the truck, along with a coil of clothesline, and the three of us went inside. While Pete tied Pops up I got started stacking the color TVs in the truck. I made sure I arranged them compactly because I wanted to fit in as many as the truck would hold. It's not going to be a cinch replacing all the jewelry Roz lost.

When vultures come to call . . .

"If you want to know the truth, Ed," said Miss Muldoon quite seriously, "I'm trying to get through the rest of my life as fast as possible."

Edwin Coleman, M.D., appraised the trim old lady on the other side of the desk with sympathetic blue eyes in which there was a trace of amusement. "When the hell did you start on that tack, Peg?"

"Soon as a drop of whiskey failed to take the winter chill out of my bones."

"Physically, you know, you're right as rain."

"And just as damp in spirits. I'm down in the dumps, Ed."

"You've been down before and bounced up."

"It's the old bounce that's finally gone. A few weeks ago when I celebrated—which is hardly the word—my seventy-third birthday I was struck by the fact that everything in life has become dreadfully boring and repetitious. It's as simple as that, Ed."

"That's not nice, Peg. You have a birthday and fail to invite me to the party."

"You wouldn't have come anyhow. My fat young cousins were present."

"The Sheehans? Well, they're fat, all right, but I'd hardly call them young."

"At my age anyone under fifty's young. But they came, all five hundred pounds of them. And without invitation. Just chanced by with a chocolate cake from the three-day-old bakery and a bottle of cooking sherry."

"Sounds jolly."

"If you fancy a pair of corpulent vultures." Miss Muldoon veiled her pale-green eyes with delicately thin lids as if trying to banish such distasteful images. "They grasp at any occasion to check out the state of my health, among other things. Terence, you may recall, pretends to be in the real-estate business, though God only knows whether he's ever completed a transaction. Well, Terence spends part of each visit estimating aloud what my house and land would fetch on the rising market. And his sister Maureen—a cousin I find it increasingly hard to kiss—takes inventory more or less covertly of all the valuables in sight. The sterling, the porcelain china, the cut glass." She unveiled her eyes with a sigh. "It's obvious that they can hardly wait for my will to be probated."

"So they're in your will, are they?"

"Largely out of respect for Father's wishes. He was a great believer in blood being thicker than water, may his soul rest easy with that sentimental nonsense."

"Didn't your father remember them in his own will?"

"Of course. Enough to whet their appetites. In fact, Father was practically the sole support of his sister, my Aunt Liz, and those two spoiled brats after her husband died at the height of his career as a

three-bottle man. Then when Liz herself died, the brats by that time being full-grown oafs, Father bought the house they'd been renting and gave them the deed outright."

"All in all, the Sheehans seem to have fared well by the Muldoons," Dr. Coleman said.

"And they'll fare better when I'm boxed and put away," Miss Muldoon said with a certain proud severity.

"You resent them and yet you provide for them."

"They're an ill-favored pair, sir, but mine own."

"Sometimes, Peg, I don't understand you at all."

"I was paraphrasing the Bard."

"I know that. What I mean is—"

"When you're my age," she continued on a doleful note, "without chick nor child and all your old friends pushing up daisies, you grow grateful for any bit of attention, even if it's wholly selfish. You're like a person, say, crossing a burning desert, delirious with thirst. You welcome the circling vultures because you know as long as they circle up there you're still alive."

"A fine figure of speech," the doctor said, smiling. "It's none of my business, Peg, but do you plan to leave your entire—" He stopped, visibly embarrassed. "I better keep my mouth shut."

Miss Muldoon awarded him a pert grin. "No, they don't get it all. I haven't left out your favorite charity."

Coleman's favorite charity was the Institute for the Deaf and the Mute. He had been spending a lot of his own time and money in strengthening the Institute's endowment fund ever since his only son, aged nine and born deaf, had stepped off a curb into the path of a fire truck because he failed to hear the siren.

"It's a worthy cause," the doctor said.

"I know it and Father knew it, but I'm going to do better by you than Father. You'll be pleased when the time comes."

"I can assure you, Peg, that's a distant day. Now if you'll take a bit of advice from a friend not too much your junior, I suggest you get away from that old mausoleum you live in. A few months abroad should perk you up. Ireland's lovely this time of the year, especially from Tralee to Dingle."

"I'll think about it. Meanwhile, I'd like you to write me my prescription again . . ."

Miss Muldoon was nobody's fool.

She knew the prescription that Ed Coleman had been scribbling for her these last few years wasn't a powerful tranquilizer—*Never more than one before retiring, then only when natural sleep impossible*—but just a harmless placebo.

Sugar and spice, she thought as Herbert helped her into the back seat of the Chrysler sedan, and everything nice. That's what an old lady's capsules are made of.

Well, she now had a special use for them.

Herbert slid behind the wheel, then turned his homely fist of a face toward her.

"O'Hara's Pharmacy, Herbert."

"Yes, ma'am."

The air-conditioned car glided smoothly from the parking lot of the Community Medical Building and proceeded at an even 35 MPH, no more or less, along five blocks of a sun-filled avenue bordered by fine old apartment houses and fancy new condominiums—high-priced frontage, as Terence would have described it.

O'Hara's once-modest facade was somewhat garish, in Miss Muldoon's opinion, since Junior had taken over from the old man, but that was the sad way of the world.

Herbert assisted her from the car.

Junior himself was on duty. His rapidly thinning red hair and ever-thickening eyeglasses were steadily transforming him into the spit and image of his old man who nowadays was rocking his life away on the porch of a convalescent home, probably dreaming of past magic with mortar and pestle.

"Good afternoon, Miss Muldoon," said Junior with an ingratiating smile. "My, aren't we looking fit today."

"I doubt that I am and I know you aren't. In fact, Junior, you're looking downright waxy."

"That's what the wife's been telling me. Guess I'm due for a vacation."

"Overdue. But before you take off, please fill this prescription."

"Certainly." He took the blank she handed him, scanned Dr. Coleman's scrawl, and nodded his head. "Be ready in a jiffy."

A few minutes later he emerged from the pharmaceutical compartment with a small brown phial which he dropped into a paper bag.

"The label spells out the doctor's warning, Miss Muldoon. Never more than one capsule in any twenty-four hour period. You'll be sure to heed it, won't you?"

"Of course. How much?"

"Five seventy."

The price of sugar is surely skyrocketing, she thought, but if Ed Coleman and Junior O'Hara were going to maintain a fiction she supposed they must also maintain a logical price for it.

As the Chrysler entered the long driveway and headed for the old carriage house, which back in the '20s had been converted into a three-car garage, Miss Muldoon found herself glumly agreeing with the doctor's assessment of the old place. It really was a mausoleum.

In her father's time it always wore a coat of gleaming white paint. For the last decade its color had been Quaker grey because grey concealed dirt and didn't need to be scraped down and repainted every four years.

Now, however, with the wide pilastered porch, the two upstairs balconies that jutted out beyond tall front windows, the towering cupola, and the railed widow's walk, the house somehow resembled the midsection of a battleship.

"Shall I put the car away, ma'am?" Herbert asked.

"Yes, I won't require it again today."

He brought the car to a gentle stop at the trellised walk leading to the side door and helped her out.

"Oh, Herbert," she said as he released her arm. "While I think of it. I want you and Agnes to come upstairs to my sitting room in ten minutes or so. It's time we arranged your holiday. Do you realize it's already the sixth of June?"

"So it is, ma'am."

Agnes, the housekeeper, was Herbert's wife. Together they'd served Miss Muldoon diligently for the last eight years. From the start there had been mutual agreement that they were to have paid leave during the last three weeks of June. They used this time to visit their married daughter in Sandusky, Ohio, where they devoted considerable energy to spoiling an endless proliferation of grandchildren. They always returned with an air of consummate pride and utter exhaustion.

Miss Muldoon usually spent the same interval poking around Boston,

which vied with Dublin as her favorite city.

This year, however, she had different plans.

She ascended to the second floor by way of the front staircase and by the time she reached the top she told herself for the hundredth time in as many days that it might be a good idea to have a small elevator installed.

Agnes and Herbert left on the tenth of June. An hour after their departure Miss Muldoon phoned her gross young cousins, the Sheehans. Old habit made her think of them as "young" despite the fact that Maureen was pushing fifty and Terence was close behind. But when they'd arrived in the world, hungry for all its goods, she was already well into her twenties.

Maureen answered the ring with an indistinct utterance.

"This is Cousin Margaret," Miss Muldoon said. "What's the matter with you, Maureen?"

"Jush a mome."

"What the devil ails you?"

"Nushin." Sound of a gulping swallow. "Sorry, Margaret. I was eating a doughnut."

I might have known, Miss Muldoon thought. "I called to ask a favor, Maureen."

"A favor?"

"Yes, a favor."

"A favor?"

"You know what a favor is, don't you? You've been on the receiving end of enough of them."

"What kind of a *favor*, Margaret?" She spoke the key word with a hint of fear.

"Don't fret, Maureen. It's not going to cost you a penny, just a bit of your time."

"Whatever you say, Margaret."

"Well, I'm not feeling up to snuff. A touch of fever with migraine. And as luck would have it, Agnes and Herbert are off on their annual holiday. So I wondered if you and Terence would care to come over and pamper me for a few days."

Would they care to come over? In less than an hour they arrived like an avalanche in their bulging Peugeot.

Miss Muldoon met them at the side door. She led them, suitcases in hand, up the creaking rear stairs and assigned each of them a back bedroom with bath.

"You'll have as much privacy here," she said, "as if you were in your own place. My own quarters, as you know, are at the front of the house. I'll try to be as little bother as possible."

"But we're here to help," Maureen piped. Though she weighed nearly 200 pounds and possessed forearms that could have belonged to a butcher, she spoke in a high girlish voice. "That's what we're here for, aren't we, Terry?"

"Absolutely right, Sis." At 295 pounds and over six feet, Terence looked like a bullock too long at the feed pen. A shock of white hair accentuated the pinkness of his bovine face. "That's what we're here for, Margaret. And it's the first time we'll be staying overnight in a coon's age."

"Not since Uncle John died," Maureen added, unable to hide a faint note of resentment.

"Ten years?" Miss Muldoon questioned the time lapse with bland incredulity. "It seems only yesterday Father was adoze in his study over the works of Yeats."

"A sainted man," Maureen trilled reverently.

"A hothouse flower, more like it," Miss Muldoon countered.

"A free-handed man," said Terence ponderously, then added with the sudden dazed expression of one beaned by a clown's bladder: "A hothouse flower? Your *father?*"

"I was referring to Yeats. In his latter years he found temperatures under ninety intolerable. I'm told he wrote some of his best and final work in steam baths."

"Yeats?" Maureen's wish-washy eyes sought her brother's for edification. "Did we ever meet him?"

"Once at a wake, I think," Terence replied.

"Make yourselves at home," Miss Muldoon said, terminating the conversation. "I've a letter to write before dinner."

It was a few minutes after six. At ease on the chaise longue in the sitting room, Miss Muldoon was enjoying a second glass of very good sherry when a discreet knock sounded on her bedroom door.

Rising, she went to the half-open door of the sitting room. Just up

the hall Maureen prepared to knock again.

"I'm in here," Miss Muldoon said.

"Oh, yes. It's about dinner, Margaret."

"I'll settle for a dish of soup."

"Any special kind, Margaret?"

"I'm not fussy tonight, Maureen."

"There's a good variety on the pantry shelves. Terry and I thought we'd have oxtail."

"That'll suit me fine."

"I'll bring you up a bowl in a few minutes, then."

"That's not necessary, Maureen. I'll be coming down."

"But, Margaret, if you're not feeling well—"

"I'll feel the better for a trudge down the stairs."

The Sheehans, both of whom were competent in the kitchen if nowhere else, had done well for themselves.

Following the soup, which they finished in a trice, they figuratively rolled up their sleeves and dug into a repast that would have foundered Falstaff—thick sirloin steaks, mounds of mashed potatoes drenched in brown gravy, clumps of asparagus dressed with hollandaise, and a huge Waldorf salad, supplemented by hot buttered rolls and drafts of dark German beer.

Still toying with her soup, Miss Muldoon commented, "Well, you seem to have found everything."

"I had trouble finding the freezer," Terence tore the words from the process of mastication. "Back of cellar once. Up front now."

Miss Muldoon said, "It's a different freezer from Father's."

"Thought so. Smaller."

"More efficient."

"Stocked well." Terence buttered his fifth or sixth roll. "Margaret, while I think of it." He bit the roll in half. "Studs."

"What?"

"Studs." He took a great swig of beer. "Joists."

"Yes?"

"Near the freezer, above it."

"*Yes?*"

"Riddled with termites."

"Herbert said as much recently."

"Dangerous, Margaret."

"I imagine so."

"Should do something about it. Maintain the property properly. Maintain its value."

"Thanks for the advice, Terence. I'll do something."

"Sooner the better."

For dessert the Sheehans treated themselves to king-size sundaes in Waterford-glass finger bowls.

"How much Waterford do you actually have, Margaret?" Maureen asked, watching Miss Muldoon pour herself a cup of tea.

"Too much."

"Nobody could have too much. Oh, I just love it. It's so solid and heavy, even the salt and pepper shakers."

"And expensive," Terence mumbled, spooning ice cream into his face. "Those two decanters from Uncle John. I priced them at Hungerford's. Hundred fifty each."

"And that was years ago," Maureen said. "I bet they're much higher today, with inflation and all."

Miss Muldoon decided to dangle bait. "What I ought to do is pick out some of the more useful pieces—wine glasses and sweetmeat jars and such—and let you both have them now."

A gleam of avarice shone in Maureen's ordinarily vapid eyes. "Why, Margaret, that would be marvelous."

"After all, you're going to get the whole kit and caboodle one of these days."

Terence licked whipped cream from his slavering lips. "Sure, we could choose the items now, while we're here."

"Not so fast," Miss Muldoon raised a thin but authoritative hand. "All in my own good time."

"Oh, of course, Margaret, of course," Maureen said hastily.

"If you'll excuse me I'm going to retire." Miss Muldoon rose, started for the hallway door, then stopped and turned with an air of uncertainty. "I think I'll take a little sedation tonight. Now where did I put those capsules?"

The Sheehans remained dumb.

"I probably left them in the bathroom off the kitchen."

"I'll go see," Maureen said, hoisting herself from the chair and waddling off through the service door.

"Don't tell me, Margaret," said Terence, an accusatory ring in his voice, "that you have to take stuff to make you sleep."

"Rarely."

"Myself, I sleep like a log."

And eat like a hog, Miss Muldoon added silently.

Maureen returned. "Is this it?" She held out the brown phial. "From O'Hara's?"

"Yes, thanks." Miss Muldoon snapped off the cap and tilted a single capsule into her palm. "One does the trick." Replacing the cap, she handed the phial back to Maureen. "I'll be obliged if you return it where you found it. I don't like having it handy. At my age, I might absent-mindedly take an extra capsule and that could be curtains."

Miss Muldoon, while not subscribing to the aphorism on the relative thickness of blood to water, didn't really expect the Sheehans to be the ones to disprove it. Not that she underestimated their greed and stupidity, but she'd always seen in them a clumsy instinct for self-preservation. They had been heirs presumptive for so long that they'd never risk the status on a reckless gamble that might make them heirs in fact.

The next morning at eight her bedroom door resounded with two courteous taps.

Miss Muldoon was already wide awake. Propped up in bed, she was frowningly engrossed in the *Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, one of her father's favorite books, which she'd been trying to appreciate most of her life. "Come round through the sitting room," she called out. "The bedroom door's locked."

There was a muffled response. A moment later Maureen, bearing a heavily laden tray, filled the sitting-room entrance, her round face wreathed with a cheery smile that never reached her dull eyes. "Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Quite well, thank you."

"We thought you'd enjoy a good breakfast. Last night you pecked like a bird."

"That looks like enough for the Cork militia."

"Scrambled eggs with mushrooms. Muffins and marmalade." Unfolding the legs of the tray, Maureen began to place it across her cousin's lap. "And a pot of coffee."

"Don't put it here," Miss Muldoon snapped. "I can't bear eating in bed. Set it over there on the bureau."

Maureen looked like a child who had been slapped. "You mean you don't want breakfast?"

"I didn't say that, Maureen. I simply don't want it in the bloody bed with me."

"You *will* eat it then?"

"As soon as I wash my face and put in my teeth."

Taking an unspoken cue, Maureen reluctantly withdrew.

Miss Muldoon eased out of bed and into a pair of old slippers. Going to the tray, she lifted the silver lid. With a fork she nibbled the eggs.

As sweet as candy.

She poured a cup of coffee and sipped it black and sugarless.

Like syrup.

Silly devils, she thought. They couldn't wait.

An hour later Miss Muldoon, fully dressed, found the Sheehans in the dining room. They were lingering over the remains of what must have been a sumptuous repast if one were to judge from the number and variety of dishes on the table.

Her presence plainly surprised them. Their stupefied eyes traveled as one to the tray she was carrying.

Terence finally managed speech. "How are you feeling, Margaret?"

"Right as a trivet."

Maureen blinked as if witnessing an unwelcome vision. "Did you enjoy your, uh, your, uh. . ."

"Eggs?"

"Yes."

"I avoid them. Too much cholesterol. And I never take coffee. Tea's my drink—tea and, on occasion, whiskey."

"You should have told us," Terence said in a tone of reprimand.

"You should have known," Miss Muldoon said, feeling wicked and very much alive.

She went to the kitchen and deposited the tray in the sink. Then she stepped into the bathroom and checked the medicine cabinet. The brown phial was still there—but empty.

"I've imposed on you long enough," Miss Muldoon said after lunch.

The Sheehans mumbled protests in unison.

"But I must impose upon you once again."

The Sheehans tried not to look apprehensive.

"I'd be obliged," she continued, "if you'd drop me off at the Community Medical Building on your way home."

"*On our way home?*" Again the Sheehans spoke together, with shared astonishment.

"That's what I said."

"But we thought—"

"I appreciate your concern for my health, but last night's sleep really restored me back to normal."

"But we planned—"

"I have an appointment with Doctor Coleman in thirty minutes."

Terence drove. Maureen sat in the front seat, her bulky shoulder against his.

Miss Muldoon, in the rear, felt the Peugeot overflowing with flesh and grumpy silence. The Sheehans were obviously confused and boiling mad.

As the car neared the Community Medical Building, Maureen ventured in her paradoxically girlish voice, "I've been remembering what you said about the Waterford glass, Margaret."

"Yes?"

"Are you still going to—"

"Of course." Poor fools, set on salvaging something.

"But when?" grumped Terence.

"In a couple of days."

Almost palpably taut hamstrings loosened.

Dr. Coleman said, "Damn it all, Peg, if you aren't a new woman."

"An old one, Ed, with a new lease."

"Good as new."

"Speaking of old, though, it's the house. Termites are devouring the foundations. And in the name of Father, I want to remedy the damage they've done. Don't you have carpenters at the Institute?"

"We teach all crafts, Peg. The best carpenter is a young lad I use myself—Brian Healy. Deaf and dumb but a veritable genius with hammer and saw."

"Is he free to do some work for me?"

"Not free, but nonunion."

"I'll pay him union wages with a bonus to boot if he reports to work n the morning."

"He'll be there. But what's the hurry, Peg?"

"I want to visit the old sod with an easy conscience, Ed."

"Erin go bragh."

Brian Healy, a freckle-faced youth with tight knots of red hair, studiously perused Miss Muldoon's written instructions, then looked at her.

"Do you understand, Brian?"

Brian nodded and went to work.

Three days later Miss Muldoon phoned the Sheehans and told Maureen, who answered the phone, that a box of Waterford glass was packed and waiting for them.

"I suggest you pick it up soon," she said, "because I'll be going abroad as soon as Agnes and Herbert return."

"Oh, glory," Maureen chirped, "we'll be over tomorrow morning."

And so they were, all 500 pounds of them.

Miss Muldoon led them upstairs to her bedroom and pointed to an old steamer trunk with leather handles at either side.

"There you are," she said.

"The trunk itself is an antique," Maureen cooed. "We don't know what to say, Margaret. Do we, Terry?"

"You grab one handle, I'll grab the other," Terence said.

"Glory, it's heavy," Maureen said.

"Damn heavy," grunted Terence. "Which way do we go?"

The juxtaposition of bureau and bed prevented them from taking it through the bedroom door.

Miss Muldoon said, "I'm afraid you'll have to go through the sitting room."

Jointly they hoisted, Maureen seeming to take somewhat more of the trunk's weight than Terence. Their gasps of exertion were constant and unified.

