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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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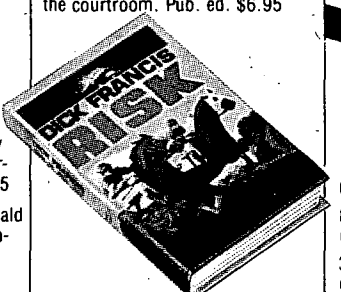

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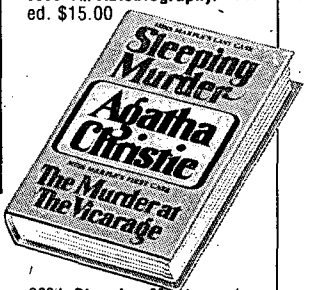

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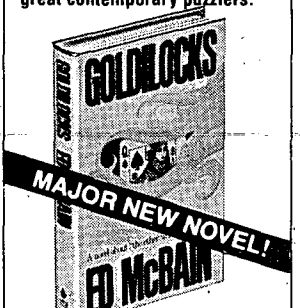

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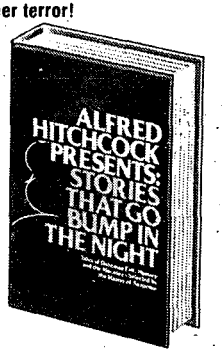

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October 1978

Dear Reader:

In one of his typically engaging *Writer's Digest* articles, "Where Do You Get Your Ideas?" (September 1976), Lawrence Block said, "The people who provide good story ideas are almost invariably other writers or people in publishing."

In support of this theory, one of the stories we're featuring this month, "Cheeseburger," by John Barry Williams, is the collaboration of three regular *AHMM* contributors—John Lutz, Barry N. Malzberg, and Bill Pronzini—who concocted it when they met at this year's Second International Congress of Crime Writers.

"Writers," Mr. Block continued, "get ideas the way oysters get pearls." At the same Congress, in New York, Edward D. Hoch took the field trip to the Coast Guard installation on Governors Island, where he was stationed at Fort Jay—then First Army Headquarters—during the Korean War. That, verifying Mr. Block's second theory, triggered off the idea for "A Memory in the Dark" (page 27).

Which brings us to Mr. Block's own story, "Life After Life." Where did he get the idea, I wonder.

Alfred Hitchcock

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Five people saw Myra Osborne vanish into thin air . . .

INTO THIN AIR

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

The temperature at high noon in Indio in August has been known to go beyond 120°. It must have been that and more as I chugged through it in my VW, without air-conditioning.

I'm Lincoln Plummer, and I'm reasonably sure I'm the only private investigator in existence who drives a Volkswagen. I know there's one on the tube who rides a bus, but then all TV private eyes have to have their own particular gimmick and the Volkswagen's a case of necessity.

I am also the only private detective with an office in Echo Park, which is definitely not the most affluent address in Los Angeles.

So why was I driving through an area as hot as if the gates of hell had opened up around me and headed for the state of Arizona, where it would be just as hot—at least for a while? I wasn't quite sure.

Oh, I knew the immediate reason; it was in answer to a phone call. The phone on my desk had been ringing when I opened my office door in the morning.

The caller was Melissa Osborne, calling direct from Sedona, Arizona. "Linc? Thank God you're finally there! I've been calling since seven!"

"I'm never in my office until eight, eight-thirty. Melissa, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Linc. Well, not so fine, I guess. But I'm not calling about me. It's Pop."

Pop was D. W. Osborne, sometimes called Daddy Warbucks, not only because of his initials and a head hairless as a billiard ball, but also because he was one of the richest men in the U.S. Or had been until he'd retired.

"What's wrong with D.W.?"

"It's not him exactly. Something's happened to Myra, and I'm afraid Pop will have a coronary. He hasn't been too well anyway."

Myra was D.W.'s second wife, Melissa's stepmother, and about half D.W.'s age. "What's she done now?"

"She's disappeared, Linc!"

My thoughts jumped back several years. "You don't mean—?"

"No, not kidnapped. At least there's been no contact from any kidnappers. But it's weird, Linc! She disappeared before the eyes of five people, including myself. We were having this party and—it's too complicated to go into over the phone. You have to come, Linc. Please!"

"Of course I'll come, angel. But I have no license in Arizona."