They jockeyed their burden across the threshold and stood breathing heavily for a moment—but for a moment only. Then, before they could

take another step, came the excruciating screech of wood strained to the breaking point. Next, the lumpish twosome, still holding the trunk by its handles, dropped precipitately from sight. From the floor below, which was the front parlor, they sent up a magnified howl abruptly overridden by the sound of more wood being rent asunder.

Two days later Dr. Coleman was on the phone. "Well," he said in his dry professional voice.

"I'm quite well, thank you," said Miss Muldoon.

"Tell me what went on over there, Peg."

"An unfortunate accident, Ed."

"You've conned the police, obviously, and the insurance investigator, but don't try that line on your old family physician. Brian, remember, is one of my boys."

"And a fine boy he is."

"Truthful too. And he's told me in so many vagrant words—sign language to you—that the job you set him doing had nothing at all to do with repairing damage done by termites."

"Didn't he tell you he cut away the affected joists and studs?"

"He did, and he says you had him saw nearly through a number of them not at all affected. *Nearly* through."

"That was simply to facilitate the work of the mechanics when they come to install the elevator."

"So Brian informed me—which was the first I ever heard of this elevator."

"It's been in the back of my mind for a long time. While Brian was here I decided to go ahead with the project."

"Oh, Peg, you're a plausible biddy. But please answer me one question. How did those overweight cousins of yours happen to be carrying a trunk full of books across that weakened part of the second floor?"

"They were giving me a helping hand, Ed, transporting some of Father's treasured Irish tomes to the cellar."

"But why didn't you warn them?"

"I was asleep at the time, in the downstairs den."

"At eleven in the morning?"

"That's right. I hadn't slept a wink all night, so after breakfast I decided a nap was in order."

"And I suppose the Sheehans arrived without your knowing it and went right upstairs to take care of the trunk."

"Exactly."

"And you didn't hear them until they plunged through two floors to the cellar?"

"No. And you can believe me, Ed, when I tell you it was the fault of those capsules you prescribe for me. I took one just before I lay down and as usual it put me out like a light."

At the other end of the phone the silence went on and on and on.

When Grace saw his haggard face, she'd take him back . . .

HANGOVER

by DOROTHY BENJAMIN

"Grace?" the sleeping man muttered uneasily as a pair of faceless orbs loomed above him. Suspended in a dark void, the orbs ballooned almost to bursting, then suddenly plunged toward him.

With a strangulated cry, Barney Stoner catapulted over the edge of the sofa bed onto the floor where, fully awake now, he lay shuddering.

What a nightmare! Those *eyes*. This hangover sure was a beaut!

He envied Babsiebaby her capacity to awaken fresh each morning

with nary a sign of having tumbled into bed in the wee hours, tanked. But then, she was years younger than he, Barney reminded himself. She was barely thirty.

He struggled onto the bed as Babsiebaby came out of the bathroom. Undulating her way through the debris of last night's binge, she set off a tintinnabulation of sound as empty beer cans rolling across the grimy scarred floor collided with vagrant wine bottles.

"My *head*," he groaned.

Babsiebaby leaned over him, tittering. "D'ja-have-a-bad-dream-Barneybaby?"

The nasal baby-girl voice that had initially charmed him now grated on his nerves. So did her habit of running words together and appending "baby" to every name, including her own.

"Nah, I'm just doing my exercises," he answered sarcastically. "It's how I begin the day."

Which, Barney reflected grimly, was becoming more truth than jest. He'd never had so many hangovers as he'd had since meeting her. Was it three or four weeks ago that he'd moved in? He couldn't recall. Every time he tried to pinpoint the exact date he drew a blank. He was certain of one thing only—it was the night he'd left his wife.

Squealing, Babsiebaby brushed her bosom across Barney's chest. Embarrassed, Barney pretended to want a smoke and nudged her aside. He extracted a cigarette from his jacket on the sagging lounge chair beside the bed and winced as she thumped an ashtray down on his bare chest.

"Goin'-for-coffee-'n'-Danish-Barneybaby. Toodle-doo," she cooed and headed for the door.

"Damn it," Barney growled, lighting his cigarette. "Why the hell don't you make coffee here?" But the door had already shut behind her.

It bothered him that she never entered the tiny kitchen except for ice cubes or glasses. All their food was take-out. He hated coffee in plastic cups. At their backyard barbecues and family picnic trips, Grace had always seen to it that a china cup was available just for him.

Barney let his mind dwell nostalgically on the specialties Grace had prepared for him—boeuf Bourguignon, roast duckling, steak tartare, cherries jubilee—then he reined it in sharply. There was nothing to be gained by that. After twenty years of marriage, it simply hadn't been

enough. And why the hell should he feel guilty over that last quarrel that had precipitated their breakup?

So he drank a little. And had a short fuse. Since when did that constitute a crime? When it came right down to cases, he had plenty to complain about too. He was as much the injured party as Grace was.

Oh sure, she was sensitive. Heaven knows he'd been made aware of that often enough! But how long was he supposed to cater to that sensitivity—forever? What had really stuck in his craw was her lack of sexual responsiveness and he'd made no bones about telling her so.

"Perhaps you don't want me to be," she'd countered.

At that, he'd bellowed, "Don't give me any of that psychological crap!"

She'd shushed him. "*Please!* Lower your voice! Do you want Linda to hear you?"

Their eighteen-year-old daughter was upstairs in her bedroom, packing for her first term at college.

"Maybe it's time Linda learned the facts of life," he retorted.

"Barney, will you listen to me for once?" Grace's eyes were large in her slender delicate-boned face. "You ride roughshod over me and when I end up tied in knots and can't unbend, you're angry. And when I try to explain you pay no attention."

"You've been handing me that baloney long enough, Grace!" he shot back. "Half of our married life I've had nothing but the cold shoulder from you! Oh, you're great at excuses. I'll give you that. First, when Linda took sick, you were tuckered out, you said. But when she got better, you found another reason. There was always something. You're so damn full of excuses!" As his anger increased, so had the volume of his voice against Grace's frantic gestures for him to tone it down. "What do you think I'm made of?" he'd demanded.

"You want the truth? I'll tell you! You know I don't want you to drink. I've told you often enough. Well, the truth is I can't stand you to come near me then—to touch me. You disgust me! Do you understand? You *disgust* me—"

Driving in the car he decided to go to Fenway Park for the baseball game, figuring the game would hold his attention and help him calm down.

But not paying attention to the road, he'd taken a wrong turn and

wound up in this skid row neighborhood. Stopping to ask for directions, he'd gone into a sleazy bar nearby for a drink. That's when he'd met Babsiebaby.

As he'd slid onto the stool beside her, she had lowered her eyes demurely, captivating him by the mockery of the gesture, and before he'd finished his second drink she had invited him to her apartment. He'd been here ever since.

Barney ground out his cigarette in the ashtray balanced on his chest. Where the hell was Babsiebaby with the coffee? His throat felt parched, there was a sour taste in his mouth, and his head throbbed.

An open bottle of wine, half empty, stood on the table. But it seemed to him only a wino would drink so early in the day, and he was far from that, Grace's complaints to the contrary.

Despite his resentment, he found himself wondering how she was reacting to his absence—grieving that he had left or relieved that he wasn't around to touch her?

Brooding, Barney surveyed his surroundings with distaste—the dark woodwork and fading wallpaper with its vintage motif of interlocking floral wreaths, the mess all about him. What a contrast to the neat attractive suburban home he had left!

Thinking how difficult it was to believe that this dilapidated building had once been an elegant bowfront townhouse, he had dozed off. Then the nightmarish orbs had roused Barney once again. With a yell, he overturned the ashtray.

Groaning, he sat on the edge of the sofa bed, dry washing his face. Feeling the stubble on his chin, he thought he might as well go shower and shave. He didn't dare risk falling asleep and glimpsing those awful eyes again. He pulled himself to his feet.

Maneuvering his way to the bathroom, he showered and was preparing to lather his face when he reared back, shocked.

In his youth, growing up in the home of a handsome cousin, he'd considered himself ugly in comparison. But when he gained maturity he had come to terms with the fact that he was just a plain-faced big bear of a man.

The image he saw in the mirror, though, was something else. Pouches under red-rimmed eyes, face pasty, mouth slack. He couldn't have deteriorated at such a clip in only a few short weeks of heavy

drinking.

Fury, fear, and frustration whipped together and his fist shot out and smashed his reflection in the mirror. Innumerable odd-imaged eyes stared back at him from the web of cracks. Drops of blood from his hand spattered onto winking fragments in the sink.

Turning on the tap, Barney let cold water run over his knuckles, then he examined his hand to see if the bleeding had stopped. He smiled thinly, remembering the time when he was so enraged by his cousin's ridiculing his teenaged awkwardness that he'd gone for his cousin's throat and might have strangled him if his aunt hadn't intervened.

"You've got butcher's hands, Barney," she had told him icily and, hating his aunt and his cousin both, he'd quit their home forever.

Barney wrapped a towel around his hand and returned to the living room, wondering what he was going to do. On Saturdays Babsiebaby's crowd gathered early, which meant half of them would be stinko by nightfall and the other half would be guzzling like mad to catch up. He'd had it with that scene. He ought to cut out. But where to?

Restive, he picked up a crumpled newspaper from the floor and spread it on the table, setting the bottle of wine down beside the paper.

Scanning the sports section, he noted that the New York Yankees were in town for their final series with the Red Sox. If he and Grace were still together, he thought, they'd be taking in the games. The Red Sox-Yankee games were their favorites.

Barney flipped the pages of the paper moodily. He supposed Grace deserved some credit. She hadn't particularly cared for baseball in the beginning, but she'd gone along to humor him and ended up becoming a fan.

He felt a spurt of excitement as the thought flashed into his mind to phone Grace and invite her to this afternoon's game. Well, why not? What did he have to lose?

The truth was he was fed up with this catch-as-catch-can existence. He needed order in his life again. And what better way to restore it than to give himself over to Grace's ministrations? For all her cool appearance, she was at heart the Great Mother.

He felt sure she would agree to meet him, if only to hear what he

had to say. Grace prided herself on being fair-minded. His mood lightening, Barney plotted his strategy.

He'd make a play for Grace's sympathy—how he had been so upset by their quarrel that he'd holed up in a cheap room and hardly eaten or slept since. One look at his face and she would surely buy his story.

Then, when he'd softened her up, he'd promise to cut down on his drinking and make an effort to control his temper. That should bring her around completely. After all, he had never made such promises to her before.

Pleased with himself, Barney went to the phone and dialed his home number.

"How are you, Linda?" he said cheerfully, when he heard his daughter's tentative "Hello?"

"Hi, Linda. It's Dad. How's college?" he asked.

"*Dad*?" Linda gasped. "Where are you?"

"Never mind that now. Put your mother on the phone, will you?"

"You want to speak with Mother?"

"That's what I said," he answered irritably, suspecting that Linda would be less than overjoyed at the prospect of his return home. Besides siding with her mother in her parents' quarrels, Linda had been resentful of him ever since her early teens because he was a strict disciplinarian. Well, he didn't believe in letting kids run wild.

Realizing this was the morning that Grace usually did her marketing, he said, "*Listen*—" his tone of voice purposely authoritative so Linda would understand he wasn't going to tolerate any attempt to come between him and Grace. "I want you to give your mother a message for me. When she gets back from shopping, tell her I'd like her to meet me at noon today at the restaurant near Kenmore Square—where we used to eat before the ball game."

"The place with the deli counter? Is that the one you mean?"

"Uh-huh," he said, pleasantly surprised that she was being cooperative. "Tell your mother I'll be waiting. Don't forget—noon."

Barney rubbed his hands together in anticipation. What a lucky break, not finding her at home. It was possible she would have refused to meet him out of peeve that he had waited so long to call. This way, peeved or not, she'd consider it cruel to deliberately let him hang around the restaurant, waiting in vain.

It was time he got on the ball. He wasn't dressed yet, and he'd better be at the restaurant to greet Grace when she arrived. Otherwise, with her blasted sensitivity, he'd have two strikes against him before he even had a chance to open his mouth.

Hurrying to the lounge chair for his jacket, Barney tripped on a discarded beer can. He grabbed the edge of the table to keep from losing his balance and the bottle of wine toppled over. He shrugged. Why bother righting it? What difference would it make in this mess anyway?

He grinned, visualizing Babsiebaby's anger when she discovered the spilled wine. Profligate in everything else, she hated to waste alcohol of any kind.

Buttoning his jacket, Barney thought smugly about how he had scored with her. Well, maybe he'd sneak a visit to her once in a while. He was going to have the best of both possible worlds. What Grace didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

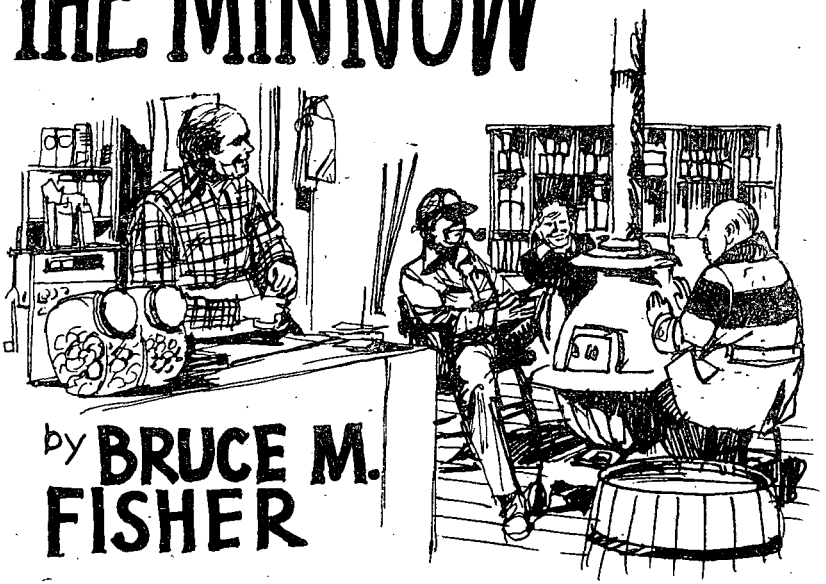
Whistling, he strode out of the apartment.

As the door clicked shut behind him, the last of the wine dribbled onto the newspaper, spreading a red stain over the photograph of a delicate-faced woman, under which the copy read:

> Homicide detectives are still seeking Barney Stoner, suspected of the strangulation slaying of his wife, Grace, a month ago.
>
> According to the couple's eighteen-year-old daughter, Linda, she came downstairs after hearing her parents quarreling to find her mother lying dead on the living-room floor and her father gone. She has not seen or heard from her father since that night.
>
> So far, police say, they have no leads as to Stoner's whereabouts.

There are many different fish in the sea. . .

THE MINNOW



by BRUCE M. FISHER

"No!" I yelled, it was such an unexpected and shocking prospect. "Damned if I will! I'll shoot myself first!"

"Suit yourself," the kid said. "You're entitled to that alternative, I guess."

In the darkness of the fish cabin, he leaned forward over the twenty-inch-square hole in the floor. Below the ice, a small perch with a big pike hook through its back swam in slow despairing circles. The

greenish glow of the ice-filtered sunlight reflected upward from the sandy bottom of the bay didn't make his thin features any more pleasant.

"It's not the only alternative," I muttered.

"Oh?" He reached for the silkline and lowered a small hook baited with a crumb of raw fat pork as more perch drifted into sight. He caught one, jerked it wriggling from the water, and dropped it into the jute sack on the wall. It flopped a couple of times. I grabbed the kid by the neck.

I'll give him credit. I had him head-down over my arm, his black mop sponging water, when he said, "Better think twice, Jake."

Jake. Not Mr. Gimball, Jake. But he'd made his point. "Damn you," I said, hauling him back onto his stool.

He said, "That's better," and slicked the water from his hair. "Now, all things considered, you've got twenty-four hours." He faced me, the jagged scar from his cheekbone to his jaw giving him a lizardy look. "Any questions?"

This blithe conversation took place before mercury and other chemical muck in the Saint Lawrence spoiled our appetites for pike, though we still eat perch, they being lower on the ecology chain. It was some time ago.

Bobby Merton was thirteen then, and built like a minnow. The accident was the reason he thought and talked like a man. You don't lie pinned in a car on its side in a ditch with your father's blood dripping on you all night long without aging mentally. They never did get the truck driver who swerved over the double white line and wrote off Henry Merton and his car.

After the funeral, I was the first to drive the widow to the hospital to see her son. It wasn't pity for Bobby's gashed face and broken leg that brought Charles Hagstrom, Lloyd Tarn, and Billy Patterson into the act. Well, Billy maybe, but not the other two.

Marie Merton was worth going after. She was a stocky, tanned farm woman with black hair and brown eyes, not beautiful, but with a kind of latent vibrancy that—well, just being near her made you want to get closer. Besides, she had three hundred acres of land, with half a mile of river frontage that would bring a small fortune from city people hankering after summer cottages. All you had to do was chop it up.

Of course, I only had Marie's welfare at heart.

So did the other three.

I couldn't see her marrying Charles Hagstrom and going to live away out there on the point that keeps the river out of the bay, a mile from the nearest neighbor. Charles was a long lean muskellunge, a cold polite man whose thin-lipped smile never reached his tawny watchful eyes. But he wanted Marie. And money, you know, counts.

Lloyd Tarn was a sharp-nosed trout with the quick movements and shrewd expression you might expect in one who raced a couple of nags at Downmore Track each week. After the new highway went through and Hagstrom bought those three acres, Lloyd had only five brushy river acres left. He was after Marie for free paddock and pasture land.

Billy Patterson should have taken up where Henry'd left off, like everybody expected him to. But that slope-shouldered perch had pride. He kept right on working for Sandy Cameron instead of jumping right in to a going concern for no more cost than the minister and the license fee. Marie had to sell the stock to bury Henry and meet the last payment on the farm.

That left me, a portly and dignified bass, thirty-eight and kindly by nature, a little bald but a mighty fine catch, being fifth-generation owner of Crabvale's general store. As my wife, Marie would have the honored Gimball name, the finest brick house in the village, plenty of friends, and as much spending money as I could countenance.

Granted, the general-store business isn't what it was in my father's day when farmers shipped milk to the city by morning train and the train stopped again, evenings, to clatter the empty cans off on the siding. The store was crowded in those days. These days, most folks do their shopping in town and only stop in for something they forgot. The post office, rear corner left, is a help.

There's always conversation in an old-fashioned general store, but it takes a plump genial face behind the counter to draw out the confidences. An expression of mild interest helps. It's better still if you appear to be busy. Then people shovel their news at you like jellybeans.

I loved picking the juicy red and black bits out of the paler ones like weather, sports, and who got caught in the power take-off recently, and wasn't it too bad, et cetera. I could get six versions of why Hendryk's maid left when she did and give you the correct answer before you could stack a carton of corn. (It wasn't the hired man or anything

else; she was allergic to hay was all.)

But I was stumped when Charles Hagstrom came from the city and ended up building that house on the point, with the trees thinned out and a road bulldozed in.

Country folks generally respect a city man with money. I got a dozen reasons why he'd come and built there, everything from him being tired of the rat race to that he was writing a book. Which sounded all right except that he could have bought a house in the village for a tenth of the money. And why did he buy a small but powerful motorboat when, according to Joe Leduc, our local trapper, it never left the boathouse?

It bugged me. I couldn't sleep nights. I put on weight by nibbling abstractedly at the big round of cheese on the counter. I sharpened my ears for a transient word but Hagstrom kept his thoughts at home and folks took him at face value, a thing that I, Jake Gimball, never do.

In desperation, I wove a new ribbon into the beat-up old typewriter in the attic and wrote a letter to him, playing the subtle hint that I knew everything when, in fact, I knew nothing. You'd be surprised how often that works. I didn't sign it, just gave a box number in town for his answer.

Why did I rent a box in town under a different name when I ran a post office right in my own store? Heavens to Betsy, if people ever got the idea that I was *nosey*, I'd never hear nothing no more.

That was six weeks before Lloyd Tarn paid $1,200 for Lucky Lad, I remember. You wouldn't think a spavined bay that thin and short in the gears would win many races, but it did—until the afternoon the sulkies piled up and they had to shoot it on account of a broken leg.

Next time store business took me to town, I found a small packet in the box. I hadn't really expected an answer, at best a few puzzled questions to establish a link, but when I opened the packet that night in my den and looked at the $5,000, my eyes popped. Then I got the creeping chills.

There wasn't a word of explanation, not even a signature. Just fifty $100 bills. Which could easily be traced back to the source. Me!

I admit I was scared. One-hundred-dollar bills are as scarce as flamingoes in Crabvale. I was mighty careful about getting them changed. And when I bought my Buick, I borrowed at the bank as a safeguard . . .

Shortly after, Henry Merton's death took the heat off.

When Bobby came home from the hospital and we four suitors arrived in Marie's yard on the same evening, we put our backs against Hagstrom's Mercury and contemplated ways of divvying up her time. Billy spit out the blade of grass he was chewing and said, "I'll call on Marie every Sunday evening." With that, he stalked to his rusty Chevy and drove away.

Charles, Lloyd, and I decided to rotate Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays between us.

The kid was a drawback. Whenever I'd visit Marie, he'd be sitting on the kitchen stool with his cast up on a chair. He never spoke, just watched me with those big deep-blue eyes. I didn't notice at first because the scar diverted attention from his eyes. But pretty soon it got to me. He was always watching. It wasn't the chaperone look either.

Clara Tarn, Lloyd's sister, was another pest. When a man's busy romanticizing, another woman's presence makes his tenderest words sound like the gushings of a love-sick fool. It seemed she was always there. I figured Lloyd put her up to it to cramp my style. When I accused him of it, he just gave me a funny look and laughed fit to bust his sides. When I grumbled that it wasn't fair, he nearly choked and reeled out of the store.

I despised Clara after that—but never mind that. The minute I'd arrive, she'd quit talking to Marie and play Scrabble, checkers, or rummy with Bobby at the dining-room table, her back a straightedge —in keeping with her personality.

At twenty-eight, her eyes were her best feature, being a clear golden brown, but neither bangs nor an upsweep of that brown hair could pretty the angular lines of her sullen face. Her skinny frame didn't have a curve worth noting. She could cut you to pieces with a saw-toothed adjective. It was no wonder she'd never got a man.

That first evening, she left before me. I thought of going home by another road but decided it wouldn't be neighborly. So I stopped and said, "Going my way, beautiful?" But she caught the sarcasm and snapped, "Not with you. I'd rather walk."

My conscience cleared and I zoomed right by her after that.

Business picked up. Farmers dropped into the store to give me sly grins. They enjoyed that. The race for Marie's hand was in the air like

election time, everybody rooting for his own candidate. It might be mentioned that women who once pushed marriageable daughters at Hagstrom no longer lauded his austerity, his noble bearing, or the way he smoked a cigar.

Bobby missed school opening in September, his leg still being in a cast, but he got it off in November and built a fish cabin out of some plywood that Henry'd bought from a wagon box but never had time to finish.

I teased him a bit about fishing being more fun than school, hoping to get on his good side, but it didn't work. Cool as river mist, he said, "Mr. Gimball, the day before Mother remarries, her choice will have a talk with me. Until that time, court her, not me."

When the river froze over, he got Billy Patterson to haul his cabin down to the bay. He didn't give me a chance to supply him with free hooks, lines, swivels, and sinkers; instead he gave Jesse Tait money to buy them for him.

Because of that, I gave Marie two cashmere sweaters for Christmas instead of only one. She was built for sweaters, that woman.

I won't go into the Valentine's Day fiasco except to say that when you bid $35.00 for the privilege of sitting with a woman at a box social, you'd better first make sure that the right name is written on the bottom of your box of goodies.

Anyway, I got more persuasive after that. Spring was coming on with all its sappy sentiments; her sighs were getting more frequent, her smiles less. If I was going to get all that beautiful river frontage, I had to get her soon.

Wednesday, the third week in March, it was my turn to visit Marie. All day, I'd been working on a spiel that would melt icicles. Imagine my disappointment, chagrin, and anxiety when I saw Hagstrom's Mercury, Patterson's Chevy, and a police cruiser ahead of me.

I found Billy in the rocker near the stove beside Bobby's stool. He had given the kid a ride home. Hagstrom was sitting at the table, opposite Marie. Two cops were perched on the sofa.

Constable "Murky" Martin was a village boy not long removed, a redhead like Lloyd Tarn, but taller, more disciplined, with a deceptively easy air. He introduced Constable Jack, who had a face like a dogfish and a pad on his knee. I took a seat near the sink and asked, "What's up, Murk?"

"Lloyd Tarn's missing again. You know how it is. When did you last see him, Jake?"

I thought back. "Monday morning. He came in for cigarettes. That's not much time to be missing, Murk."

"Heck, no. But when Clara gets excited, she's a regular bat in the hair for persistence."

I said, "He's probably flitted off to the city to see a hockey game," meaning the hot spots, just giving the hockey excuse for Marie's benefit. "When did Clara see him last?"

"Monday morning, at breakfast. His pickup is still in the yard. She wasn't worried until Jim Thatcher phoned, wanting to know why Lloyd didn't turn up yesterday to finish the Black Pride deal."

"Black Pride!" Billy exclaimed. "That horse will cost him!"

Hagstrom quit stroking Marie's hand. "More than a thousand dollars?"

"More like five thousand."

"Lloyd can afford it," I snapped, miffed because I hadn't heard of it sooner. "You wouldn't think it to look at him, but I happen to know he still has most of the expropriation money he got when the new highway went through."

"Indeed?" said Charles. His hooded eyes sent a chill down my back that I'll never forget. Because I knew he knew who had sent him that letter. And I knew he had just realized it. I was starting to quiver when Murk asked, "What's this about a thousand dollars?"

Hagstrom said blandly, "I gave Lloyd a thousand dollars against his land along the river, with the option of buying it outright. That was on Monday morning too."

"What time?"

"About noon. He phoned earlier and asked me to pick him up at the old blacksmith shop."

"Sneaking out on Clara, eh? And leaving his truck in the yard? When did you drive him home?"

"I didn't. He insisted on walking home. We'd had brandy. The last I saw, he was walking down my driveway to the Old River Road. I spent the afternoon in Jesse Tait's fish cabin."

"Did you mention Lloyd's thousand dollars to Jesse?"

"I may have. Why?"

Murk laughed. "I think I'll put a beeper on Lloyd when he turns up

at the racetrack on Saturday. Just before the first race. He could have flagged the bus to the city—it goes by your place shortly after noon—but it's not like him to miss a deal for Black Pride after losing Lucky Lad."

"There are wolves in the city," Hagstrom said. "I should have driven him straight home instead of hurrying to fish through the ice." He smiled. "It's a great sport, isn't it, Bobby?"

The kid didn't answer. He had the knack of staring at a point midway in the room, listening, looking at nobody, seeing everyone. Then he focused on Hagstrom with a dawning look of horror and said clearly, "Lloyd didn't take the bus."

"He didn't? How do you know?"

"Because he's dead! And you killed him!"

"Bobby!" Marie's dark eyes flashed. "What a dreadful thing to say!"

"But he did! He did!"

Hagstrom went rigid. "My God, Bobby," he croaked. "Do you hate me that much?"

Murk shook his head. "I've heard of the rivalry here—begging your pardon, ma'am—but this is going too far."

Billy, quiet broad-faced Billy, who hadn't changed from his stable clothes, put an arm around the kid's shoulders. "If you're looking for leads," he drawled, "why don't you follow one?"

Murk sighed. He got the picture. "Bobby, did you see Mr. Hagstrom kill Mr. Tarn?"

"Not exactly."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"In my fish cabin."

"What day? What time?"

"It was Monday. I'd just finished eating my lunch when they came from the point to the bay."

"You looked out and saw them?"

"No, I didn't open the cabin door. That scares the fish."

"So how do you know it was Mr. Hagstrom and Mr. Tarn?"

"I could tell by the way they walked."

"That's ridiculous!"

"No, it isn't. Mr. Hagstrom has a long slow stride and Mr. Tarn has a short bouncy one. There's no snow on the bay since the thaw last week, just a frozen sprinkling to make good walking, and I heard them

plain. Two men coming but only one walking away."

Hagstrom interrupted, "It's possible that he heard me walking across the ice to Jesse Tait's cabin. But Lloyd wasn't with me."

Murk said, "Exactly where was this murder committed, Bobby?"

"About two hundred feet south of my cabin. Lloyd's in the fish hole I moved from at daybreak last Monday."

"You mean Mr. Hagstrom waited until you moved your cabin, then got Mr. Tarn on the pretext of buying land, and marched him to that vacated fish hole, killed him, and shoved him in under the ice?"

Marie broke in. "Bobby! You stop it, right this instant!" She appealed to the policemen. "He hasn't been the same since the accident. He was delirious afterward and—"

Murk said, "We'll take that into account, ma'am."

Hagstrom said, "I'm sorry, my dear. I had cherished some hope, but if the boy feels that way about me, I must bow out."

He turned to the policemen. "Gentlemen, I don't like Lloyd Tarn. But I wouldn't kill him, not even for the finest woman in the world. And if I did, it wouldn't be on a broad open place like the bay, in clear sight, without even a shrub for concealment."

Billy spoke up. "It wouldn't be in clear sight of anyone. Yours is the only house overlooking the bay and every one of those fishermen has his eyes glued to the water every minute of the day. Where else could you get rid of a body in wintertime? If it stayed down, it would never be found. If it rose, it would freeze tight to the underside of the ice and go downriver with the spring breakup."

Murk frowned. "Bobby, if Mr. Hagstrom killed Mr. Tarn, why didn't he do it on the river behind his house where nobody could see him and a strong current would carry the body away?"

"Because he's not like us," Bobby persisted. "He'd chop his feet off trying to cut a hole through the ice. He had to have one ready."

"You didn't hear anything else? No voices raised in argument? Not a yell or sounds of a struggle? The thud of a blow? Or a gunshot, maybe? If you could hear footsteps, you could hear other sounds as well. Did you?"

"No, sir. Nothing. Just footsteps."

Murk shook his head. "We'll investigate, of course. It won't take long. There's hardly any current in the bay itself."

Hagstrom stood up. "Gentlemen, I've had enough. If you need me,

you'll find me at home in the morning." He stopped halfway to the door and said quietly, "Good night, Jake."

Our eyes met briefly; a different look this time, one of complete understanding.

I said, "Good night, Charles," and shook my head sadly to indicate what I thought of the affair.

Bobby was quieter by morning. He seemed confused when Murk knocked on his cabin door at ten o'clock, reluctant to show us the ice-hole that supposedly held Lloyd Tarn. Hagstrom raised a quizzical eyebrow. I gave him a good-morning nod. Several ice fishermen joined the group.

It had frozen hard during the night. Jesse Tait brought an axe and cleared two inches of new ice from the hole. The black water steamed faintly in the sunlight. Murk tossed his coat down and unlaced his boots. Bobby's mouth fell open. "What are you going to do?"

"Do?" said Murk. "Why, I'm going down there to get Lloyd Tarn's body." He stood on his coat and peeled down to his long johns. Bobby glanced in the direction of home.

Murk stripped, giving us the benefit of a lean muscular body glowing with health. "Last chance, kid. Is Lloyd here or not?"

Bobby looked up from the steaming water to Murk's chiselled features. "I—I don't know," he quavered. "Maybe I just imagined it. It's so quiet in a fish cabin—and it seemed so real, but maybe—" He turned away, his thin shoulders heaving.

Billy touched his arm. "Tell the truth, Bobby. If you were lying about hearing footsteps, admit it now."

"I don't *know*, Billy. Maybe I dreamt it. Maybe I fell asleep in my cabin and dreamt it. I do that sometimes when the fish aren't biting. I get so tired walking through the deep snow and—"

"I understand," Billy said. "I know how it is."

Hagstrom said, "There's more at stake here than a runabout fool's location. I insist you search this hole and clear me of suspicion."

"Don't worry," said Murk. "We'll search it."

You'd never get me into a frigid black hole like that with only three feet of water between ice and bottom. Murk tied a nylon rope around his chest, adjusted a pair of water goggles, sat down, stuck his legs into the icy water, breathed in and out mightily, and slid himself in. Con-

stable Jack glanced at his watch and paid out the rope carefully.

It was so quiet you could hear that damned watch ticking. We thought Murk was never coming up. When he did, he kept his face out of the sunlight. He took another great breath and went down again. After the third time, he held up his arms and we hauled him dripping onto the ice.

He grabbed a bath towel from Constable Jack and toweled himself until his skin was almost as red as his hair. "Nothing down there in a twenty-foot radius," he said, and got dressed as if he didn't know we'd be talking about his icy dip for months.

Nobody looked at the kid. He sniffled a couple of times. Then, just as everybody was leaving, he tugged at my arm and asked piteously, "Please, Mr. Gimball. Will you stay with me for a while? I need somebody—" And he stumbled toward his cabin.

Well, sir! I'd always figured I was the one to marry Marie. There was Billy, waiting to commiserate with the kid, but Bobby had chosen me. It was a great feeling.

When he closed the cabin door, we waited for our eyes to adjust to the darkness. I was smiling, making plans, when he said, "I put on a pretty good act back there, don't you think?"

"Act?" I was suddenly wary—cold.

"Yes, not to give the game away until we had a little talk."

"Game? Talk?"

"Unless you'd rather I called the cops back. Aiding and abetting, they'd say. Or maybe accessory after the fact."

"What are you driving at?" My lips felt numb.

"Don't you think it's about time you got married, Mr. Gimball?"

"I've been thinking of it."

"And that a man should always pay his debts?"

"If he has an ounce of honor in him, certainly."

"Then you'd better pay yours, if you don't want to be known for the lush you are!"

Lush! There is no more hated a fish in the bay than the ugly, splotched grey-yellow-and-brown, dirty, scaleless, gluttonous monstrosity that we call a lush for want of its right name. Fishermen who find one on the pike hook in the morning fling it outside with a curse and a shudder of disgust. I felt sick.

He proceeded, "For almost a year, I've had nothing to do but study

four men and a woman. Every word, tone, gesture, expression, glance—everything, both conscious and uncon—"

"Get on with it," I muttered.

"O.K.," he said. "Well, I saw the look Mr. Hagstrom gave you last night when he realized there wasn't enough current here to carry the body away. And I saw the nod you gave him. I bet you didn't know you nodded, Mr. Gimball. But you did."

"What body? Lloyd's in the city!"

"No, Mr. Gimball. He's down in this hole, out of sight under the ice, and you know it."

"Do I?"

"Who else could have moved him from that hole to this? Not Mr. Hagstrom, for fear they'd be watching him. Not Billy. Only you."

"How do you know he was moved here?"

"Because I always leave the bait perch high in the ice hole so a pike won't take it during the night. This morning it was down near the bottom. Also, if anybody had noticed, there's a fresh glaze where water dripped and froze on the pebbly snow surface of the ice. Straight from that hole to this cabin."

Acid was eating my stomach. Just when I had something on Hagstrom at last, the kid had something on me. Sure, I'd moved the body. Who wouldn't? When all you need to diminish a threat and gain $10,000 or more is a few minutes with a bamboo pole and a meathook, you'd better take it. Or maybe you'd better not.

"O.K., kid," I said. "What's your price?"

"Nothing much," he said casually. "Just that you propose marriage to Clara Tarn."

That's when I yelled and damn near drowned him.

"I didn't hear any alarming sound," he said, "because sounds traveling through the air bounce away from the walls of a cabin. It's like being in a cocoon. But sounds made on ice travel through the water and come up into the cabin like they're amplified. I knew who made those footsteps. I could tell yours too, or Jesse Tait's, or Constable Martin's."

It was nothing new. I've got a blind cousin who calls me by name the moment I enter his door. It always startles me. Apparently, this kid—this *minnow*—had the same knack. "But how did you know he killed Lloyd?"

"Oh, a lot of things pointed to it," he said. "They didn't mean anything by themselves. Not until last night when you mentioned that Lloyd had money. Hagstrom didn't expect that. Remember the look he gave you? It scared you, didn't it, Jake? It would have scared anybody, I guess. But that's not the point."

"The point is that I've got to marry Clara Tarn? Why?"

"Because I think—and you probably know—that Hagstrom killed Lloyd by mistake. You've got to replace him. That's the debt you owe. She's alone now, Jake."

"And the other reason?"

"Because she loves you."

"Loves me!" I exploded. "You're as crazy as you look! There's no more love in that woman than a weasel!"

"You're wrong, Jake. She's the most loving woman you'll ever meet. Anyhow, you've got to propose before Mother and Billy come to an understanding so Clara won't think she's second choice."

"Oh, God!" I muttered.

"Another thing. We can't leave Lloyd down there much longer. You've got to ask Clara tonight."

"And how do you propose explaining Lloyd here without getting me mixed up in it?"

"Don't worry. I'll think of something."

I said, "I'm sure you will," and left.

I'll never forget the sound of the sedges at the edge of the bay. The sun shone, warm with the promise of spring, and a crow cawed lazily in the distance. But the sedges stirred and rustled under a random eddy of wind and it was the most lonesome sound I'd ever heard in my life.

I think it helped.

It wasn't a pretty proposal, coming out snarlylike, because I hated to give in. That's the way it is when you let a cantankerous streak blind you to a truth that you've known ever since the time you tripped at the Sunday School picnic and landed on—but never mind that. The thing is that while I was hedging about, wishing myself far away, I was praying, actually praying, that she wouldn't refuse. To cut it short, she didn't.

I phoned Bobby that night and said, "It's done."

Next morning, he came staggering wild-eyed into the village with a fantastic story about a pike taking the bait perch and rushing away out under the ice, unreeling nearly two hundred feet of line. When it spit the hook out and he drew the line back; he snagged what he thought was a log, only it turned out to be Lloyd.

And some people believed it. Murk didn't, but he had to accept it. Lloyd had been shot through the back, he told me.

Hagstrom must have been watching the bay like a hawk. He was gone when the police got there. I wondered what he'd done to make silence worth $5,000 in the first place. But after Lloyd's funeral, I didn't much care. I had other fish to fry.

The face he saw inside the car could make him rich . . .

THE STORY OF MY LIFE

by RON GOULART

When they fired him from *Persons Magazine*, the managing editor told him, "You're doing pretty good, Jack, but not good enough."

Jack Bails replied, "Yeah, that's the story of my life." He cleared out his desk that same spring afternoon, cramming everything into a worn airline bag.

He descended to the street, went around the corner and into the Newspersons Saloon. He figured to stay until about commute time.

After two vodka martinis, though, he got into an argument with a financial writer for the *Times*. The fellow punched Bails three times in the stomach, which made him sick. While the bartender was helping Bails into the bathroom he observed, "You were right in that argument, but you made your point in such a nasty way the guy had to poke you."

"Sure," agreed Bails as he splashed water on his face, "That's the story of my life."

Three weeks later his wife suggested he move out of their pleasant colonial in Old Greenwich. "I don't hate you or anything," she carefully explained, "it's simply that you don't much interest me any more."

He nodded. It was the story of his life.

Making use of some money his wife didn't know about, Bails took off for Mexico. He knew he was a good writer, and now he had some time he was going to turn out something beyond the garbage he'd done for *Persons*. His second day in Mexico, in a pleasant village where writers often go to write; he came down with a bladder infection that knocked him out for nearly four weeks. On his way out of the hospital his Mexican doctor told him, "Usually this type of trouble isn't so debilitating, Señor. You had an unusually rough case."

"That's the story of my life," Bails replied.

He decided Mexico wasn't exactly right for him and moved further south, settling finally in the small Central American country of Bandera. And it was there, in the coastal town of Puerto Vallejo, that he met Tandy McAllister and spotted Leon Strasser.

Both things happened on the same hot quiet afternoon while he was walking downhill toward the wide white beach that fronted the better hotels of the port town. He was staying at a smaller hotel inland since he never seemed to be able to afford the best accommodations no matter where he was.

Tandy was cycling along the edge of the cobbled street. He noticed her when she went whizzing downhill by him because, even though she was a shade thin for his taste, she was extremely pretty and healthy-looking. She was a girl in her middle twenties, a good ten years younger than he was, with long red hair tied with a single twist of green ribbon. She wore white shorts and a white jersey and her skin was smooth and evenly tanned.

Some rich tourist, he thought.

Then the big green convertible came roaring up the road toward Bails. It swerved to avoid a rut in the street and sideswiped the girl.

She cried out once, fought with the handlebars, and went clattering off the roadway smack into a low whitewashed stone wall.

The car didn't stop, kept coming up the hill.

Bails shouted, "Idiot, you hit that girl!"

The driver ignored him, drove on and away. But Bails got a good clear look at him—and recognized him, in spite of the dyed black hair and newly acquired moustache.