"That doesn't matter. The police here are as baffled as we are. I think they believe she just left Pop and we all concocted this story to cover it up. But we didn't! And there's no need for you to worry about the police bothering you. Pop will see that they don't."

That had to mean that D.W. had built up some political clout over there, even in retirement. He was the kind of man who couldn't exist without some word to say about how the world ran, at least any part

having to do with him or his.

So here I was, driving a rattling VW to Arizona in all this heat. Although Sedona doesn't service the major airlines, I could have hired a private plane to fly me in—D.W. could afford it, and he wasn't stingy, whatever else he might be. But I'm not crazy about flying, especially in small planes. I suppose the real reason I was driving was simply because I didn't like Myra Osborne and never had. No matter that I knew it was foolish to form assumptions until all the facts were available. I tended toward skepticism about any danger she might be in.

Myra was perfectly capable of hiding out somewhere for a few days, probably with a man, worrying everybody to death—maybe quite literally. Myra had been a girl with movie ambitions that came to naught—a platinum blonde with a spectacular figure, but absolutely no talent. She came across on the screen like a robot.

She caught D.W. at that vulnerable age for the male—just past fifty, his wife dead for five years. Myra and Melissa got along like two strange cats, but Melissa had once told me that she intended to stick around and try to protect D.W. from Myra's shenanigans.

But she couldn't hang around forever. She had been twenty-one her last birthday.

She had been fifteen when I'd met her, and in dire peril. She had been kidnapped, a ransom demand made to D.W. of a hundred thousand dollars. The kidnappers—kidnapper, as it turned out—had demanded that a neutral party make the ransom drop. My instructions from D.W. had been to follow the instructions to the letter, to drop the satchel of money and get the hell out.

I had disobeyed the last, at the risk of D.W.'s wrath. I knew that most kidnappers kill their victims, usually *after* they have the ransom money in their hands. So, after making the drop in an empty lot in San Fernando, I had doubled back, watched the pickup, and followed the kidnapper's vehicle. That's one advantage to a VW—no one can imagine a detective doing a tail job in one. The kidnapper drove to an abandoned farm near Newhall. He had Melissa stashed in the old farmhouse and was about to shoot her when I barged in on him, saved Melissa's life, and rescued D.W.'s money. D.W. was furious at the danger I had placed her in, but Melissa had made a hero of me and D.W. had grudgingly come around and not only thanked me but

awarded me a fat bonus. Since then I'd received a card from Melissa every year: "Merry Christmas to my knight in shining armor."

So here was her knight coming to the rescue again.

Of course, it was possible that this was a repeat of the earlier episode—Myra could have been kidnapped—but I didn't think so.

The temperature had moderated somewhat by the time I reached Prescott, which is located on a high mesa. I stopped for gas and called the Osborne residence in Sedona. Melissa answered the phone.

"Melissa, any word on Myra yet?"

"Not a thing, Linc." She sounded real down. "Pop is going crazy, and the police have come up with nothing."

"O.K., angel, hold on. I'll be there in two hours."

Before long, the mesa ended abruptly at Jerome, an old mining town perched on the edge of the mesa. A few years ago it had been a ghost town, but it had been discovered by the artistic set and was booming, the ancient houses clinging precariously to the steep hillsides being renovated.

The sun was low in the west, and the view of the canyon was breathtaking. I drove cautiously down the steep narrow streets of Jerome and onto the floor of the canyon. Soon the spectacular cliffs of Oak Creek Canyon, where Sedona is located, came into view, towering in dazzling pinks and reds.

D. W. Osborne's house was also spectacular, all redwood and glass, located on a small hill with an excellent view of the cliffs.

Melissa answered my ring and fell against my chest. "Thank God you're here, Linc!"

I comforted her, smoothing her long auburn hair. The trouble with being dubbed a knight by some damsel in distress is that you have to produce or risk tarnishing that shining image.

Melissa stood back, sweeping a tear from under one brown eye with a knuckle. She had grown up since I'd seen her. There are times when a man in his forties wishes he could shave fifteen years off his age. This was one of them.

"Don't expect too much, angel," I said gently. "If the police have learned nothing—well, I'm no miracle worker."

"The police! They don't even believe us, Linc, and besides I don't think they care."

"This 'us' you keep talking about. Who are they?"

"Come along, you're about to meet them."

She took my hand. "They're all out around the pool. Pop got them all here to talk to you, all the ones who saw Myra vanish."