Bails ran toward the girl. He reached her before anyone else. Not that the few passersby on the quiet afternoon street seemed much interested.

"I'm O.K., I'm O.K.," she said when he reached her. "I learned how to take a fall a long time ago." She was crouched beside her mangled bike, rubbing gingerly at a scraped spot on her pretty knee.

"Let me help you up," he insisted, extending a hand.

Smiling, brushing back her red hair first, she took his arm and pulled herself upright. "I'm Tandy McAllister," she said, letting go of him and rubbing at her backside. "Who are you?"

"What?" He was thinking about the man in the car.

"Name? It doesn't have to be a real one, just something so I can file you in my head."

"I'm sorry, I'm Jack Bails. Really."

"Thanks for coming to my aid, Jack."

He said, kicking at the fallen cycle, "Even if you're in good shape, this thing's pretty well wrecked."

Tandy shrugged. "I borrowed it, so let them worry about it. We can leave it here to die."

"You mean it?"

She said, "You've got too many scruples. A bike is just a collection of pipes and wires and rubber. It's not like a horse, in which case we'd have to shoot it."

"I guess I'm only worried about having to pay for a new bike."

"You can't get blood from a turnip, as Adam Smith or some other gifted economist once remarked." She shrugged again. "That looked like an expensive old car that tossed me off the road."

"Yeah, it was."

"It would've been nice if he'd stopped," said Tandy. "I would've settled out of court for a hundred bucks. Since the guy vanished into the dust I won't even bother to fake whiplash or mental anguish."

"You could use a hundred dollars?"

"I wouldn't have to ponder long over how to spend it. Were you think of offering me money for my favors?"

Bails grinned and shook his head. "My finances aren't much better than yours," he said, glancing up the road. "The thing is . . . "

She waited a few seconds. "There's something you want to tell me," she decided. "But you're not sure you trust me."

"That's about the case."

"Would it be easier to talk over a drink? Your treat."

"O.K., let's go to the terrace bar at the Hotel Paloma," he suggested, taking her arm. "It's the best place in town, I hear."

"It is. I used to spend some time there, before I was abandoned," she told him. "Full details on that, if you're at all interested, when we reach the Paloma."

"I'm interested, sure. I used to work on *Persons* and I haven't completely shaken the habit of being interested in people and their achievements."

"Then you're going to like me," she promised. "I've got enough achievements for a good half dozen bios."

They stayed all afternoon on the cool shaded terrace of the Hotel Paloma. They drank three, or possibly four, of the rum drinks Puerto Vallejo was noted for. Tandy told him about herself, about her wanderings across America after she'd retired from a New England college in her sophomore year. Eventually she had come to Bandera with a writer named Nolan Rumford, a bestselling novelist. Bails knew who Rumford was. *Persons* had done a piece on him the year before. Rumford had had a call from Hollywood the previous week and left, deciding he no longer needed Tandy for company or inspiration. He'd slipped away in the night, leaving the rent on their impressive villa paid up for a bit less than three weeks ahead.

"How much would you need to pay another month's rent?" Bails asked.

She named the figure. "Are you suggesting you could come up with it?"

The amount would cover his total expenses for three months. But Bails had a strong feeling his luck had changed, and he believed Tandy would make a fine addition to the new life he had in mind. "This isn't a proposition or anything," he began. "However, if I move in with you I can take care of the rent for a couple of months and by that time I—"

"Listen, Jack," the girl cut in. "If you live with me we'll have the whole relationship. So don't blush and shuffle your feet." She reached across the table and took his hand. "I'm impulsive. I've already decided I like you. That doesn't mean you have to give me money."

"There's something," he said, enjoying the warm touch of her fingers on his skin, "I want to discuss with you. After sitting here, Tandy, and getting to know you, I'm sure I can trust you." He paused, took a sip of his drink. "It's about the guy who ran you down this afternoon."

"Don't tell me you know a way we can get a few hundred bucks out of him?"

"With any luck," said Bails, "we should be able to collect at least $200,000."

He roamed the villa after he'd dropped his two suitcases and his typewriter in a closet in the enormous bedroom. He hadn't felt this good in years. He strolled out onto the terrace and looked down toward the dusky sea. The multicolor lights of the ships and the vast hotels did indeed look like strings of gems and the guitar music from a distant restaurant sounded incredibly romantic.

He stretched his arms wide, laughing. "Someday, my boy, this will all be yours."

"Like my digs?" Wearing a pale-yellow robe and dangling a beach cap from her forefinger, Tandy joined him in the twilight.

There were splashes of green, explosions of red petals all around them in the swiftly darkening night. "It's terrific," he said. "We should have signed a long-term lease."

"Are you absolutely certain about Strasser?"

Bails nodded. "They didn't completely appreciate me on *Persons* and my wife never thought much of the talent, but if you'll pardon the expression, I never forget a face. Even when it's hidden under dyed hair and a Latino moustache. Trust me, the guy who came barreling up the Calle Ternera was Leon Strasser."

"How much did he swipe?"

"I told you."

"Tell me again."

"In October of 1976, Leon Strasser, then a vice-president with the Nordling Shipping Company, absconded with over $500,000 in cash," said Bails. "That's the last anybody ever heard of him."

"Until today."

"Yeah. Now we know he's living in Puerto Vallejo."

"He could have been just passing through."

Shaking his head, Bails said, "Nope. He had a sticker on his windshield for the Beach Club. Meaning he must reside in this town under a fake name."

"And his $500,000 must also be in residence," said Tandy, smiling at him.

"Chances are he acted alone," said Bails. "There's no record ever of a steady girl."

"He should have a goodly portion of the dough left."

"He should," agreed Bails. "Our task is to get hold of a goodly portion of it for ourselves."

"Economics," said the girl. "Somebody or other once defined economics simply as the study of who gets what."

"I don't want to be tough on Strasser," said Bails. "We have to be willing to let him keep at least half of his loot. We'll settle for around a quarter million. That'll be our price for not telling anyone who he really is or where he's come to rest."

Tandy poked her tongue into her cheek. "There might be a way to get *all* the money."

"Oh? How?"

The plan was simple enough.

Bails had some reservations when Tandy outlined it, but she convinced him she could handle her part of it.

He went along. That's the story of my life, he said to himself. Letting a woman run things.

Even so, it sounded as though it could work.

The next day they learned who Leon Strasser was pretending to be. That wasn't difficult. Bails went into the Beach Club and said he had a message for one of the members about some goods purchased at his store. He'd forgotten the man's name, but he gave the club steward an

accurate description of Leon Strasser as he now looked.

"Ah, you mean Señor Nariz."

"Yes, that's it. Eduardo Nariz."

"No, it's Manuel Nariz."

A bit more digging, and some bribing, told them that Strasser, alias Nariz, was living in a substantial home in the exclusive Mar Vista Hills area of town. They also discovered he frequented the El Bombo Club, often in the company of one or another attractive woman.

"That's our opening," said Tandy in the sunlit breakfast room of their rented villa.

"What?"

"The obvious thing to do," she said, "is for me to meet him."

Bails frowned. "He's stolen a lot of money," he said, sliding his coffee cup around in a small circle. "He—listen, he might even kill to protect it."

"I've had the complete course in how to keep from getting killed," she told him, smiling. "Not that I haven't had an occasional smack in the snoot, but nothing fatal."

"I think," said Bails, "we ought to confront Strasser in some safe location and tell him if he won't give us $200,000 we'll turn him over to all the authorities we can think of."

"Jack, that's even riskier than what I'm suggesting," Tandy said. "We don't even know for sure that Strasser hasn't paid off the local law. If we hit him directly *we* may end up in the local hoosegow and that'll be the last anybody'll hear of us."

"O.K., so what is it you want to do?"

She buttered herself a second piece of toast. "We have to find out where Strasser-Nariz has the dough stashed. It's almost certain to be in his house somewhere. We find that out and then we quietly grab the loot and slip across the border into a brand new country."

"I don't know."

"Trust me, Jack. If we do this thing my way we end up with all the money. It could be as much as $400,000. God, we could live for years on that. We could rent a villa three times the size of this dump."

"I love this dump."

"Sure, and I love you along with it. But I think we both deserve a bigger slice of the world."

"You've got a crumb on your chin." He reached across and brushed

at her face with his finger. "You want to get to really know the guy, you mean, work your way into his confidence and all."

"I'm good at that, remember?"

"It could involve— I don't like you to— You'd maybe have to—"

"For a half million dollars, Jack, I can sleep with a man a few times," she told him. "It's not going to do any permanent damage."

He pushed back from the table, went to the window, and stared down into the street. "I suppose not."

Her hand touched his back. He hadn't heard her leave the table to come over to him. "Don't be a nitwit, it's you I love," she said. "Let's please do it my way. In a month or less we'll be able to buy the best life together anybody's ever had."

He turned and took hold of her. "O.K., your way," he said.

She got to know Strasser by arranging what looked like a completely accidental meeting at the Beach Club. The embezzler liked her and began to take her out. Within a week Tandy reported to Bails that she'd been inside Strasser's house.

"It must have been quite a tour." Bails had been waiting for her to come home, sitting in the living room with a cold untasted cup of coffee cradled in his hands. "Hell, it's nearly sunup."

"Oh, is that what that big orange thing on the horizon is?" She crossed the room, not very close to him, and started down the white hallway to the bedroom.

He sat a few seconds longer, then, rising and placing the cup of dead coffee on the cane bottom of his chair, he followed her. "I don't like this," he said to her back. "I don't like your getting intimate with the guy."

"He's not," she said, waiting for him in the bedroom doorway, "a murderer. He's only a man who snatched a lot of money when he got the chance. We're planning to do the same thing, so don't act superior."

"Did you—?"

Tandy went into the bedroom. "No," she said. "And quit with the cross-examination."

"Asking an obvious question isn't allowed any more?"

"I love you, not Strasser. I'm getting to know him so we can take his money away from him." She sank down onto the edge of the bed and

worked off one shoe with her other foot. "I now plan to sink into a coma. Unless you still have a few more anxious questions."

"No," he said. "Go to sleep. I'm sorry."

The night wind was coming across the harbor. Standing near the wrought-iron fence, Bails shivered. There was guitar music in the air from the party far down the hill from Strasser's mansion. It no longer sounded romantic.

He was dressed in dark slacks and a navy-blue pullover, and he carried a black suitcase filled with tools and an explosive. He stared through the iron bars. There were no lights in the house, no signs of life. That was as he had expected. Tandy had phoned him an hour earlier to tell him she and Strasser were at the party down the hill and would be there for several hours. Strasser's two servants had the night off.

As soon as Bails got the money he would drive by the party in the old car they'd bought especially for this part of the plan. He'd pass the rear drive of the house and honk three times. Tandy would excuse herself, head for the powder room, and then hurry down the hall that led to the back of the house. He'd pick her up and they'd drive away. Away from Puerto Vallejo and Bandera, to a new country and a more comfortable life. The $380,000 would see to that.

The $380,000 was what Strasser had left. He'd actually confided in Tandy, had even showed her where he kept the cash. Bails didn't want to think about that, about what Tandy'd had to do to get that close to the man. After tonight, though, things would be good between them again. There would be no more Strasser to worry about. There'd only be Tandy and a hell of a lot of money.

He checked his watch, then used the key Tandy had given him. The old lock in the iron gate squeaked slightly. Bails hesitated, listening, then went ahead and pushed the gate open. He darted through, onto the curving drive that led up to Strasser's sprawling white mansion.

The wind was growing stronger. All at once it yanked one of the red tiles from the roof and and sent it spinning and twisting right at Bails. He ducked, his heart starting to beat rapidly.

He got hold of himself, worked around to the side of the house. The side door was unlocked, just as Tandy promised it would be.

Bails rotated the knob very slowly. According to Tandy, there was a

safe in the floor of the room he was entering, under the leather armchair. He figured he had a bit less than two hours to break into into with the tools in his suitcase.

He crossed the dark threshold, shut the door behind him, and leaned against it.

The lights came on.

"Good evening." Strasser was standing by the light switch, a .38 revolver in his hand.

"Excuse me, my car broke down and I was wondering—"

"Won't do, Bails," said the lean man. "I know all about what you're here for."

"I don't see how you—"

"Tandy told me," explained Strasser.

Bails said, "Listen, I know who you are."

"Which is why I'm going to kill you," Strasser said. "I'll arrange it to look like a burglary and have my friends on the local police dispose of your remains."

"Tandy knows who you are too."

"Bails, don't you understand?" Strasser shook his head sympathetically. "Tandy has decided that over the long pull I am a much better prospect than you. This caper tonight was designed to get rid of you. Tandy has sold you out." He fired twice.

Bails fell dead. It was the story of his life.

Hal Johnson finds an overdue book, and a murder. . .

THE HONEYCOMB OF SILENCE

By JAMES HOLDING

I found a public telephone booth on the apron of a gas station two blocks away from Fenton's house. I pulled into the service station, parked out of the way of possible pump traffic, and entered the stuffy booth, groping in my pocket for change.

It was a hot bright morning in August—a Tuesday, I remember—and I was sweating even before I closed myself into the booth.

Instead of dialing the emergency number, I called Headquarters and

asked for Lieutenant Randall of Homicide. He was my former boss. I hadn't seen him or heard from him in several months, so I figured this was a pretty good chance to say hello.

Randall picked up his phone and said, "Yeah?" in a bored voice. "Lieutenant Randall."

"Hal Johnson," I said. "Remember me?"

"Vaguely," he answered. "Aren't you that sissy cop from the public library?"

"You *do* remember me," I said. "How nice. Are you keeping busy these days, Lieutenant?"

"So-so." He paused. Then, with an edge of suspicion, "Why?"

"I think I may have stumbled across a job for you, Lieutenant."

"You always were papa's little helper," Randall said. "What kind of job?"

"I think a man's been murdered at 4321 Eastwood Street."

"You *think* a man's been murdered?"

"Yes. I went there just now to collect an overdue library book, and when nobody answered the doorbell I took a quick look through the living-room curtains, which weren't drawn quite tight, and I saw a man lying on the floor in front of the TV set. The TV was turned on. I could hear the sound and see the picture through the window."

"Did you go inside?"

I was shocked. "After all you taught me? Of course not. I didn't even try the door."

"So the guy didn't hear you ring the doorbell on account of the TV noise," said Randall hopefully. "He's tired. He's lying on the floor to relax while he watches his favorite soap opera."

"Face down? And with all that blood on the back of his shirt?"

Randall sighed. "4321 Eastwood?"

"Right."

"I'll send somebody to check it out. What name did you have for that address?"

"Robert Fenton. I hope he's not the guy on the floor, though."

"Why?"

"Because if it's Fenton, he owes the library a fine of two dollars and twenty cents on his overdue library book."

"You're breaking my heart," Randall said. "Where are you calling from?"

"A pay phone two blocks away. Do you want me to go back and wait for your boys?"

"No. Thanks all the same." His voice became bland. "If it's a murder, we'll try to handle it all by ourselves this time, Hal. Aren't there some kids somewhere with overdue picture books you can track down today?"

Randall telephoned me back at home that evening. His call came just as I was taking my first sip of my first cold martini before dinner. I hadn't even decided yet whether to go out to eat or to finish up the meatloaf left over from the pitiful bachelor Sunday dinner I'd cooked for myself two days before.

Randall said, "The guy wasn't watching a soap opera, Hal. He was dead."

"He looked dead," I said. "Was he murdered?"

"We think so—the lock on the back door had been forced and he'd been shot in the back and there wasn't any gun around."

"Oh," I said. "And was he Robert Fenton?"

"According to the evidence of his landlord, his neighbors, and the bartender at Calhoun's Bar down the street, he was. The bartender ought to know because she went out with him a few times. It seems he was a bachelor, living alone."

"A lady bartender?"

"Yeah. Not bad looking, either," said Randall, "if you go for bottle blondes with false eyelashes."

I didn't rise to that. At this point, I'm still waiting for Ellen Crosby, the girl at the library's check-out desk, to tell me she'll marry me or else to get lost.

"How about Mr. Fenton's library book, Randall?" I said. "Can I have it?"

"Which one was it? There were several library books scattered around the living room."

"I'll have to look up the title. Fenton probably borrowed the others recently, and they're not overdue yet. Anyway, can I have them back to clean up his library record?"

"Why not?" Randall agreed. "Stop by tomorrow and I'll have them for you."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be there. . ."

Lieutenant Randall was as good as his word. When I got to his office next morning about eleven, he had a stack of library books waiting for me.

"You have any suspects yet?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "Fenton had only lived there for a year, according to his landlord. And nothing in the house showed where he'd been before. As far as we've been able to discover, he has no relatives or friends in town except the blonde bartender in Calhoun's Bar."

I said, "Who's looking for friends? It's an enemy who killed him, presumably."

Randall grunted. "We haven't turned up any of those, either."

"Funny. No friends, no relatives, no enemies?"

"And no job either."

"Fenton was unemployed?"

"A gentleman of leisure. With private means. That's what he told the blonde bartender, anyway."

"Hell, that's what *I'd* tell a blonde bartender too," I said. "That doesn't mean it's true."

Randall lit a cigar—if you can call those black ropes he smokes cigars. He said, "Exactly what did you see through the crack in Fenton's draperies yesterday?"

"Just what I told you. Fenton lying on the floor looking very dead, blood all over the place, the TV set going."

"You didn't notice anything else?"

"No. I went to call you after one look. Should I have noticed anything else?"

"The joint was a shambles, Hal. Somebody had tossed it. Almost a professional job."

"The killer?"

"We're guessing so. Looking very hard for something."

"A prowler," I suggested, "looking for dough. Interrupted by Fenton."

Randall shrugged. "Maybe. Fenton's wallet was missing. But if so, the prowler overlooked five one-hundred-dollar bills in Fenton's money belt."

"You wouldn't usually hang around long enough after shooting somebody to make a thorough search of his body, would you?"

Randall shrugged again. I stood up. "Well, anyway, Lieutenant,

thanks for salvaging my library books." I gathered them up.

"Do you need any help?" he asked. "You could rupture yourself."

I ignored that. I said, "Have you looked through these books?"

"Sure."

"Whoever killed Fenton was searching for something," I said. "Books make dandy hiding places."

"We looked, Hal. There's nothing in them."

"They haven't been searched by an expert until *I* search them," I said, knowing it would infuriate Randall.

He snorted. "Well, don't do it here. Get lost, will you?"

I grinned at him and took the books and went on about my business, which is tracing down lost, stolen, and overdue books for the public library. It's a quiet life after working for Randall in Homicide for five years. But I like it. Almost as much as Randall resents it.

When I got back to the library that afternoon about four, I turned in the fines and the books I'd collected on my rounds—all except the books Randall had found in Fenton's living room. These I took with me to my minuscule office behind the Director's spacious one, and began to examine them carefully, one by one.

I examined the card pocket of each book, the space between spine and cover, the paper dust-jackets. I checked each book painstakingly for anything hidden between the pages, either loose or attached.

There were eight books in the stack. I was holding the seventh book by its covers, shaking it pages down over my desk to dislodge anything that might possibly have been inserted between the pages, when I struck pay dirt.

Under the fingers of my right hand, I felt a slight irregularity beneath the dust jacket.

We protect the dust jacket of every library book with a transparent jacket cover made of heavy cellophane with a white paper liner. We fit this transparent cover over the book jacket, fold it along the edges to fit the book, and attach the end flaps to the book with paste. It was under one of these end flaps that my fingers encountered a slight ridge that shouldn't have been there—a suggestion of extra thickness. The book was called *Mushroom Culture in Pennsylvania.*

Feeling a tingle of excitement, I worked the pasted edge of the fold-over flap loose from its moorings, pulled it clear of the book cover, and found myself staring down at a crisp fresh one-hundred-dollar bill.

I looked at it for a second or two without touching it, surprised and, yes, mildly elated. As an ex-homicide cop, I knew enough not to handle the bill and chance destroying or smearing any recoverable fingerprints. Yet as a curious library cop, I couldn't resist using a pair of stamp tweezers from my desk drawer to tease the bill aside enough to count the others under it. There were ten of them—all hundreds—crisp, fresh, deliciously spendable-looking. A thousand dollars.

I won't say I wasn't tempted. Funny thoughts ran through my head. Nobody knows about this money but me, I thought. This is a library book, so it's kind of like public property, I told myself, and I'm certainly one of the public. And wasn't there a section of the criminal code that said something about finders keepers? However, after a couple of minutes, I'm proud to say that I picked up my telephone and asked the switchboard operator to get me Lieutenant Randall.

I was eating lunch in the library cafeteria the next day when Lieutenant Randall appeared in the cafeteria doorway. He spotted me at once, walked to my table, and slid into a chair.

I said, "Welcome, Lieutenant. You're just in time to pay my lunch check."

Randall said, "Why should I? Because you turned that money over to me? You probably figured it was counterfeit, anyway."

I stopped a spoonful of chocolate ice cream halfway to my mouth. "And was it?"

He shook his head. "Good as gold. So finish up that slop and let's get out of here where we can talk."

I went on eating very deliberately. "First things first," I said. "I should think out of common gratitude the police department would pay my cafeteria tab for the help I've given you. It's only a dollar and twenty-three cents."

"Subornation of a witness," Randall said. He ostentatiously got one of his black cigars from his pocket and felt for matches.

I said, "No smoking in here, Lieutenant. Don't you see that sign?"

He gave me a cold stare. "Who's going to stop me? I outrank the only other cop I see anywhere around."

"O.K.," I said with a sigh, "I'll go quietly."

I paid my check and we went upstairs to my office. The Lieutenant sat down in a straight chair facing me across my desk. I said, "All right,

Lieutenant, you need more help, is that it?"

Randall gave what for him was a humble nod. "This book business has us talking to ourselves, Hal. We did find out something this morning that has a bearing, we think. Fenton was a man who had a lot of hundred-dollar bills, apparently. His landlord says he always paid his rent with hundred-dollar bills. The bartender at Calhoun's Bar says he sometimes paid for his drinks by breaking a hundred-dollar bill. And he had five hundred-dollar bills in his money belt when we found him."

"So the fact that the money in the library book was in hundreds too makes you think they were intended for Fenton?"

"It seems likely. And possibly they were from the same source as the others he had."

"And also transferred via library book?"

"Could be." Randall frowned. "But I can't figure out how whoever hid the money in the book could be sure Fenton got it. Anybody could borrow the damn book once it came back to the library with the money in it . . . "

"Not if Fenton had put in a reserve for it," I said. "Then, when it came back to the library, we'd send him a postcard and hold the book for him for three days."

"Well," said Randall, "that could explain Fenton's end of it. But how about the guy *paying* the money? How'd he know what library book Fenton wanted him to put it in?"

I leaned back and thought about that. At length I said, "There's only one way I can see. Fenton could call the library and put in a reserve on that book in the other guy's name. Then, when the book was available, we'd automatically notify the other guy that the book he'd reserved was in. And he'd know that was the book Fenton meant for him to put the money in."

Randall nodded. "And meanwhile Fenton calls in his own reservation on the same book so he'll be sure to get it when it's returned to the library?"

"Yeah," I said. "That could work."

"It's pretty complicated. Who knows enough about how a library operates to dope out a system like that?"

"I do, for one," I answered modestly. "And maybe Fenton did too."

Randall brooded. "Say you're right about it. Then how come the

money was still in the book? Why didn't Fenton take it out as soon as he got home from the library?"

"What time does the M.E. figure he was killed?"

"Sixteen to eighteen hours before you found him."

"O.K. That's about the time he might have got home from the library with his books, around cocktail time let's say. So maybe he mixed himself a drink and turned on the TV before he removed the money from the book? And he was killed before he had a chance to retrieve it."

Randall made a noncommittal gesture with his hands. He fiddled with his unlit cigar. "The whole thing smells more and more like blackmail to me," he said. "There's only one reason I can think of for Fenton to devise this crazy pay-off method, Hal. To conceal his identity from whoever he was blackmailing. It's a more elaborate scheme than the usual trick of renting a post-office box under a false name and having your blackmail payments mailed to you there."

"You can stake out a post-office box and see who comes to collect mail from it," I said. "But there's no way you can tell who's going to borrow a library book from the public library after you return it. Besides, we circulate more than one copy of most of our books. How are you going to keep track of the particular copy you hid your money in?"

In a deceptively innocent voice, Randall asked, "How many copies of *Mushroom Culture in Pennsylvania* does the library have in circulation?"

"One," I admitted, grinning at him. "There are *some* books we have only a single copy of. And maybe that's worth noting. For *Mushroom Culture in Pennsylvania* was the only one of Fenton's library books that doesn't have two or more copies going."

"So what?"

"So by reserving an unpopular one-copy book for his blackmail victim, Fenton made sure there wouldn't be a long wait before he got his money."

"The devil with that," said Randall irritably. "All a guy would have to do to find out who borrowed a certain book is ask your librarian to look it up for him. Right?"

"Wrong. That's against the rules—as is giving out information about who's on the waiting list for books that have been reserved. Our system works on card numbers, not names."

"I know that, but when you issue a library card to somebody you

take a record of his name and address, don't you?"

"Sure," I said easily. "But matching the names to the numbers is the trick. Once a book you've borrowed is returned to the library by its next borrower, you can tell by the date card in its pocket the card number of the person who borrowed the book after you did, but not the person's name."

"There must be plenty of ways to crack *that* crummy system," Randall commented acidly.

I shrugged. "Our master file of cardholders' names and numbers is kept out at the main desk."

"Locked up? In a safe?"

"Just a simple file cabinet," I said, deadpan. "I suppose somebody might gain unauthorized access to it."

Randall said with contempt, "Child's play."

"For example?"

"I could hide in the stacks some evening until the library closes and the staff goes home. Then I'd have all night to locate your damn file and milk it."

"That's very good," I complimented him. "Right off the top of your head too."

The Lieutenant jumped up. "Let's stop fooling around, Hal. Lead me to this master file of yours. *You* have authorized access to it, right? So if we can nail down the name and address of the person who borrowed *Mushroom Culture* just before Fenton, we may have our killer."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Say we're right about this being blackmail, and your blackmailee figures out Fenton's identity through his card number. He goes out to Fenton's house Monday afternoon, breaks in through the back door, and is turning the joint upside down looking for whatever blackmail evidence Fenton is holding over him. O.K. Fenton comes home from the library unexpectedly, interrupts him, and gets shot for his pains. His killer is sure to see *Mushroom Culture* among the library books Fenton is bringing home. If he'd hidden a thousand bucks of his money in that book just a day or so before, wouldn't he take his money back? Why did he leave it in the book for me to find afterward?"

Randall said impatiently, "How should I know? Give me his name and I'll ask him! Come on, Hal. Move!"

I reached into the center drawer of my desk and pulled out a card.

"I just happen to have the information you want right here, Lieutenant. I looked it up this morning."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I wanted you to ask me, nice and polite," I said. "Because you assured me last Tuesday morning that you wouldn't need any help from me this time. Remember?"

Randall didn't give an inch. "How was I supposed to know the murdered man would turn out to be another damn library expert?" he said.

He took the card and read the name out loud. "Samuel J. Klausen." And the card number: "L-1310077."

When he left, he had the grace to throw a "Thanks, Hal" over his shoulder.

I felt smug.

My smugness vanished when Randall called me at the library the following noon. "Is this the resident library expert?" he greeted me.

"It's too late for compliments. Did you arrest Mr. Samuel J. Klausen?"

"No way. He was a washout, Hal. He's no more a murderer than I am."

I was disappointed but not surprised. "Not even a blackmailee?"

"Oh, yes, he admits to being blackmailed. He broke wide open when I told him we'd found his fingerprints on the money in the library book."

"Did you find his prints?"

Randall coughed. "We found fingerprints, yes. We didn't know they were his until he admitted the blackmail payments." Randall coughed again. "Anyway, he readily admitted he was paying off somebody in hundred-dollar bills concealed in library books—but until we told him, he didn't know it was Fenton. He claims he didn't know Fenton from Adam's off ox."

"Did he tell you how the book thing worked?"

"About the way we worked it out. A year ago, Klausen got a print of a very compromising photograph in the mail, no return address, then a phone call from a man threatening to send the picture to Klausen's wife unless he paid him hush money. When Klausen agreed to do so, the man asked him if he had a library card, and set up the library-book pay-off system."

"What did Fenton have on Klausen?" I asked curiously.

"None of your business."

"Excuse me," I said. "Is it any of my business why you're so sure Klausen didn't kill Fenton, despite his denials?"

"Klausen has a cast-iron alibi for Monday evening when Fenton was shot."

I clicked my tongue against my teeth. "Too bad. Cast-iron, you say?"

"Klausen was making a dinner speech to a gathering of insurance brokers in Baltimore, five hundred miles away, when Fenton caught it. We've checked it out."

"That's pretty cast-iron, all right," I said. "So what's next?"

"Back to the drawing board, I guess. Unless you've got some more brilliant suggestions."

"Let me think about it," I said.

"Nuts to that. *I'll* do the thinking from here in. You just give me the library jazz when I need it, O.K.? So here's something to start with. Suppose Fenton was blackmailing somebody else besides Klausen, which seems fairly likely, and using the same library-book method of collecting his money? Would he use the same books he did for Klausen, or different ones?"

"Different ones," I said promptly. "Even if he didn't screw up his timetables, our people would think it was queer if he reserved the same books for himself more than once."

"Check. Now here's another little thought for you. Did you happen to notice, Hal, that none of the eight books we brought in from Fenton's house was overdue?"

He whistled a few bars from "Tea for Two" under his breath, while he waited for me to realize the full enormity of my oversight. Then, "You did tell me, didn't you, Hal, that you were calling on Fenton last Tuesday to collect an overdue book?"

I abased myself. "Yeah, I did. And Lieutenant, I'm sorry. I guess finding the money in *Mushroom Culture* drove everything else from my mind, including that overdue book."

"Well, well," Randall said softly.

I said, "You want me to go out and jump off a bridge or something?"

"Not just yet." The more apologetic I became, the more cheerful Randall sounded. "Not till you tell me the title of that overdue book."

"Hold on," I said. "I'll look it up." I checked my overdue lists. "It's a

book called *The Honeycomb of Silence* by somebody named Desmond."

"Another one I'm just dying to read," Randall cracked. "So I'm on my way right now out to Fenton's house to find it. It might tell us something if we're lucky."

"You want the name of the person who borrowed it before Fenton?" I offered.

"Not till I find the book." He hung up with a crash.

I got back to the library after my afternoon calls about five-thirty. There was a message on my desk to call Randall. I called him and he said, "I'll take that name now, Hal."

"You found the book?"

"Between the back of the TV set and the wall. It obviously slipped down there after Fenton took the money out of it, and he forgot to return it to the library. Hence, it was overdue."

"After he took the money out of it," I repeated. "So it was another of Fenton's pay-off books?"

"Shut up and give me the name of the cardholder before Fenton. And let's hope he doesn't have an alibi like Klausen's."

I read him the name and address from the master file card: W. G. Crowley, 1722 Plumrose Street.

I knew everything had worked out all right because on Tuesday of the following week, Lieutenant Randall called and offered to buy me a dinner at Al's Diner, provided the total cost of my repast didn't exceed a dollar and twenty-three cents.

At Al's Diner, he was seated in a back booth waiting for me. He had a look of work-well-done on his face and a beer on the table before him. "Sit down," he invited me expansively, "and join me in a beer. I hope you don't want a salad with your hamburger, however. Salads are thirty-five cents in this joint."

"Never touch them," I said, sliding into the seat across from him. "But I'll take the beer." He signaled to the waitress. When she brought my beer we told her we'd order dinner later.

I took a sip of my beer and said to Randall, "Did you snaffle W. G. Crowley?"

He nodded.

"And he's your murderer?"

He nodded again. "Murderer, bank robber, dope pusher. And also, I'm sorry to say, an ex-cop."

I stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"He used to be a member of the narcotics squad of the Los Angeles Police Department, under a different name—his real one—James G. Crawford. He's a security guard at the First National Bank here. And that's where the bank-robbery charge comes in. The guy had the nerve to steal the hundred-dollar bills he was paying Fenton from his own bank! How do you like that for resourcefulness?"

"If he's all that resourceful," I suggested, "he's probably resourceful enough to walk away from your murder indictment too. You did say he was Fenton's killer, didn't you?"

"No question about it. Open and shut, as the TV cops say. And don't worry, we've got him hogtied. He'll never walk away from anything again."

"Good," I said. "What do you mean 'again'?"

"He was suspended from the LAPD, charged with pushing the dope that his own narc squad appropriated in raids. And before the grand jury could come up with an indictment, he jumped bail and left town permanently. Disappeared. Now he's a bank guard here in town calling himself Crowley."

"And you're certain he killed Fenton?"

"With his very own police positive," said Randall. "The .38 he carries under his arm every day as a guard at the First National." Randall held up a hand as I opened my mouth to speak. "And how, you are about to ask," he said, "do we know that? Well, we found three of his fingerprints *under* the flap of the book about honeycombs. And the same three prints on one of the hundred-dollar bills in Fenton's money belt. And the same three prints again among those on the butt of Mr. Crowley's gun. Isn't that enough?"

"Not enough to convict him. And you know it."

His yellow eyes emitted a gleam of satisfaction. "Well, then, how about this? Our ballistics boy tells us the bullets taken out of Fenton's body were fired by Crowley's gun. And Crowley has zilch in the way of an alibi for the time of Fenton's murder. And he also, of course, had a good solid motive for killing Fenton."

"What did Fenton have on him?" I asked.

"Probably just the knowledge that Crowley was really Crawford, the indicted, dope-pushing LA cop who disappeared without leave. Fenton could have landed him in jail for quite a spell by disclosing his whereabouts to the LA police."

I said, "I don't get it. If that was the case, what was Crowley looking for when he searched Fenton's house? All he needed to do was kill Fenton to protect himself."

"I've got two theories on that," Randall said. "One: he was trying to make the murder look like what we originally thought it might be, the work of a casual prowler. Or two"—Randall's unblinking sulfur-colored stare was amused—"maybe Crowley was thinking of taking over Fenton's customers, and *collecting* a little blackmail money for a change instead of paying it out."

He paused and I said, "The first theory might be possible. But what gave rise to the second? Your overactive imagination?"

"We found something interesting in Crowley's apartment," Randall replied.

Dutifully I asked, "What?"

"The negative of the compromising photograph that Fenton used on Klausen," Randall said, "all neatly labeled with Klausen's name and address."

"Well, well," I said, "For an ex-cop, Crowley was pretty bright, wasn't he?"

"You can't insult me tonight," Randall said comfortably. "Finish your beer and let's order."

"Not yet. I still don't get it."

"Get what?"

"How Fenton knew that Crowley was the fugitive Crawford."

Randall shrugged. "What difference does that make? Accident, I imagine. Fenton just happened to see Crowley in the bank one day probably, and recognized him."

"You mean Fenton knew him in Los Angeles?"

"Maybe. Or at least knew what he looked like."

"All right. My next question is the real puzzler to me. How did you find out that both Crowley and Fenton came from Los Angeles? You didn't know fact one about Fenton *or* Crowley the last I heard."

He gave a negligent wave of his hand. "Just good solid routine police work, sonny. After Klausen pointed us toward Los Angeles."

"Klausen!" I said, confused. "He pointed you toward LA?"

"Didn't I mention it?" Randall was complacent. "The—ah—indiscretion for which Klausen was being blackmailed by Fenton occurred at a convention Klausen attended last year in Los Angeles."

"Oh," I said.

"LA gave us a rundown on Fenton too. They'd had him up out there for extortion once, and for peddling porno films twice, and he walked away each time without a scratch. A very cagey fellow. Incidentally, his Los Angeles record showed that he worked summers while he was in high school at the public library."

I finished my beer. "Very, very neat, Lieutenant. May I offer my congratulations? And we may as well order now."

As he signaled for the waitress, he seemed so pleased with himself that I couldn't resist saying, "All the same, you'd never have got to first base on Fenton's murder, may I modestly point out, if I hadn't found that money in *Mushroom Culture*."

"That's not necessarily so," said Randall judiciously. "But it's possible you're right, of course."

"Wherefore," I said, "may I please have a tossed salad with my hamburger?"

Randall grinned. "Well—O.K. Just this once I guess I can throw caution to the winds."

"And speaking of financial matters," I went on, "what are you planning to do with that five hundred bucks you found in Fenton's money belt?"

"In default of any known relatives or heirs, I thought I'd turn it over to the Police Benevolence Fund."

"You can't do that," I said. "At least not all of it."

"No?" He bristled. "Why not?"

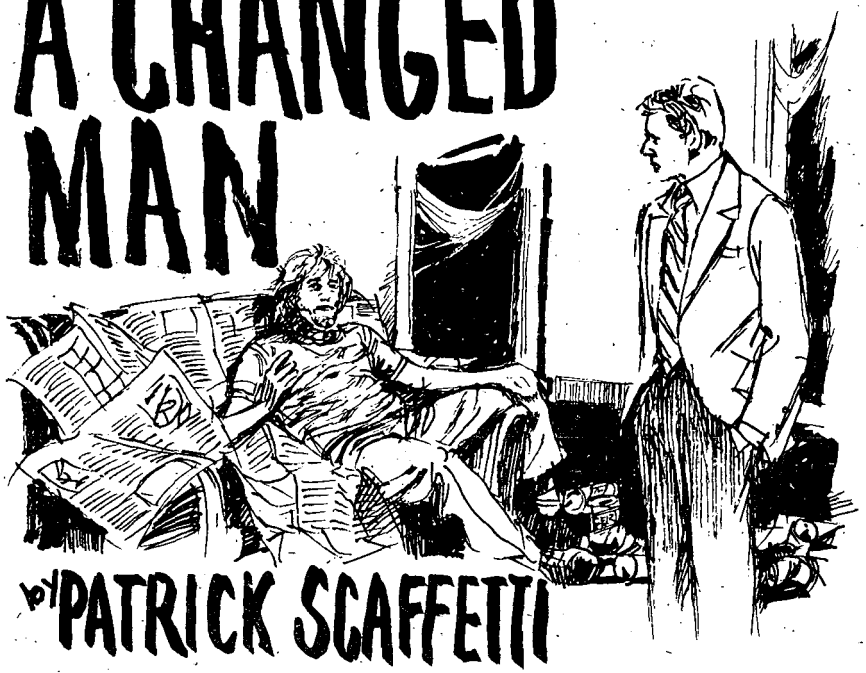
"Because part of that money is mine."

He looked at me as though I'd lost my mind. "Yours? What do you mean, yours?"

"Now whose memory is failing?" I said. "Didn't I tell you last Tuesday that Fenton owes me an overdue fine of two dollars and twenty cents on *The Honeycomb of Silence?*"

A new sense of purpose was what Stan needed. . .

A CHANGED MAN



by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

Off-duty Sergeant John Trask paused in front of his neighbor's house and surveyed the shaggy, dandelion-freckled lawn, streaked picture window, and litter of flyers on the porch. He noticed the filthy green Chrysler in the driveway and the row of overflowing trash cans along the fence. Sadly, Trask shook his head, amazed at how grief could change a man.

Stan Shields had once tended his lawn and property with an energy

that put the rest of the block to shame. While others did the minimum amount of maintenance work on weekends, Stan would crawl about his lawn on all fours, trowel and clippers close at hand, weeding, snipping, pruning. He painted the white trim on his brick ranch house every spring and washed his car when it already gleamed. Neighborhood wives alluded to Stan Shields when chastising their own husbands' lack of ambition.

Things had certainly changed, Trask thought. He hadn't seen Stan working outside once since the hit-and-run driver had killed Stan's wife Norma three months before. After the tragedy, Trask and some other neighbors had tried to draw Stan out of his grief, but he wanted no part of their friendly overtures. He politely but firmly made it clear that he preferred to be left alone with his sorrow, and he became a veritable recluse.

But who could blame the poor guy? Trask asked himself. Stan and Norma had been married for over twenty years. With no children, they'd been devoted to each other in a special way.

Trask hesitated a moment longer, then decided that even though what he was about to do would be officially frowned upon, human decency compelled him to go through with it. He drew a deep breath, strode up the front walk, and rang the bell.

There was no answer. The policeman jabbed the bell again, and the door opened. Trask blinked at the man who stood in the dimness of the hall behind the screen, wondering if this could be Stan Shields, his next-door neighbor of thirteen years.

"Hello, John," said the man. "How are you doing?"

The change in his neighbor's property had not prepared Trask for the change in Stan Shields himself. Once fastidious about his dress and grooming, the man before him wore stained baggy trousers and a grimy T-shirt. A tangled mass of long unkempt grey hair covered his head, and stubble darkened the lower part of his face.

"I'm O.K., Stan," said Trask. "How about yourself? We haven't seen much of you lately."

"I'm getting along, I guess. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to talk with you a few minutes. May I come in?"