Pop would, of course. When D.W. commanded, you obeyed. Then I did a double-take. "*Saw* her vanish?"

She led me through the luxuriously appointed house and out the sliding glass doors into the patio. It was dark now, and the only illumination came from the lighted pool. But there was enough light to show me the seven-foot-high brick wall around the patio. It was solid, no gates to be seen. Off to the left was a structure separated from the main house by a few feet that I took to be the dressing room.

There were four people seated around an umbrella table, three men and one woman.

One of the men rose as we approached and a gravelly voice said, "Hello, Plummer. I want you to know it was Melissa's idea, calling you."

The change in him since I'd last seen D. W. Osborne was shocking. Where once he had stood tall and erect, a shade over six feet, a couple of inches now seemed to have been chopped off, and he stood slope-shouldered, his hair white as salt, his face grey and lined. He was sixty and easily looked seventy. That damned Myra, I thought angrily.

"I'm sorry for your trouble, D.W.," I said.

He turned away abruptly. "Meet the Jasons," he said. "Stuart and Beth Jason, this is Lincoln Plummer, a private investigator from Los Angeles."

Stuart Jason was a name familiar to all Western movie addicts. After strolling through a number of B-Westerns, he had latched onto a TV Western series that had been running steadily for fifteen years, making him several times a millionaire. His lean, expressionless face and long, shaggy red hair was as familiar to the public as the countenance of the President. Rumor had it that he was a chaser, yet he had been married to the same woman for twenty years.

He stood up, all six feet four decked out in cowboy duds, and stretched a long arm across the table. In a rumbling voice he said, "Hidy, Lincoln. Seems to me there was a pretty fair country ball player named Plummer with the L.A. Dodgers some years back. Had a bad injury, arm or leg, I forget which."

"That was me," I said curtly. "How do you do, Mrs. Jason?" I nodded to the small rather mousy woman, who simply nodded back. "I didn't know your series was shooting out here, Mr. Jason."

"Oh, it ain't. I'm out here doing a feature. That's all Herb's fault. Right, old hoss?"

D.W. said, "This is Herb Kilmer, Plummer. He's a triple-threat man—writes, directs, and produces his own films. Started out as a cinematographer, and moved right on up."

The dark, fortyish, good-looking man stood up to shake my hand. He had a shy smile. "This is a first for me, Mr. Plummer. I just hope it works. I'm no Orson Welles, believe me."

"Don't be modest, Herb," Jason boomed. "It'll work. How can it miss with me starring in it?"

"No one can ever accuse *Stuart* of modesty," Mrs. Jason murmured.

Her husband ignored her. "It's got a very clever gimmick. I play an old-time gunfighter who's killed near the end of the picture. Dying, I swear I'll return from the dead and get my killer. At the very end I come back as a ghost and revenge myself. Or rather my trusty old .45 does. It just appears out there in the dusty street where I was shot down, aimed at the baddie, no hand holding it, nothing. How does that grab you, hoss?"

"It'll bomb," Mrs. Jason muttered.

I was getting a feel for this crowd, and it wasn't good. There was a bitter undercurrent and I wasn't sure if it was only between Jason and his wife. "Still no word about Myra?" I asked.

"No," D.W. said dispiritedly.

I glanced around the patio. "And this is where she disappeared?"

"Yes," Melissa said. "Right here. It was quite a bit later than it is now. Pop and I had driven up to Flagstaff to do some shopping and were gone most of the afternoon. Pop had invited everybody over for drinks and dinner and we were having after-dinner drinks out here. A few of us had been in the pool earlier—Herb, Stuart and myself—but we'd changed before dinner. Suddenly Myra jumped up and said she thought she'd take a dip. None of us felt like joining her. She went over there—" Melissa nodded toward the dressing room "—and changed. Then she came out and climbed up on the diving board."

"Did any of you actually see her come out of the dressing room?"

"No—we were busy discussing the movie."

D.W. growled, "What the hell difference does it make? We all saw her on the diving board!"

I looked at the board, which was at the end of the pool nearest us. "Did she say anything?"

"Not that any of us could recall later, but we all remember seeing her up there."

I could certainly understand why the men could remember, recalling the last time I'd seen Myra in a bikini. "Then what happened?"

"She posed on the end of the board for a few moments. The next time any of us looked, she had gone into the water." Melissa paused to take a steadying breath. "I don't know how long it was before we realized she'd been under too long."