Stan shrugged. "Sure, why not?" He pushed the screen door open for Trask to enter.

As he stepped into the living room, Trask kept his face expression-

less, but he was shocked at the transformation. Norma Shields had kept an immaculate house. On past occasions when Trask had been inside, the furniture had glistened and not a cushion or nicknack had been out of place. The house had almost had an unlived-in quality about it. Now it seemed as though a horde of barbarians was in residence.

Dirty clothes, newspapers, and empty beer cans were strewn everywhere. The carpeting was spotted and covered with crumbs. Cobwebs dangled from the ceiling. A football game was blaring from the television set in the corner.

Stan turned the volume down. "Have a seat," he said, shoving a pile of newspapers from a chair onto the floor. "Can I get you a beer?"

"No, thanks." Trask could not recall ever having seen his neighbor drink anything stronger than a Coke before.

Stan plopped down on the couch and extended one leg over the cushions. "So what is it you want to talk about?" he asked.

"This morning we picked up the driver who killed Norma," Trask stated bluntly.

Stan's eyebrows shot up, and his face registered surprise. "You caught him," he said softly.

The policeman nodded. "He hasn't confessed yet, but there's no doubt about it. A twenty-three-year-old punk. He's already got himself quite a record. His car is the exact same make, model, and color reported by the witnesses, and the front fender is bent in. The guy has no alibi for that night. He's divorced and lives alone. We got a tip on him from his next-door neighbor. He kept the car in the garage for the past three months. He was afraid to risk getting the fender fixed."

"Where is he now?"

Trask sighed in disgust. "I hate to have to tell you this, Stan, but he's out on bail. That's justice for you. He got himself a sharp lawyer, and he's free until the trial. But don't worry—there's not a chance in the world he'll get off. Not with the evidence we've got against him."

"What's his name?"

"Look, Stan, technically I shouldn't have told you we've got the guy, but I know how broken up you've been since the—" Trask fumbled for the right word "—accident. I figured maybe knowing we've picked him up might help you get your feet back on the ground. But leave the rest of it to the law. What difference does it make what his name is?"

"Just out of curiosity, John, tell me his name." There was no emotion in Stan's voice.

"Oh, what the hell. It'll be in the papers soon enough. His name is Sam Lavis. He lives over in Dexter."

"And he's out on bail?"

"Only until the trial. I can guarantee you he'll end up behind bars."

Stan lifted a beer can from the arm of the couch, brought it to his mouth, tilted his head back, and guzzled the contents. He wiped his palm across his lips and said, "Thanks, John. I really appreciate your leveling with me. Just knowing that the driver's been caught makes me feel a hundred percent better."

"I thought it would," said Trask. "That's why I came over to tell you. Something like that can really eat at a person."

Stan stared at the empty beer can in his hand and nodded.

"I know you've taken this whole business pretty hard, Stan, and I can't say I blame you. But you've got to start picking up the pieces sometime. You're still a young man. You should begin thinking about going back to work and getting out more. Don't forget, Marge and I are right next door if ever you need us for anything."

"Sure thing. And thanks again, John."

As soon as Trask was gone, Stan switched off the television. The old throbbing pressure gripped his head as though two metal rods were being driven into his temples. During the past few months he had almost forgotten the feeling, but now it was back with a vengeance. He collapsed onto the couch and closed his eyes.

But no sooner had he entered his own private darkness than the familiar scene came vividly back into his mind. He watched as Norma emerged from the supermarket with a single shopping bag clutched to her chest. Always a careful woman, she paused at the curb, checked the traffic in both directions, and stepped into the street. An engine roared. Startled, she looked to her right, then froze in horror. The beige car lunged at her, threw her several feet into the air, and sped down the street, leaving her broken and bleeding on the sidewalk. Furniture polish, air freshener, and detergent littered the ground around her.

As he lay on the couch with his heart pounding and beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, Stan knew that he would have to do some-

thing or he would never again be able to live with himself. The thought sickened him, but there was no avoiding it. Too much was at stake. And he would have to act before the law exacted its own justice.

He rose from the couch, trying to ignore the symptoms of his anxiety, and walked down the hallway to the bedroom. He pulled open the bottom drawer of the bureau, rummaged through a mass of junk, and lifted the revolver he'd kept hidden there. He examined it carefully and made sure that it was loaded. The gun was unregistered and had never been fired. Stan had always thought that someday he would use it, but this was not the purpose he had had in mind.

He brought the revolver into the kitchen and set it on the cluttered table, then returned to the living room and yanked the telephone book from a shelf. He skimmed through the L's, found Lavis, Samuel, and memorized the address to the right of the name. His wristwatch read 6:38. There was plenty of time to clean the gun and work out his plans before it would be dark enough to leave the house.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, Stan Shields slipped behind the wheel of his car and began his journey to the neighboring city of Dexter. The pressure from the metal rods on his temples had become a tight vise. Stan had never been a particularly assertive man, but a newfound sense of purposefulness guided his actions.

He had no trouble finding the address. It was a brick ranch much like his own. A light shined dimly from somewhere in the interior. Stan parked his car down the street, tugged on a pair of gloves, and walked back to the house. The weight of the gun in his pocket felt strange. He knew he was taking a risk, but what did he have to lose?

Stan walked up the driveway and quietly tried the knob on the side door. He was surprised when it opened, but then it was a quiet residential neighborhood and the homeowners had probably been lulled into a sense of false security. Or maybe Sam Lavis just had other things on his mind and forgot to lock it.

He stepped into the house and drew out the revolver. He stood silently a moment, thankful that there was no dog. Slowly, he stepped into the kitchen. All was still. He crept through the kitchen to the hallway and saw a light coming from a room at the back of the house. He moved cautiously toward the light and heard someone snoring.

The room was furnished as a den, and a tall lanky man sat in a chair,

sleep, his head back, his mouth open. A bottle of Scotch and a glass stood on the table beside him.

Stan did not stop to reflect on his good luck. He moved into the room toward Lavis. Carefully, he placed the revolver in the drunk man's limp hand, pressing the fingertips against the handle, the barrel, the trigger. Lavis mumbled in his sleep, and his legs twitched. As though in slow motion, Stan lifted the hand and the gun to Lavis's temple as Lavis opened his eyes. Their eyes met, and in that brief second Lavis's face showed that he understood. Stan pulled the trigger.

As the explosion resounded in his head, Stan dropped the revolver, fled from the house, closed the door behind him, and walked down the street to his car. Once behind the wheel, he yanked off the gloves and tossed them on the passenger's seat. He turned the ignition key with trembling fingers and pulled away from the curb.

Everything had worked out perfectly, he told himself; he was safe. No one would question that Lavis had committed suicide rather than face a trial and inevitable conviction for a heinous crime. There was no way in which anyone could possibly tie the unregistered gun to Stan. Luck had been with him all the way.

But reason did not quell his fear.

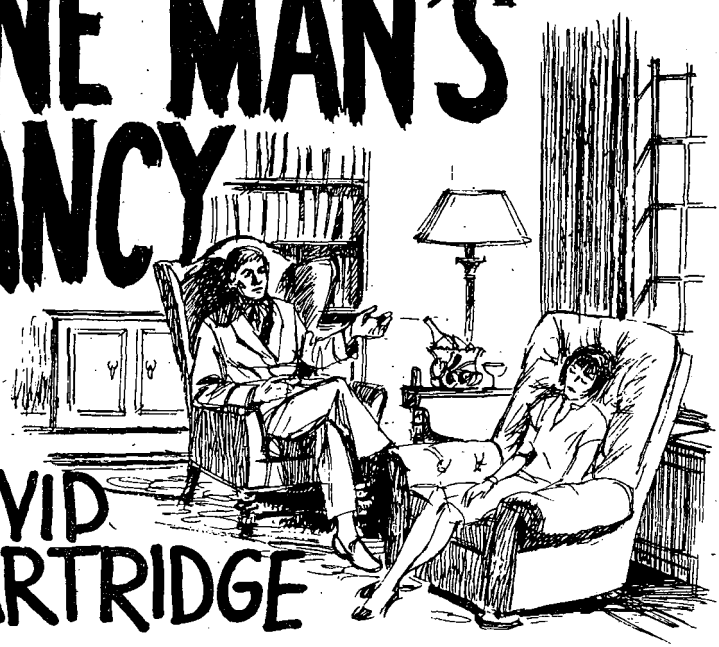
Only when he pulled into his own driveway and saw the overgrown front lawn did Stan begin to relax. The grass would have been beautifully manicured if Norma were still alive, he thought. But those days were gone for good. He parked the car, stuffed the gloves into his jacket pocket, and let himself into the house. He breathed deeply, drawing dust and strange odors into his nostrils. No more lemon scent. He surveyed the clutter, knowing he would never again hear Norma's dictum, "A place for everything, and everything in its place."

Feeling better by the second, Stan strode into the bedroom and changed into his comfortable dirty trousers. He discarded the clothes he had worn in a pile at the foot of the bed. He returned to the kitchen, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, pulled the tab, and gulped half the can. Norma had never allowed any alcoholic beverages in the house. Stan smiled. His headache was gone, and the beer calmed his stomach.

Only one source of bitterness spoiled Stan's contentment. As he carried the beer into the living room, he thought, I might as well have killed her myself as hired that bumbling Lavis.

When a man passes 40, he must pay for his entertainment . . .

ONE MAN'S FANCY



by DAVID PARTRIDGE

If I could explain what there was about this woman. She wasn't exactly young. She wasn't even a little cross-eyed. What was it?

I consulted a celebrated authority on the subject—*De l'Amour* by Stendhal. I had the volume right here on my shelves, having inherited my father's library of masterpieces in three languages. My brother was entitled to it, but he didn't want all those books. My brother is on Wall Street.

This particular masterpiece could have been written by some kind of a mathematician. Categories. Algebra. A plus B. It must be read in the original French, as I did, to savor the stupidity of this genius. My edition is bound in full Morocco with gilt edges.

But this woman—the nameplate on her little uniform said CHERYL, which went perfectly with the shrimp cocktail she brought me. A mound of lettuce topped by three immature shrimp. Dainty, light.

Now this little waitress was quick and quiet. Not an unnecessary word. I became aware of her forearm, her wrist. Slender, thin, too thin. Her competent fingers. Tea with lemon, two small cookies. At last I had the audacity to look up into her face.

I left a large tip under my plate. The biggest bill I had in my wallet.

Now I must mention that I had never before visited a tearoom. It had never occurred to me.

But on this day I was walking in a distant part of town—and I walk. I have walked in the country and in cities, especially, by the hour. Like Charles Dickens. There is no other way to see anything. My brother, of course, plays golf. He keeps an electric vehicle to spare him the disgrace of taking an unnecessary step. But I walk, carrying a stick as a rule—a cane of Irish blackthorn. One never knows.

And on this day, as I walked slowly, I stopped before a quaint window. A sign said TEA ROOM. The windowpanes were leaded, divided into squares in the old style. And through the window I caught sight of a slender person in a light-green uniform with a little waitress cap to match. She was quick and graceful as she busied herself at that table near the window.

I wanted to go in there, but I didn't. I walked around the block slowly, and by the time I passed that window again the table was vacant; there was nothing to be seen but the two burning candles—those candlesticks on the table in broad daylight—and the old-fashioned lace curtains drawn back on either side. A genuine tearoom. Genteel.

I walked around the block once more and discussed the matter with myself. Why the hesitation? Was I afraid? Afraid of what? Intimidated by gentility? The implication of chastity made by the neat little uniform? The ritual of the burning candles?

In the end, I walked in.

I walked in through the silence to the table near the window, hung

up my umbrella and my hat on the hatrack, and sat down, pretending everything was normal. I picked up the meager hand-written menu, pretending I wasn't aware of the waitress standing close beside me in her little uniform, her thin arms crossed over her breast. Then I glanced briefly into her face and saw that she was not as young as all that. She had a certain severity. On the other hand, there were saucy bangs over her forehead. I had already observed shrewdly that she wore no wedding ring, only a poor little wristwatch.

I ate my meal without an unnecessary word. And left, as I say, a handsome tip.

As the French proverb has it: When a man reaches the age of forty, he must begin to pay for his entertainment.

I went downtown to my brother's office. I am obliged to go there every once in a while to sign and countersign checks, papers, and so on.

There is a view of the river from his windows. The atmosphere is good enough—always some little jokes, of course. This time there was mention of Union Pacific, Southern Pacific. "How about Northern Pacific?" I asked. "She has changed her name—merged, married," he said. My brother has a superb sense of humor.

We get on well enough down there in his office. But I don't go to his house any more. His home, he calls it—a building as white as Cadiz with a picket fence and all that. There is a big wife and two small children. Monsters.

The last time I was there, for the usual Thanksgiving visit, the boy kept climbing all over me and pulling my ears—dear old Uncle Max. The mother beaming. At last the boy succeeded in breaking my spectacles, and I slapped him, a little harder than necessary perhaps. Perhaps not. At any rate, I left. I had my Thanksgiving dinner in town.

But in the office, all is smooth enough.

My brother says, "Why do you want all this cash?"

I say, "It's my money, Howard. I'd like you to get it for me in clean bills. Tell your man I want new banknotes. Fresh, clean, and crisp."

The table at the window was vacant. The candles were burning. I took off my hat and went in.

She did not recognize me and I scarcely looked at her. I mean, I did

not dare look squarely into her face. Again I was aware of her small wrists, her fingers, the pitiful wristwatch.

I gave my order and not another word. No overtures. No harpooning of the captive audience with a quip. *Chi va piano, va sano.* I am a linguist, a man of culture. I can wait. That is the way. Besides, it was a pleasure.

I left a substantial tip under my plate, paying the modest bill at the desk, of course.

I hesitated about returning the following day. Perhaps she would wonder. However, I did take a little walk in the neighborhood, passing the candle-lighted window from across the street and shielding myself from view with my open umbrella.

I observed the scene, the customers going in, coming out—elderly women. Gentlewomen. They ate green salad with half an egg, a small pot of tea. Ladies. Tips meager to zero.

At last I went in. The table was vacant now, but the waitress this time was an amiable person on the heavy side.

I gave her my order and was tempted to ask a question. But I lack the gift, the light touch, the lilting tone with which to say, "Where is our little friend Cheryl today?"

Possibly she was hiding from me somewhere on the premises. Possibly she would reappear. I dallied over my tea-with-lemon. At last it occurred to me this must be her day off. Friday. I must remember that.

Monday was the day of decision.

Again, I hesitated. But I must return if only to see her face, having studied only her hands and her manner of walking away from my table with lightness and grace, her footsteps noiseless.

This time she gave me a shred of recognition, affording me the opportunity to look squarely into her face. She had small deep-set eyes. I cannot explain what there was about her.

I said to myself: If you never go back, she will remember you.

The voice of prophecy was strong and clear in my mind and I said to myself: If you never go back you will have broken it off at the peak! The road from here is down.

I knew very well. I saw it all very clearly. My mind, of course, is a

cut above the minds of other men. I knew very well.

But still, on leaving, I left a substantial tip, as always, and a note I had prepared in advance on one of my engraved cards from former days: *Please call me.*

The future was in her hands. I would never return, I would not beseech her. A gentleman does not inflict himself. Besides, I knew very well that she would call, sooner or later. She had looked at me with an inscrutable eye—when she looked at me at all—but I was sure. I was prepared.

But when the telephone finally rang one evening, I was shocked by the explosion of the sound in the quiet room. It was a quarter-to-nine.

She did not say, "Do you know who this is?"

She said, "You asked me to call." Her voice was small and steady, unsmiling.

I said, "What's your name?"

She replied, "You know my name. My name is Cheryl."

"Cheryl is not a name," I said. "Cheryl is a flower, a fruit."

She waited. I thought she had hung up. At last she said her name was Agnes. Also she consented to come over. For a little while, she said. Just for an hour or so.

I did not tell her to hurry. I did not tell her of my impatience to see her again. A civilized man does not reveal his feelings without the saving grace of a little joke, and I never was a jokester.

But I was free to repeat her name. "Agnes!" I said aloud to the rubber plant in the corner. "Agnes is coming! Before long the doorbell will ring and she will be here."

George III raised his hat to a tree. Why not? A plant is not a stone.

I went out into the hall and experimented with the bell. Sometimes a person rings and rings and you never hear it. The person waits, then gives it up and is lost forever. The mechanism, the batteries. And no one had rung my bell in a long time. But it was in good order.

I hurried to the pantry. I had made preparations—delicacies, snacks, and the silver tray in a high state of polish, the crystal glasses sparkling. I had learned long before to dispense with a servant. A man can keep his place immaculate, the velvet hangings at the windows, the old clock on the mantel. I held up the glasses for a final inspection.

When the doorbell rang, I said to myself: This is Agnes!

She was wearing a little grey suit and a summery hat, a hat with fruit as ornaments. But I recognized her. I would have recognized her on the street if I met her unexpectedly, uniform or no uniform, from her cruel deep-set eyes and her manner of walking.

She stood in the middle of the room and looked around at the massive old furniture of gleaming mahogany and the ancient rubber plant reaching almost to the ceiling. Whether she was filled with scorn or interest, I did not know. But I observed that she did not look at me.

She stood there on her frail ankles and allowed me to take her hat and the little jacket and the poor cotton gloves. And when I said, "What would you prefer, Agnes? Some wine? Sherry, Madeira, a glass of champagne?" She met my eye for an instant and said, "I haven't much time, you know. I told you that." And it seemed to me she was opening a button on her blouse, preparing to have it over with.

But I persuaded her to sit down for a moment in the big armchair. I brought her cigarettes and held a light for her. And when she looked up at the clock on the mantel, I pretended not to notice.

"I have a little surprise for you, Agnes," I said.

The tray with all the delicacies did not interest her at all. She was not hungry, she had no appetite. "No, thank you," she said, "nothing." But she would have a glass of champagne—just one glass—and she looked up at the clock again.

She was in a hurry. She was a poor little thing, a waif. She was not a professional. But she was in a hurry to get it over with.

She almost said so. She said to me, after I had filled her glass, "What do you want of me?"

"I want to talk to you, Agnes," I said. "I want to become acquainted with you."

That was the simple truth. I wanted her, first of all, to be my friend. "Talk to me about yourself, Agnes," I said.

And when she said there was nothing to tell, nothing interesting, not a thing, I said to her, "Everything about you interests me. You don't have to tell me any secrets, just some simple things about your home, your childhood, where you were born. And tell me about your family. Have you any brothers and sisters? What are their names?"

She said, "What difference does it make?" She came from a little town upstate, she wasn't going back, and who cared?

For a moment, I thought she was going to leave. The tone of her voice— I got up and refilled her glass. And accidentally, I think, my hand touched her forearm.

She looked up at me, and for the duration of a glance she looked squarely at me. I remember very well her small dark eyes and the fringe of her black bangs.

She said, "It's getting late. What do you want, anyway?"

"First," I told her, "I want to talk to you. I haven't talked to anyone for a long time. I haven't met anybody I wanted to talk to." And so, since she didn't want to say anything more, I began telling her about myself. I told her about my brother Howard, who was my only living relative, and about his family—the two terrible children. I told her about the changing of the guard at the King's palace in Copenhagen. I told her about San Francisco, Mount Tamalpais. . .But she didn't seem to be listening, possibly she had not heard a word.

She was asleep.

I didn't notice right away. I was so busy talking, so anxious. But then it seemed to me that her silence was even deeper, and there she was fast asleep in the big armchair. Her head had fallen to one side, poor thing, and her skirt was disarranged, revealing the length of her sweet and slender legs.

I got up and quietly covered her with my camel's hair steamer-rug. I turned off the light beside her chair, then I sat down again, for a long time, watching her sleep.

I was in no hurry. I am a gourmet.

Now and then, under questioning, she would tell me one thing or another about herself, possibly even telling the truth. She told me her age, and I think she told the truth. She described the old frame house where she was born and where her family still lived. She told me something about a brother—his name, his wife's name. I liked to hear her speak, because she was so quiet by nature, at least when she was with me. Taciturn. Every word, therefore, was doubly important and precious.

Sometimes at the table over a late supper, I would try to tell her some more about myself. I had had some interesting experiences in my life. I had visited the celebrated Casino of Monte Carlo as a young man, and had attended a gala performance of *La Bohème* at La Scala in

Milan. I had a number of colorful anecdotes to tell her, but she would not really listen.

I remember one evening very well.