"It was me who first noticed, I reckon," Stuart Jason drawled.

"Anyway, we all ran to the edge of the pool. You can see how clear the water is, Linc. But Herb and Stuart dove in anyway."

"She just wasn't there," Herb Kilmer said, his puzzlement as fresh as though it had just happened.

"You're sure she didn't climb out without being seen?"

"How could she, Linc? We would have seen her." Melissa shivered. "It was weird."

"And even if she did slip out without us seeing her, where did she go and where has she been since?" Kilmer asked.

"How about the clothes she removed to put on the swim suit?"

"We found them in the dressing room," Melissa said. "The police have them."

"Are any of her things missing from the house?"

"We've looked and can't find a thing. None of her clothing. Even her purse is there. She had cashed a check for a hundred dollars yesterday and it was all there except for five dollars. Her car is still in the garage."

I stepped to the edge of the pool. The water was clear as glass. I could even see a cigarette stub on the bottom. I faced around. "Did all of you know about Melissa being kidnapped a few years ago?"

They all stared at me, and D.W. exploded. "What are you doing, Plummer? Accusing my friends of—"

"Pop, please!" Melissa placed a hand on his arm.

"Yes, hoss," Jason said. "We all knew. Myra liked to hang around out there where we're shooting. We were all sitting around between

set-ups a couple of weeks ago and she told us about Melissa being kidnapped."

D.W. shook off Melissa's hand. "I asked you, Plummer. Are you accusing my friends of something?"

"D.W.," I said, "I'm not accusing anyone of anything. I'm just asking questions."

"Just like the private eyes on TV," Mrs. Jason said. She clapped her hands. For the first time I realized she was drunk. "Just getting the facts, ma'am!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Beth." Jason got to his feet. "Let's head back to the motel."

"Am I making a fool of myself, Mr. Plummer?" she asked. "Stuart says I always make a fool of myself—and him—at parties."

Jason reached down, hauled her upright, and began towing her toward the house. She looked back at us and waved.

Kilmer said uncomfortably, "I think I'd better shove off too. Early call in the morning. Unless you have more questions, Plummer?"

I shook my head. "No. Not tonight, at any rate."

Without a word to me, D.W. followed him into the house.

"I apologize for Pop, Linc," Melissa said. "This is all a great strain on him."

"You don't have to explain him to me, angel." I walked toward the dressing rooms and went inside, flicking on the light switch. There were benches along the wall nearest the pool and a frosted window was set in the wall above the benches. There was a john and two shower stalls, and two steel cabinets about five feet high. Both were empty. There was nothing else, not even discarded clothing. I went and opened a door at the side. A path led to the house. It was possible to go into the house without being seen from the pool.

Back inside, I stepped up on one of the benches. The window opened out on oiled hinges. From that vantage point, I could see the entire pool, the diving board, and the umbrella table where Melissa was sitting huddled up, as if she was cold.

I returned to the patio table, found a clean glass, dumped some melting ice cubes from the bucket into it, and splashed a generous amount of Scotch over the cubes. I sat down across from Melissa and drank deeply.

Without removing her gaze from the pool, she said, "You know

something, Linc? I felt strange last night when I ran to the pool. I *knew* Myra wouldn't be there! Or do you suppose I just think that now? After the fact?"

"That's probably it. Often eyewitnesses later swear they saw or thought something they really didn t. The power of suggestion." I took a deep breath. "Melissa—was Myra still playing around?"

Almost inaudibly she said, "Yes, Linc, she was."

"All this time and D.W. never caught on?"

"He's never caught on. If he had— Well, you know Pop's temper. There would have been an explosion you could have heard in L.A."

I was silent, knowing she was right. D.W. was a man who didn't approve of unauthorized use of his property, and Myra was his property.

"She still addicted to practical jokes?"

"God, yes! The crueler the better," she said bitterly.

I sat, silent, sipping scotch.

Melissa said abruptly, "I'll bet you didn't stop on the way to eat, Linc. I can fix you a couple of sandwiches."

"If it's no trouble."

"It's no trouble." She stood up. "And you'll stay here, of course—we have plenty of room."

I didn't demur. I was too tired to hunt up a motel. As Melissa went into the house, I splashed more Scotch into the glass.

I had a real nasty feeling about this one. Aside from the problem of how Myra had vanished before the eyes of five people, nothing that I had learned formed any logical pattern.

I slept hard. Dreamlessly, as far as I knew. It was long after sunrise when I was awakened by a pounding on the door.

The knock sounded again. "Linc? Are you awake?"

I sat up, pulling the covers around me. "Come in."

Fully dressed, Melissa rushed in. Her face was pale and stricken. "The Sheriff's office called, Linc. They've found Myra. . ."

"Where? How?"

"She's dead, Linc. Murdered, they said. They found her in a coulee west of town. Pop's already left, he wouldn't wait."

"Give me a minute to throw on some clothes."

She nodded and left the room. I went into the bathroom and dashed cold water on my face. I didn't take the time to shave off the two-day

stubble of beard but put on pants and shirt and a pair of desert boots I'd brought along.

Melissa was waiting for me when I hurried into the living room. She handed me a small thermos. "Coffee. I thought it might help to wake you up."

"Thanks, angel."

Melissa handled her Mercedes skillfully. She drove fast, but I scarcely spilled a drop of coffee from the thermos cup. Once we were out of town, she turned south for about a mile, then swung west off the main highway onto a narrow blacktop road.

"Melissa, does D.W. have any money in this flick of Kilmer's?"

"Without Pop's money, he wouldn't be filming." She darted a glance at me. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know as it has any bearing on anything. I'm just trying to get a handle on the people involved."

"You asked me last night. . ." She hesitated, clearing her throat. "Myra was making it with both Herb and Stuart."

"How about Jason's wife? Did she know?"

Melissa shrugged. "Probably. But I doubt she'd care all that much. Myra was only one of many. Stuart is a chaser."

Up ahead I saw several cars parked on the shoulder of the road. Three were sheriff's cars. Melissa pulled in behind. We got out and walked quickly toward a group of men standing about thirty yards away. When we reached them, I saw that they were at the edge of a shallow coulee. Other men were grouped together at the bottom.

"You'd better stay up here, Melissa."

"No, Pop's down there."

I shrugged, took her arm, and we half slid down the crumbly bank. At the bottom we made our way through the crowd to where D.W. stood staring down at Myra, who was lying on her back. From the traces of red dirt that is so prevalent around Sedona, I surmised that she had been killed first, then flung down into the coulee. She wore a sheer blouse, a tan skirt, and white-calf half-boots.

"You said none of her clothing was missing," I whispered to Melissa. "Have you seen this outfit before?"

"I don't remember it, Linc. It looks brand-new."

"The bikini she wore on the diving board—what color was it?"

"It was silvery, sort of grey, almost the color of her platinum hair."

D.W. glanced around at us and a big red-faced man in a sheriff's uniform scowled at me. "Who're you, Mac? Only people with official business are allowed down here."

Before I could respond, D.W. growled, "He's a private investigator from Los Angeles, Macreedy—a friend of mine, Lincoln Plummer. He's working for me."

I was a little surprised at D.W. backing me—then I realized that things had changed. Before, he'd been afraid Myra had disappeared with some man and he wasn't sure he wanted her found. Now that she was dead, it was a different ball game.

"This is a police matter, Mr. Osborne," the sheriff's man said. "And a California private investigator's license is no good in this state."

"The police didn't have much luck finding my wife when I reported her missing," D.W. snapped.

Macreedy looked stubborn, but I could see that he was starting to hedge. "You have a right to hire a man," he said. "It's your money."

I said, "Speaking of found, who found her?"

Macreedy turned away. It was D.W. who answered. "A couple of kids out hunting this morning." He spoke steadily enough, yet it was plain that he was keeping himself under rigid control. "She was shot, Plummer. In the back of the head. No gun has been found." His voice rose. "The best they can estimate the time of death until after an autopsy is about twenty-four hours."

"Pop, come on, let's go," Melissa said gently. "There's nothing we can do here."

He seemed about to resist. Then his shoulders sagged and he turned away and started up the bank.

"Coming, Linc?" Melissa asked.

"In a minute, angel. Wait for me in the car. I want to check something first."

Macreedy had his men spread out, searching the area inch by inch, and the body was unguarded. I squatted down beside it. It took only a moment to check the labels on her skirt and blouse.

As I straightened up I heard a siren in the distance, coming for Myra.