She was wearing a new dress and a little necklace I had just given her. She was still working at the tearoom, and would have to go home and change before we went out evenings. She would insist upon it. As for me, I would have taken her to the most fashionable restaurant in the world just as she was that first evening, in that poor little grey suit. She was never a beauty or even a pretty girl, but I can't remember a moment or a circumstance when her looks didn't suit me. Besides, she was not a girl, she was a woman. She had a surprisingly strong little body. And those lustrous black bangs that she tossed in a rare moment of animation, in honor of the handsome headwaiter, for example, or of the musician who came up to the table, his violin under his arm, asking whether there was anything special Madame would like to hear. And Madame would toss the bangs, and the pendant earrings would sway and catch the light.

She liked this one little place. The music, the middle-class elegance, the suave service. She was almost vivacious. She was pretending to be there without me.

At last I told her what I thought. I permitted myself to speak my mind, in moderate language.

She said, "Are you jealous of a waiter?"

I said, "I am jealous of everyone. You have eyes for everyone but me."

Then, for a moment, she trained those deep-set cruel eyes full on me. She seemed about to say the fatal words, the final insult. But she bit her lip.

I took her home. At her door, I remembered to pay her. You must always pay a woman for her time. That is the big moment.

Jealous? Certainly. A lover is bound to be cocksure or jealous, one or the other.

Who said that? Was it Stendhal, that genius? Possibly I said it myself. What's the difference?

The next time she was wearing a new dress, something dark, and she looked almost stylish.

I assured myself, once again, that things would be different this time, that she would learn to show some respect.

But again it happened, and again and again, the same thing. She would have eyes for the musicians, for the men at the next table or up at the bar—for anyone but me—but especially for the waiter. She would look up into his face, trying to catch his glance, as though trying to beseech him to rescue her. She would watch his lips as though she loved him. Waitress and waiter should get on swimmingly, not a cloud in the sky, I was tempted to tell her more than once, but I never did. I did not want to lose her, not in that manner.

I did not want to say goodbye forever—and then be tempted to lurk and loiter in some doorway near her windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. She had quit her job at the tearoom, which made it doubly difficult to intercept her. And if she moved, I should have to wander across the entire city, looking for her. So long as there was a shred of possibility, I would find no rest. Altogether, it was an affliction.

I decided, therefore, to marry her.

I need hardly mention that I knew what I was doing. I knew very well. My mind is an extraordinary mechanism. I saw that there were two alternatives here, and I knew what to do in either case. It was to be one thing or the other, and no more of this slow erosion. There was the slender possibility that she might change with the wedding ring, the dignity of marriage. Perhaps she would find it possible now to listen to me, listen with her eyes I mean. Certainly, I expected no pyrotechnics, no sudden display of infatuation. I would expect and demand only a modicum of friendliness. It would be up to her. She must decide whether to conduct herself as my friend or my enemy. It had to be one or the other, and I knew what to do in either case.

I was prepared for the best and for the worst. I had my plan worked out in detail. In my younger days I had crossed the Atlantic a score of times, and was well acquainted with ships, with the intrigue of the smoking room, with the dark and deserted reaches of the boat deck.

Somewhere among the four thousand-odd volumes in my library downstairs there is a story about a man in early middle age, a pawnbroker I believe, who marries a poor young waif, a girl in desper-

ate circumstances. And one night he opens his eyes and finds her standing over him, pointing a gun within inches of his face. He does not move. He stares directly into her eyes until at last she lowers the gun and turns away.

What happens next is of no importance. I don't remember the exact ending or even the name of the author. The girl I have never forgotten. There is an equation here.

So we were married.

I persuaded her without much difficulty. She was sitting close beside me at a quiet corner table, and I produced the diamond ring and said what I had to say. I took her hand, and if she flinched I didn't notice it. She had lowered her eyes, and she seemed to be listening to every word I had to say. We were, in effect, holding hands—for the very first time.

"Agnes," I said. "Agnes, my dear!. . ." My voice was unsteady.

After a moment, I began telling her what I wanted to do for her. Aside from giving her my name, which was an important matter, I would change my will. I would leave her everything, all my goods and chattels. And in view of the difference in our ages, by the very nature of things, she would be likely to inherit all this someday because she would outlive me. Unless, of course, there was an accident.

Then, in a lighter vein, I said, "On our honeymoon, Agnes, we'll flee the cold and snow. We'll take a trip south—to the West Indies on a ship. A cruise. How would you like that?"

She only said, "I'll need a lot of new clothes."

Naturally, I booked the bridal suite.

Whatever the outcome of the experiment, whatever the verdict, it would be worth it. I had chosen a suite with a modern motif—teak and ivory—with lighting subdued. Also a Bon Voyage basket to be sent to the cabin. Flowers and fruit and the customary splits of champagne, the sovereign remedy for seasickness.

The scene, therefore, was festive. And the bride, in her traveling costume, everything new from head to toe, looked dainty and graceful and almost contented. Having never before traveled by sea, she was clearly surprised at the comforts and conveniences and splendor. As she unpacked her things, she was actually humming a little, it seemed

to me. For a moment I was almost hopeful.

I sat there, not daring to light my cigar in the perfumed cabin. I sat and watched her, and was overcome with this woman as never before. I said to myself: Perhaps the miracle will come to pass! Perhaps she can be spared!

I watched her as she moved about, half dressed in her new finery. When I asked her to come to me, she came and sat down on the arm of my chair. Thus, without seeing her face, I was free to imagine that she was gazing down at me with some fondness, and at any rate I could touch her and breathe the scent of her.

But then, when I said to her, "Agnes, we could have dinner served here in the cabin. Drinks and dinner and everything. How would you like that?" she moved away from me a little, and said, "Oh, I think it would be more fun in the dining room!"

More fun! Those were her honeymoon words. And even then, naturally, I tried to make excuses for her. I did not want to do what had to be done. It was a cold night and the water was cold and black. Besides, there was her perfume, the touch of her skin.

I took her to the smoking room for a cocktail. She was not a big drinker, but she fancied herself with a glass in her hand, and the word cocktail, absurdly, always has some magic.

I began explaining to her that the first night out at sea was always on the quiet side—people in the know did not even dress for dinner. At least, I said, that was the case in the days when I used to travel.

She was not listening. There was a party of four at the next table. Nondescript, quiet. And my wife was constantly looking over there rather than at me.

We went down to dinner. The dining saloon, I told her, not the dining room.

I ordered some Burgundy, and the wine steward, wearing the traditional silver chain with the heavy links, seemed to make an impression on my wife. He was a portly man, no younger than myself, but he had the advantage of not being me. She fabricated some conversation with him, asking some question about sherry, which she called sherry wine. She tossed her bangs and caused the earrings to sway and catch the light. She gave the steward her breathless attention. She watched his mouth as he spoke—his lips—as though she wanted him to kiss her. I had ceased to exist.

I wanted to say to her, once again: Agnes, look at me, listen to me, speak to me! But she would only have said, once again, What do you want of me? What more do you want?

I said nothing. It was too late. I informed myself that the verdict was in.

After dinner I said to her, "Let's go up to the boat deck and see the moon. There's nothing like the moon at sea."

She was willing, but without enthusiasm—as always.

I said, "We'll have to take our coats, and a shawl for your hair."

Down in the cabin I looked at her. She kept her eyes averted. She did not favor me with so much as a glance. Every moment, therefore, was an affront. She was diminishing me. She was an addiction that was destroying me. It was a matter of survival.

Up on the boat deck there was no one. The funnels and masts were high above us, and highest of all the stars and moon.

If she had come to me there, in the wind and darkness, and offered me her lips in response to the night, I would have shown mercy. But she would not share the beauty of the night with me.

The lifeboats were hanging along the side and beyond them there was no rail, only the space for the boats to swing out. In case of an emergency, I explained to her, the boats swing out on a davit, as they call it.

Stepping over a coil of rope, I went behind a lifeboat and touched the davit. I explained the whole matter of lowering the lifeboats. I had seen it done in practice drills on the high seas.

"Look!" I said.

She stepped over the coil of rope and looked at the davit casually, her eyes averted from mine.

If she had come close to me and brushed my cheek with her lips, or touched my hand, or only murmured my name, I would have spared her. But she only stood there, apathetic, anxious to have it over with.

I was standing with my back to the lifeboat and she was beside me. Before us was the abyss.

I said, "Agnes!" by way of farewell.

And again I said, "Agnes!" and was on the threshold of granting mercy, but then, for the last time, I pronounced her name and seized her and pushed her away from me. With all my strength, I pushed her and she fell over the edge backwards, without a sound.

I waited a moment. I waited and waited, fully five minutes, then I began running toward the bridge, the Captain's quarters, shouting: "Man overboard!"

In the wind, no one heard me.

I ran down to the smoking room and shouted that my wife had fallen overboard. The steward ran out.

I did not know what I was supposed to do next.

I felt the engine stop. I went out on deck and saw the searchlight playing on the water. A lifeboat was being lowered. An officer came down from the bridge and looked about.

I assumed that he was looking for me, so I went up to him and told him I was the husband. I told him we had been married only a week.

He put his arm on my shoulder—a splendid type—and told me how sorry he was, and to follow him to the Captain's cabin.

They poured me a brandy and I commenced to describe the accident. I kept my cap on in the cabin, to make them think my grief was causing me to overlook such a thing as manners. I think that was a very clever touch.

In twenty years they would meet and share their success. . .

THE PACT OF THE FIVE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

We never really thought of ourselves as The Five in those days, although looking back on it I suppose we did form something of a group to outsiders. Often after college parties we were the ones who remained, drinking and talking among ourselves. Sometimes we studied together for exams or went off to the movies or a pizza parlor in a group.

If people commented at all, it was probably because Terry was the

only woman among us. She was slim and fair and remarkably serious, considering all the laughs and good times we had. Usually when we walked down the street she was in the lead. But she was no more our leader than I was. We had no leaders, and that was why we stuck together.

Sam Forrest was the oldest. He'd come back to college after serving two years in Korea during the war. He was twenty-four the year we graduated, and he looked even older. His dark eyes were always wandering, as if on guard. Perhaps it was a bit odd that he took up with the rest of us, but he seemed to prefer our company to that of the other veterans on campus. Sam was especially friendly with Mike Milton, a stocky redhead who was majoring in economics. Mike was the joker of the group, and they seemed an unlikely pair.

By contrast, Tom Query was probably the most ordinary. He'd started hanging around with us for the most ordinary reason—he wanted to get Terry Dunn into bed with him. I never knew if he succeeded during our college years, but I doubted it. Terry, as I've said, was serious—she gave the impression of having known and rejected all the Tom Querys of the world long before any of us got together.

But I envied Tom a bit myself in those days. He was tall and handsome, a football player who might have made the big time at a larger college. But out on Long Island we didn't have much of a team, and no one came to see us play except the students and a few local residents with nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon.

The day that it happened—the day of the pact—was in the spring of our senior year. Though it was long after the football season, we'd been reminded of it by the early arrival of our college yearbooks. There we all were, our graduation photos arranged alphabetically in the front of the book: Dunn, Forrest, Milton, Query, and me—Phil Whitmore. We'd gathered at Terry's apartment to look at the yearbooks, because hers was the best place. Terry's roommate had dropped out of college after her third year, and rather than find a new one or move back to the dorm Terry had managed to keep it going on her own. She used the extra bedroom for overnight guests and occasional visiting family, who were happy to send her a little extra money toward it. If any of us were rich in those days, Terry came closest to it. Her father was an insurance executive with a fancy office on Maiden Lane in Manhattan.

"You should have been on the football team, Phil," she said that

night, nudging me with her bare toes as she sat flipping through the yearbook. "Then you'd have your picture in twice, like Tom."

"Mine's in twice," I reminded her. "That spook in the senior play is me."

"I forgot!" She giggled and then slammed the book shut. "Who's cooking dinner tonight?" Terry didn't mind us hanging around all day as long as she didn't have to prepare a meal.

"I'll do it," Mike said, "as long as you don't want anything fancy."

Sam Forrest got to his feet. "I'll run down to the corner for some wine. Looking at my yearbook should be cause for celebration. Hell, I never thought I'd make it through Korea and here I am making it through college." Sam was the only one of us without parents—his mother was dead and his father gone—and I suppose in a way we were like a family to him.

So we drank some wine and talked through the evening and far into the night. We talked most of all about what we would be doing with our lives after graduation. "My life's all settled," Mike Milton said, downing the last of his wine and reaching for another bottle. "I'm going to be a small-town banker, foreclose the mortgage and all that stuff."

"After this banquet tonight I'd guess you'd be a famous chef somewhere," Tom Query said.

"What about you, Tom?" Terry asked. "Pro football?"

Everyone laughed at that, but for all his athletic abilities no one really knew how Tom might end up—least of all Tom himself. "I'll probably be coaching high school kids somewhere."

"If any of you get into trouble I hope you'll let me handle the case," I said. By that time I was pretty well set on a law career. I was going on to Harvard Law School in September.

"So what have we got?" Sam Forrest asked. "A banker, a coach, a lawyer, and a writer." We all knew that Terry wanted to write. She already had a job lined up with a New York publisher after graduation.

"How about you?" Terry asked Sam. "Have you decided about yourself yet?"

"The only thing I'm good at is killing Commies," he said, "and no one's likely to pay me for that. I'll fall into something, though. I always do."

"We all will," Terry decided. "You know, twenty years from now one of us might even be a millionaire."

Tom Query shifted his position on the floor. "I hope to hell he remembers his old friends."

"Let's shake on it," I suggested.

Terry got to her feet. "Better than that—let's make a pact!"

"Great idea!" Query agreed. "The first one to make a million gets to run away with Terry!"

A cheer went up from all but Terry. She was used to our humor by then, but she still refused to be a party to it. "No, seriously," she said. "Suppose we have a pact that the most successful of us, twenty years from now, will help the others."

"Help how?" Mike Milton wanted to know. "Come to my bank and I give you a loan?"

"Exactly," Terry agreed. "Things like that! A banker could give a loan, or if one of us had a business he could take in a partner. If I'm a best-selling author I'd collaborate with one of you on a book. If all else fails, the successful one could simply give the rest of us a large sum of money."

"I'll go for that," Sam Forrest agreed readily. "It's the only way I'll ever get any real money unless I rob a bank."

"It's a pact then?" Terry said. She was just a bit high on the wine by that time, and she produced a lipstick from her purse. Bending over the coffee table she drew a five-pointed star on its glass top in lipstick. "A pact of the Five! In twenty years we'll meet again to share the wealth!"

"Do you want it in blood?" I asked, putting out my hand.

"Yes!" she said. She dabbed my wrist with a smear of lipstick. "The blood of my lips. We'll swear by the blood of my lips, and by our very lives, to help each other—to share with each other!"

And our five hands came together, to be lipstick-dabbed and to clench briefly.

That was the birth of the Five, and although we didn't know it that night it was to affect the lives of every one of us.

But that night all we did was finish the wine and talk some more before drifting back to our own rooms. By morning the pact was only a vague memory to most of us.

Graduation came, and though we promised to stay close there was the inevitable drifting apart. I went off to law school, while Mike Mil-

ton pursued a financial career and Terry Dunn her publishing job. Sam and Tom merely drifted through the summer, and they were the first I lost touch with. I kept up my correspondence with Terry, though, and I knew she was seeing them both. Still, it came as quite a shock in the spring of the following year when she wrote to tell me she was marrying Sam Forrest in June. I suppose I'd always figured it would be Tom who landed her, if any of us did.

Her wedding was a big affair. I went mainly because of Terry, and I suppose Mike Milton went because of his long friendship with Sam. And Tom Query must have decided he'd look like a poor loser if he didn't attend too.

So we toasted the bride and groom, and Terry returned the toast with, "To The Five! May we live long and healthy and wealthy lives! And may we meet again in nineteen years as happy as we are at this moment!"

It took me a minute to grasp the meaning of her words, and then I remembered the pact. I would have thought she'd have more on her mind on her wedding day, but then I realized that the pact had been more serious to her than to any of the rest of us.

In the years that followed I remained close to Mike Milton. We ended up living in the same Long Island town, near the college, and he became manager of the local branch of a large bank by the time he was thirty-five. I joined a prestigious law firm and was a senior partner before I was forty. An annual Christmas card with a note scrawled at the bottom kept me in touch with the Forrests. Terry had quit her job after they were married and they lived for many years at various addresses in the Los Angeles area. The only evidence of her writing I ever saw was in a Canadian magazine she mailed me about three years after the marriage.

"My first published work!!!" she'd scrawled across the contents page, and signed it with a flourish. It was a short story, and a pretty good one—the sort of serious thoughtful fiction I would have expected from her. I sent her a letter of congratulations, but if she published anything else in the years that followed I never saw it. After a while the Christmas messages stopped alluding to her writing altogether. She'd taken a job as a secretary at one of the television networks and Sam was trying to sell real estate.

I'd completely lost contact with Tom Query, and so I was surprised

when one of Terry's Christmas notes conveyed the news that "Tom has joined us out here." I wondered what "joined us" meant. Was Tom married? Were they living together in a sort of commune? I decided she meant only that he had moved to California and they were seeing him.

In any event, they drifted out of my mind. Occasionally over the years when I'd see Mike at some social gathering or community meeting he asked about them. But I could supply so little information that soon the three were replaced in our conversations by more immediate topics. We had our own families now, and other friends. The Five was a thing of the past.

One evening in May my wife handed me the mail and I found in it an invitation to my twentieth college reunion. "Has it been that long?" I marveled.

Jane laughed. "You're an old man, darling. Or a darling old man. I haven't decided which."

It was a few days later when Mike Milton phoned me at the office. "Have you heard from Terry Forrest?" he asked.

"Terry? No—should I have?"

"She's in town and wants to meet me for lunch today. I thought you might be invited too."

"Not yet. I'm meeting a client anyway, so today is out. Say hello to her for me. Tell her to phone me. I'd love to see her again."

He called me back in mid-afternoon. "Phil?"

"Yes, Mike. How did lunch go?"

"Well—strange."

"How strange?"

"You remember just before graduation when the five of us made that crazy pact? About sharing our success in twenty years?"

"I remember."

"Well, I know this sounds crazy, but I think that's why Terry's in town. I think she wants something from us."

"Oh, she can't be serious!" But I was remembering just how serious Terry Dunn used to be.

"Sam and Tom are with her too."

"They are?"

"I didn't see them but she says they all came for their share."

"I don't believe it."

He laughed mirthlessly. "You'll find out. She's planning to phone you for lunch tomorrow."

He'd barely hung up when my secretary told me she had a Mrs. Terry Forrest on the line. I took a deep breath and said to put her through.

Her voice was the same, even after nineteen years. Listening to her, I remembered her in her wedding gown with Sam at her side.

"Terry," I said, "it's good to hear your voice! How've you been? How's Sam?"

"We're both fine. And Tom's here with us."

"Oh?"

"I thought we might have lunch tomorrow if you're free."

"It sounds great."

"Shall I come by your office about noon?"

"Do you know where it is?"

"I'll find it."

That evening I mentioned it to Jane. "Guess who's in town? Terry and Sam Forrest—the ones we exchange Christmas cards with. Terry and I are lunching together tomorrow."

"Invite them out for dinner," Jane said. "I'd love to meet them."

"I'll see. I haven't seen either of them since they were married nineteen years ago. She said another one of our college crowd, Tom Query, is in town with them."

"Invite him too," Jane said. "We'll make it a reunion."

I remembered the reunion invitation that had arrived a few days before. Was that what had brought them east? Not likely, since it was still weeks away.

"I'll let you know," I told Jane. "If they're coming tomorrow night I'll call you right after lunch. But they may be just passing through." Looking around at our spacious living room with its beamed cathedral ceiling, I didn't really know if I wanted Terry to see the house. Not, at least, until I was certain what her intentions were.

Seeing someone after an absence of nineteen years can be a shock, but I'd imagined Terry as looking about the same, or as having aged gracefully with a few wrinkles perhaps beginning to appear around the eyes. What I hadn't imagined was a shapely woman in a yellow pants

suit wearing oversized sunglasses, her hair curled close to her head.

"Hello, Phil. You look terrific," she said, extending her hand.

"So do you, Terry. But I'd hardly recognize you."

"Everyone looks like this in California. At least this year. Are you ready for lunch?"

"Sure. I've made reservations at a little place around the corner."

Over cocktails I asked her, "How's your writing coming?"

She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "Oh, I've gotten away from that."

"I enjoyed the story you sent me."

"You know, I can't even remember what it was about. That whole scene seems like a lifetime ago."

"Whatever you are doing agrees with you. I'd take you for a college girl."