The business section of Sedona had grown considerably since my last visit. There were a good number of shops selling women's clothing now

and it took me a couple of hours to confirm what I had already suspected—that in one shop, Myra Osborne had bought a new wardrobe two days before, paying cash. There was no doubt that it had been Myra—Mrs. Osborne often shopped there, the saleswoman said. She even had a charge account. No, the saleswoman had no explanation as to why Mrs. Osborne paid cash instead of charging the purchases to her account.

I then drove seven miles out of town to the movie location, a Western village, circa 1880. I knew they wouldn't be shooting today. There were a couple of men guarding the sets.

I stopped the VW beside the guard shack. "My name is Plummer. I'm a private investigator working for D. W. Osborne. I'd like to look around here."

The guard looked uncertain. "I have to call and confirm that, Mr. Plummer. I have orders not to let anyone prowl around here."

"Sure, go ahead."

I waited a few minutes until he made the call. He stuck his head out of the shack. "Mr. Osborne says it's O.K."

I drove the VW around behind the buildings, which consisted of false fronts with scaffolding and catwalks behind for the cameras.

I was more interested in the equipment trucks and trailers than in the set itself. I was banking on the fact that the person who had killed Myra felt safe enough not to have destroyed what I was looking for.

I had to pick a few locks, but I found what I was looking for in the third truck I searched, the truck where the camera equipment was stored. After locking the items I had found in the trunk of the VW, I drove past the guard shack with a friendly wave.

It was after dark when I parked before the Osborne house. A sheriff's car was parked in the driveway. Melissa met me at the door. "There was a ransom note in the mail this afternoon, Linc!" she said.

Macreedy was inside, on the phone, one of his men with him. The ransom note was in a glassine envelope on the coffee table. I bent down to read it. The note followed the usual pattern: a single sheet of paper with letters clipped from newspaper headlines and pasted onto the sheet.

MR. OSBORNE WE HAVE YOUR WIFE WE WANT ONE HUNDRED GRAND DO NOT CALL THE COPS SECOND NOTE FOLLOWS.

As I stood up, Macreedy cradled the phone and came over.

"When was the letter postmarked?" I asked him.

"I was just on the phone to the post office," he said dourly. "It was dropped into an outlying mailbox and wasn't picked up until yesterday noon, too late to be delivered until today."

"Probably mailed before Myra was killed."

He glared at me. "Why do you say that?"

"It figures."

I looked around the room for the first time. They were all there: Herb Kilmer and the Jasons, all pulling on drinks.

"Why did they kill her, Plummer?" D.W. asked as I approached, his craggy face sagging with grief. "If they wanted money, I would have paid. I would have paid anything."

"I don't think she was kidnapped, D.W."

Macreedy butted in. "Then why the ransom note, smart guy?"

"Dust. Just dust to obscure the real motive. But the killer miscalculated on the timing. The ransom note was supposed to be delivered, *then* Myra found."

D.W. stared at me dazedly. "I don't understand. If Myra wasn't kidnapped, what happened to her?"

"Well, you might say she cooperated in her own death. You all saw her vanish before your eyes. So she wasn't dragged off by kidnappers, right?"

"How could she do a vanishing act, Linc?"

"I'll get to that in a minute, Melissa," I said. "This afternoon I canvassed some shops in town. Those clothes she had on, none of which you'd seen before, she bought the afternoon before she disappeared. She wanted to make sure that none of her clothes were missing, not a shred."

Melissa looked baffled. "I still don't understand."

"It's the same principle a magician uses to fool an audience. He leads you to *expect* to see something and, presto, you see it. Of course, there's a little more to it than that."

"No, Linc. I *saw* Myra on that diving board."

"Oh, you saw her—or a reasonable facsimile. If you'll all go outside, I'd like to demonstrate, with just the pool lights on, like they were the other time. And please assume the same positions."

They started outside. I motioned for Macreedy to stay behind. "I'll

need your help," I told him.

He gave me a suspicious look. "My help doing what?"

"You want this thing wrapped up, don't you? Well, I think we can do it here and now. I really want you to watch more than help."

"All right." He threw up his hands. "If you can shed any light on this screwy case, I'm yours."

I took him outside and unlocked the trunk of the VW. I indicated the two objects in the trunk. "You take the larger one."

"What the devil is it? A camera?"

"Not exactly. It's a laser box."

I carried the lighter object. We went through the house and into the side entrance of the dressing rooms, where we wouldn't be observed by the people around the pool. I moved one of the lockers over near the window, placed the laser apparatus on it, and aimed the laser beam outside. I showed Macreedy how to operate it. Then, removing the hologram from its container, I took up a position between the laser box and the window, holding the hologram up so that the laser beam would hit it squarely.

"Now turn it on," I directed Macreedy.

The laser beam clicked on, and there, poised on the diving board in a bikini, was Myra Osborne. She seemed as real and solid as life, except that the flesh tones were lacking, since a hologram can only be projected in one color, in this case a silvery grey.

Mrs. Jason was the first to notice. She leaped to her feet with a shrill scream and pointed at the diving board with a trembling finger. The others jumped up, staring. Melissa stared in horror, a fist clenched to her mouth. Only one of them glanced quickly toward the dressing-room window, then quickly away again.

D.W. started in a stumbling run toward the diving board. "Myra! Dear God, it's Myra!"

"All right, shut it off," I said.

Macreedy switched off the laser. There were more cries from the group around the pool, and I saw D.W. stop in mid-stride, staring incredulously at the empty diving board.

I left the dressing room and strode toward the pool. Melissa met me halfway. "Linc, were you responsible for that?" At my nod, she said, "That was a cruel thing to do to Pop!"

D.W., overhearing, came at me in a bull-like charge, "Blast you,

Plummer, what are you up to?"

I said, "You wanted to know how Myra vanished before your eyes, didn't you? Well, that's the way it was done."

Melissa said, "But how, Linc?"

The others crowded around.

"It's a holographic process. Three-dimensional. An object, or a person, seems as real as life, especially when you are expecting it to be there. A hologram doesn't move, but you expected Myra to dive in the pool, so when she was gone from the board, you thought she was in the pool. The image was all one color, of course, but there wasn't time for you to notice that. I had a hunch that was the way it was done when Jason mentioned the old .45 in the movie suddenly appearing in midair in the middle of the street, no one holding it. There's no better way I know of to make something suddenly appear than the holographic process."

"But why, Plummer?" D.W. asked plaintively. "What does it have to do with Myra's death?"

"The two tie together. You realize, D.W., that Myra had to cooperate. The holographic plate was made here, with her alive. I would guess it was done the afternoon before she disappeared. You and Melissa were up at Flagstaff, so she had the pool and the house to herself."

"Alone? How could she do it alone?" Melissa asked.

"She couldn't—she had to have help. She had a partner in the plan, a partner who killed her later that night."

"But why would she cooperate in her own kidnapping?" D.W. demanded. "And why was she killed later?"

"About the first I can only speculate. A practical joke, maybe. At first, anyway. We both know Myra loved practical jokes, and there was Melissa's kidnapping to give her the idea. Maybe she even intended to collect the ransom. Myra wasn't stupid. She knew that sooner or later she'd be caught playing around and you'd kick her out without a dime. The ransom money would have made a nice little nest egg."

His fists doubled, D.W. took a step toward me. "I won't stand here and listen to you dirty my wife's name!"

"You'll listen if you want the truth. Come on, D.W.—you knew, you must have known. Almost everybody else did."

"I won't listen to this," he said. But his glance slid away.

"Melissa, you told me D.W. was jealous, likely to kill anyone caught fooling around with Myra."

"Well, yes, Linc. But you're not accusing Pop of—"

I gestured. "No, no, D.W. didn't kill her. But that's the reason she was killed. Her killer was afraid he would find out and act. He helped Myra with the hologram and was supposed to keep her hidden away until the ransom was paid. Instead he killed her. Kilmer, you were the only one here to look back at the dressing rooms when Myra's hologram appeared just now. Why was that?"

"Why, I—" Kilmer licked his lips, looking from face to face. "I knew she was dead, so I figured it had to be some trick."

"No, Kilmer, you looked because you knew. I found the holographic equipment and the hologram this afternoon, in a camera truck on the set."

"That doesn't mean anything—anyone working on the film could have used it."

"True. But you started out as a cinematographer. Who better than you to know about holography? Besides, you were having an affair with Myra."

D.W.'s head came up. "Is that true?" he thundered.

"Of course it's not true, D.W."

Kilmer backed up a step as D.W. advanced on him.

Melissa grabbed her father's arm and hugged him to her. She looked at Kilmer. "Yes, it *is* true, Herb. Myra told me herself and laughed about it, daring me to tell Pop. She said she didn't care any longer."

"All right, so we were having a thing! For God's sake, D.W.! I'm sorry, but I was only one on a long list!"