"That was twenty years ago." She sipped her cocktail. "The reunion's coming up soon. Are you going?"

"Mike and I live so close I suppose we should. Are you staying for it?"

"I don't know. That depends."

"How's Sam doing?"

"Fine. He's off drinking with Tom right now."

"It's amazing the three of you have stayed so friendly."

"Why's that?"

"Well, there was a certain rivalry there. Tom always liked you."

"I guess so."

"You were what lured him off the football field in the first place."

"Well, it never was much of a team."

"Any regrets?" I asked seriously.

"None."

"I'm glad." I glanced at the menu. "We'd better order soon. I have to be back for a two o'clock appointment."

"You're doing well, aren't you?"

"Well enough," I answered with a shrug. "Of course, practicing law on Long Island isn't the same as in Manhattan."

"You and Mike are the two who made it."

"We are?"

She nodded, studying me through her tinted glasses. "I suppose you have a family."

"My wife Jane and a daughter Marcie in high school."

"That's nice. We never had a family, Sam and I." She laughed. "Sam once said that Tom was around the house so much we didn't need kids."

"Tom never married?"

"No. We think he had an affair before he came west, but he never talks about it."

We made small talk, dredging up names from the past. When the coffee came, she got to the point. "Phil, you know why we've come east, don't you?"

"Well, no, I guess I don't. I assumed you were on vacation."

"This is the twentieth anniversary of the pact. Don't you remember?"

I tried to laugh it off. "I haven't thought about that in years. We said a lot of foolish things after having a few drinks, didn't we?"

"It wasn't so foolish at the time. I was going to be a best-selling novelist and collaborate with one of you."

"Would you have?"

"Of course. As it turns out, though, you and Mike are the successful ones."

"What's Tom doing?"

"Odd jobs. He was an assistant tennis coach at one of the clubs, but there's no money in that. And Sam and I aren't working at anything right now. Three failures out of five—that's not a very good percentage, is it?"

"I'm sure something will break for you."

"We hope so. Tom's got great plans for a tennis club, if he can get the backing." She leaned forward a bit. "I told him I knew you'd come through, Phil."

"Come through?"

"The pact! I've already talked to Mike and he's going to do his part."

"I never took the pact seriously, Terry."

"Never took it seriously! We swore it in blood, remember?"

"It was your lipstick, if I remember rightly. And we'd all been drinking."

Her lips narrowed to a hard line. "The agreement was that we would share our success after twenty years. The time is up, Phil, and we're here to collect."

I was growing increasingly uncomfortable. "Look," I said. "I might see my way clear to invest a thousand dollars in Tom's tennis club. Have him phone me and—"

"A thousand dollars! We have bar bills bigger than that! Phil, I'm talking about *sharing the wealth!* You're living in a hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar house out on Brentwood Lane! We drove by it. We know that neighborhood."

"You should know the mortgage!"

"Don't kid with me, Phil." She got up from the table. "We only want what's rightfully ours."

"Terry, stop talking like a—"

"Think about it, Phil. I'll be in touch."

I went back to the office with a knot in my stomach. The first thing I did was phone Mike at the bank.

"She's wild on the idea of that pact, Mike."

"You're telling me!"

"I offered them a thousand dollars and she acted insulted."

"Phil, I'm worried about it. You should have seen her eyeing this bank yesterday—like it was all mine!"

"It might just be her madness. Sam might not know what she's doing."

"Don't count on it. You know how Sam and Tom used to follow her around."

"But you were a friend of Sam's too. You could talk some sense into him."

"Terry's changed, Phil. Maybe they've all changed. Twenty years is a long time."

"Look, let's just sit tight. Maybe the whole thing will blow over."

"Yeah," he replied uncertainly.

I hung up and sat staring out the window until my two o'clock client arrived. For the rest of the afternoon I was uneasy, jumping every time the telephone rang. On the way home that evening I kept glancing in my rearview mirror, watching for a car that might be following me.

"Have a hard day, darling?" Jane asked.

"So-so."

"How was your lunch with Terry Forrest?"

"Good, I guess. But she's changed a lot."

"You didn't phone, so I assume they're not coming for dinner."

"No, I—I didn't think to invite them. After twenty years I guess our interests are very different."

Our daughter Marcie was having dinner at a friend's house, and for once I was glad she was away. Terry's presence in town, and her attitude, bothered me. She'd made me uneasy at lunch, though I couldn't yet put it into words for Jane.

After dinner, around nine o'clock, the telephone rang. Jane answered it and came for me. "It's Mike Milton."

I walked to the phone and picked it up. "Hello, Mike."

"Phil, she just called me again!" His voice was near panic.

"What's wrong?"

"She wants me to help them rob the bank!"

"She can't be serious!"

"I don't know! God, what should I do? Should I call the police?"

"I'd hate to do that. It could all be a stupid joke. Just what does she want you to do?"

"She knows I usually open up in the morning. They must be watching me. She said they'd come and fake a robbery and I could give them the money. She said this way I wouldn't have to give them any of my own."

"Oh, that's crazy, Mike. Terry's no bank robber—none of them are!"

"All right—what should I do?"

"Look, phone me in the morning when you get to the bank. Maybe things will look different by then."

"I . . ."

"Try to get some sleep, Mike. These aren't strangers we're talking about. These are Terry and Sam and Tom! They're not going to rob your bank."

He sighed. "If you say so."

"I have an idea. If she shows up tomorrow tell her you're all invited here for dinner tomorrow night. It'll be a reunion of the Five, and we'll straighten out the whole business over drinks. How does that sound?"

"O.K., I guess. Thanks, Phil. I'm glad you're there."

I hung up and went back to my study. Jane was standing in the doorway. "What was all that?"

I waved it away. "Mike's upset. It seems Terry's got this crazy notion he owes her some money."

"From twenty years ago?"

"Maybe we'll have to have them all over for dinner after all. And Mike and his wife too." I remembered our daughter. "Would Marcie like to stay at her friend's again tomorrow? She's always asking to."

"Well, I suppose she'd like it. But don't you want the Forrests to meet her?"

"It might be just as well if she's not here."

Jane came to my side. "What is it, Phil? Who are these people?"

"Only friends from my past," I replied.

In the morning I went to the office early, expecting a call from Mike. When it didn't come by ten o'clock I pushed it to the back of my mind and became absorbed in a lawsuit I was bringing to court the following week. It was just before ten-thirty when Jane phoned from home.

"Phil, I just heard on the radio there was an attempted robbery at Mike's bank this morning. They said the police were there and someone's been killed."

"My God!"

"Phil—"

"I'll call you back."

I told my secretary I had to go out. I hurried downstairs to my car, hardly aware of what I was doing. I closed my mind to the possibilities as I drove the two miles from my office to the bank.

There were several police cars in the parking lot when I pulled in. I recognized one man—a Sergeant Hawkins whom I'd cross-examined during a couple of court cases—and hurried over to him. "Good morning, Sergeant. What's happened?"

He didn't like being interrupted at his work, but at least he remembered me. "Oh, hello, Mr. Whitmore. Does this concern you?"

"Mike Milton, the manager here, is an old friend of mine."

"I'm sorry about that," Hawkins said, his eyes pained. "He was killed, you know."

"Mike—*dead?*"

"I'm afraid so. As near as we can reconstruct it, somebody was waiting when he opened up this morning. They must have held a gun on

him and forced him inside. I suppose they wanted him to open the vault, but he tripped the alarm instead. I guess that's when they shot him. Once, in the back of the head. The road patrol found his body inside when they answered the alarm."

I felt physically ill. Not so much with the shock of his death—for which I'd prepared myself on the ride out—as with the knowledge of what must have happened. Terry and Sam and Tom had killed him . . .

"Are you all right, Mr. Whitmore?"

"I—I think so. It was quite a shock. We went to college together."

"There's no sign of the robbers. They beat it after they shot him and didn't take a thing that we can discover. The employees are checking the cash now."

In that instant, as I was about to name Terry and her husband, I hesitated. Maybe I was too much of a lawyer to make the terrible accusation without more proof. Maybe I still couldn't bring myself to really believe. Certainly Terry had made no real threats against me, and I had only Mike's word of their threats. I didn't know if they'd driven or flown in from California, nor where they were staying. I couldn't even describe any of them except Terry after all these years.

And what if they were innocent? Bank robberies happened all the time. Mike's killing could be nothing more than a terrible coincidence.

Sergeant Hawkins moved away with some of the other detectives, and I walked back to my car. I had to get home to Jane. She'd be waiting for my return call, but it would be faster to drive home from here. I knew she'd want to be with Mike's wife as soon as she could.

I found myself glancing at the occupants of cars as I passed them, watching for a woman with a curly hairdo and big sunglasses.

I swung into the driveway and parked behind Jane's red station wagon. As I opened the side door I called out, "It's me, dear."

A tall man stepped out of the kitchen. For an instant I didn't recognize his bearded face. Then I saw that it was Tom Query and he was holding a gun.

Jane was seated on a kitchen chair and Terry Forrest was standing behind her.

"Hello, Phil," Terry said before Jane could speak. "Please tell your wife that we're old friends and we mean her no harm."

Query had followed me into the kitchen and I turned to him. "What in hell is going on here? What are you doing with that gun, Tom?"

"We had a bit of trouble earlier," Terry said.

Jane said, "Phil, I think they're the ones who tried to rob Mike's—"

"Shut up!" Terry snapped.

I sighed. There was no point in pretending I didn't know. "Mike's dead, Terry. Did you kill him?"

Tom answered from behind me. "Sam shot him. It was an accident."

Terry nodded. "Sam's getting rid of the car. He'll be here soon. Mike pushed the alarm button and Sam's gun went off. We didn't mean to—"

Jane buried her face in her hands. I went to her and tried to comfort her. She brought her face up, tear-streaked, and asked me, "Who are these people, Phil? What do they want with us? These can't be your friends."

"No, they can't," I agreed. "Terry, Tom—what is this craziness? Are you high on drugs or something?"

Terry laughed shallowly. "Is that the California image back east, Phil? No, we're not high on drugs."

"But don't you realize what you've done? You've murdered Mike Milton!"

Query raised his pistol a bit and though it still wasn't pointing directly at me his intention was clear. "You're a lawyer, Phil. Will you take our case?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, I'll take your case. My first stipulation is that all three of you must surrender to the police."

"Sam would never go for that," Query said with a shake of his head.

"We're wasting time," Terry said. "I wanted your wife to phone you at the office, Phil, but you saved us the trouble by stopping by. I'll get right to the point. We need money."

"I have no bank for you to rob," I said.

"We didn't rob Mike's bank. We didn't take a cent from it."

"I told you yesterday I could probably invest a thousand—"

"Invest!" Terry laughed. "We're not talking about investments! The agreement was that we would share our success. That's why we're here. Sam is like a wild man. You'd better not play games with him."

Jane looked up from her chair. "What do you want? What do you want to leave us and go away?"

Terry thought for a moment. "What did this house cost? One fifty?"

"A hundred and twenty-five thousand," I said. "And I told you, it's heavily mortgaged."

"We'll take our share of it, in cash. And we'll take Mike's share too. That's four-fifths of the value—one hundred thousand—in cash."

"You're crazy!" Jane gasped. "We don't have that kind of money!"

"But you can get it, can't you, Phil? Bank accounts, stocks you can sell, a loan on the house. It's not yet noon. You can get it, or most of it, by the time the banks close."

"I could get you a few thousand dollars at best."

Terry shook her head. "I'll tell you what, Phil. We're going to tie your wife to the chair here and leave her with Sam. Then you and I and Tom are going to take a ride downtown. We're going to visit all the banks you and your law firm deal with and see how much money you can come up with. If you can get us most of the hundred thousand nothing will happen to your wife, but if you double-cross us or call for the police I don't know what Sam might do to her."

"You know damn well what he'll do to her! You're telling me he'll kill her! You're committing a felony right this minute by attempting to extort money from me!"

"You really do sound like a lawyer, Phil. You must be great in a courtroom."

Query motioned with the gun. "Get some rope and tie her up, Terry. We've got to get going."

Jane turned to me with pleading eyes. But now the gun was pointed directly at me and I knew Tom Query would use it. We'd been friends long ago, in another world, but that didn't matter now. "I'll get you the money," I said, "but Jane goes with us."

Terry shook her head. "She stays here with Sam. That's the only way we can trust you, Phil."

"So the Five has become the Three."

Terry looked at me. "I don't know. Maybe the Five never really existed. Certainly you and Mike didn't act like it had." She found a length of new clothesline in one of the cupboards and started tying Jane to the chair.

"Phil," Jane said, "don't let them leave me with—"

"Gag her too," Query instructed. He took me out to my car and slipped into the back seat behind me. "Back out and wait by the curb,"

he said. "Sam should be here soon."

I sat behind the wheel looking straight ahead, too aware of the gun at the back of my head to think clearly. After about five minutes Terry opened the car door and slipped into the front seat by me. "He's back," she told Query. "He ditched the car. I'm sure Phil will let us have this one when we leave."

"I hope you said hello to Sam for me," I told her. "And introduced him to my wife." I slammed the car into gear and pulled away from the curb a little too fast.

"Slow down," she warned. "Don't attract attention."

We went first to my savings bank. I withdrew $3800 in cash and handed it over to Terry outside. "Does that satisfy you?"

"It's only a beginning."

"I have a checking account with about five hundred in it."

"What about your law firm's account?"

"I can't take that money."

"Sam might be getting impatient," Query said from the back seat.

I was about to start the engine when a familiar figure passed in front of the car. It was Sergeant Hawkins entering the bank I'd just left, probably to do some personal business on his lunch hour. "All right," I said suddenly. "The firm has an account here too. I'll go back in and see what I can do."

"No tricks," Terry warned.

"You'd better go with him," Query suggested.

She walked into the bank at my side. Hawkins was in line for a teller, clutching a bankbook in his hand. I had only to walk up and speak to him and—what?

"Hello, there," I said as I passed the line. "Good to see you again."

"Hello, Mr. Whitmore. Twice in one day."

"This is an old friend, Terry Forrest. Terry, this is Mr. Hawkins."

She smiled and nodded. I wondered if Hawkins would catch the fact that I'd omitted his police title. But he seemed not to notice, and merely moved a step closer to the teller. I moved on toward the officers' desks, and then paused.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"The officer who handles the firm's business must be out to lunch. I don't see him. I couldn't withdraw from the account without a bankbook unless he approved it."

"We can't wait all day," she said. "Go back to the office and get the book."

"I'll have to explain what I want it for. I'm not authorized to make withdrawals."

She was losing her patience. "All right, let's get back to the car." As we passed the tellers' line I noticed that Sergeant Hawkins was gone. I looked around the bank but couldn't see him anywhere.

We went out and got into my car. "What happened?" Query asked from the back seat.

"I think he's stalling us," Terry replied.

"What'll we do?"

"Phone Sam and tell him to get rid of Mrs. Whitmore."

"Wait," I insisted, "I can get you more money. There's another savings account at another bank—a term account—with ten thousand in it. I can withdraw it by forfeiting the interest."

"Let's go get it."

I started to back out of the parking space and realized that a car had pulled in directly behind me. When I backed up another inch he started honking his horn. "Crazy fool!" Query muttered.

I sat there but the other car didn't move. "I'll get out," I suggested, reaching for the door handle.

"No!" Terry said. "Tom, tell that guy to move."

Query swore and opened the rear door. As he started back to the car behind us I heard a voice say, "Tom Query? You're under arrest. I must warn you that anything you say—"

Terry twisted in her seat and tried to bolt, but Sergeant Hawkins was at her door. He grabbed her with both arms and pinned her against the side of the car. I got out and saw two more detectives running up. The man on the other side was wrestling Query to the ground, getting the gun away from him.

"I don't know how you did it," I told Hawkins, "but I'm sure glad to see you. They're holding my wife a prisoner at our house."

Hawkins slipped a handcuff onto Terry's slender wrist. "Who is?"

"Her husband. Sam Forrest."

Sergeant Hawkins shook his head. "Not unless he's a ghost. These two are wanted back in Los Angeles for murdering Sam Forrest last week. A neighbor got suspicious and found his body hidden in the basement."

I stared at Terry. "But—"

"When you introduced me just now I spotted her right away. The L.A. police sent me a picture of her yesterday. And when I saw him waiting in the car I knew these were the two. So I radioed for help."

Terry had turned away from me. I doubted if she would ever have cause to speak to me again. One of the detectives came around from the other side of the car with Query's pistol. "This could be the gun that killed the banker this morning," he said.

"I'm sure it is," I told him. "Now would someone please take me out to my house?"

Sergeant Hawkins drove me out and went into the kitchen first with his gun drawn. Jane was all alone, tied to the chair and gagged. Hawkins cut her free and she cried when I held her in my arms.

"How come the L.A. police contacted you?" I asked Hawkins.

"There was something in their mail about a college reunion back here. It was a long shot, but they thought the Forrest woman and Query might come here for it, if they didn't know the body had been discovered. Crazy thing for them to do, wasn't it?"

"We made a pact," I said. "Twenty years ago."

"What sort of a pact?"

"It had something to do with success."

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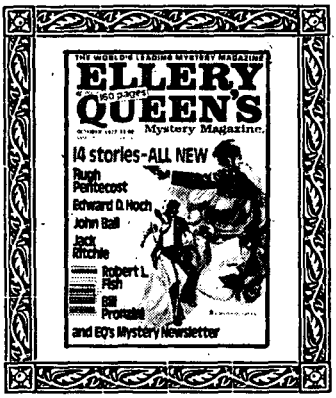

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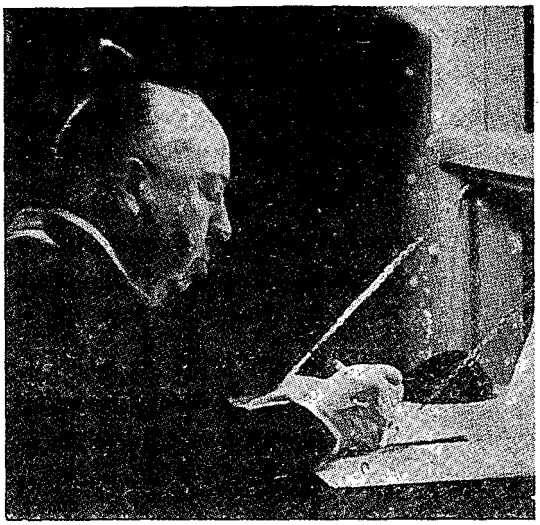

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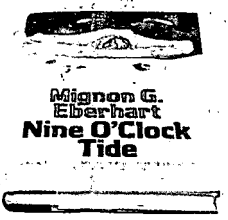

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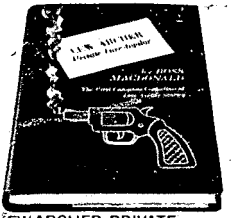

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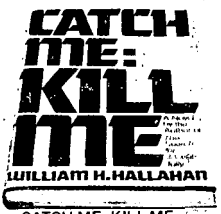

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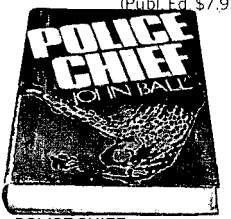

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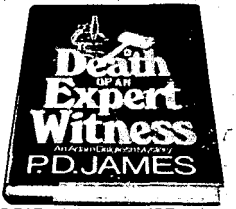

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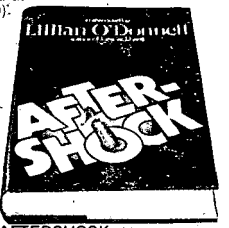

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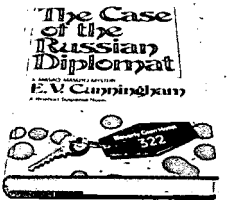

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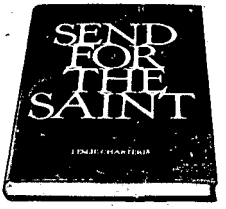

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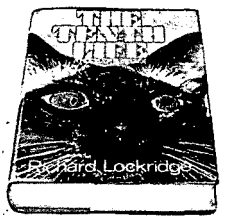

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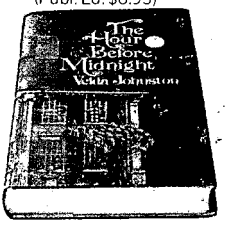

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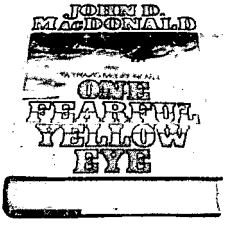

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