"And that's why you killed her?" I said.

Kilmer glared at me. "Killed her! You're out of your mind, Plummer. You're not pinning that on me. I had no reason to kill her."

"It's my guess she threatened to tell D.W. if you didn't help with her little game. And you were afraid she'd tell him anyway after it was over. In which case D.W. would at the very least kill the flick—if not you."

"You can't prove any of that!"

"Do you want to bet your prints aren't all over the holographic camera?"

D.W. came on, Melissa tugging at his arm. "You no good—calling

me your friend, all the while sneaking around my wife!"

Kilmer backed off. "All right, I killed her!" he said. "But it was an accident! I was just trying to frighten her. Suddenly she was really going to go through with the whole thing, collect the ransom and all. I didn't want any part of it. I waved the gun at her, and she grabbed it. We wrestled for it. It went off accidentally."

"In the back of her head?" I asked.

D.W. had him by the throat now, and was shaking him. Macreedy stepped in and separated them. "O.K., Mr. Osborne," he said. "I'll take him from here."

"Linc," Melissa said later. "This holographic thing. We were all around the pool that night. Herb was sitting right next to me. Who operated it?"

"Myra. Who else? You said she went into the dressing room to change. She flashed the image on the diving board, then slipped out the side door and through the house while you were all still around the pool. Then she probably stored the equipment in Kilmer's car and walked away. It was a while before any of you thought to check the dressing room, right? She counted on that."

"Yes." She glanced toward the house, her face shadowed. "I'm sorry for Pop. He's really suffering."

"He'll get over it, Melissa, cruel and trite as that may sound now."

We were silent for a moment.

Finally I said, "Well, I'd better saddle up, it's a long drive back to L.A."

"You're not driving back tonight? All that way? Why not stay the night and start back in the morning?"

I shook my head. "It's cooler driving through the desert at night. I'll send a bill. D.W. can pay it or not, as he feels like."

"He'll pay. Linc. . .thank you." She kissed me on the mouth. Tears started in her eyes, and she whirled and ran toward the house.

Like I said, fifteen years younger. . .

It was getting hard to tell business and cheeseburgers apart . . .

CHEESEBURGER

by JOHN BARRY WILLIAMS

Wiggins was hungry again.

He sat in the diner, wolfing a cheeseburger and thinking of business. Or perhaps it was the cheeseburger he was thinking of and business was incidental. More and more, recently, the two had become entangled in his mind.

"You want coffee?" the waitress said.

"In a few minutes," Wiggins said. The cheeseburger was a little oily

and the cheese only half melted toward the edges, but he guessed he had had worse. Some cheeseburgers were better than others, he thought, but even the bad ones were still pretty good. They grew on you after a while. You could take something for granted for a long time and then find it an important part of your life.

"I can bring it now," the waitress said. There were no other customers in the diner this late at night, which made her unusually attentive. The attentiveness made Wiggins nervous.

"No. No."

The waitress went away. Wiggins worked patiently on the cheeseburger, eating toward the center. The center was definitely the best part, which meant that it made sense to eat around the edges in an arc. Toward the center the cheese and meat congealed into an amalgam.

There was a rumble outside and Wiggins glanced out the window and saw a glistening chrome motorcycle with a leather-clad rider come to a stop. The rider killed the engine and got off the seat with a flourish, locked the handlebars, and came up the steps of the diner. He was a tough-looking man in his mid-twenties with what appeared to be a human tooth dangling on an iron chain around his neck. The rider gave Wiggins a single disinterested glance and walked past him, taking a seat facing him in the booth just ahead.

As the waitress came from behind the counter, Wiggins said, "I don't think I want the coffee just yet. I want another cheeseburger."

"You'll have to wait," she said. "I have to take care of this customer now."

"But I was here first," Wiggins said.

"And you sent me away."

"I wasn't ready then. Now I'm ready for another cheeseburger."

"Listen," the rider said nastily, "can I order something in this place or can't I?"

"Wait your turn," Wiggins said. "I want another cheeseburger."

But the waitress was at the other booth, her head tilted, conferring with the new customer. It isn't right, Wiggins thought, she shouldn't be ignoring me this way.

"That's a double vanilla malted and french fries," the waitress said finally.

"Put on the cheeseburger first," Wiggins said. "Right away."

"Why don't you shove your cheeseburger?" the rider said.

I'm not going to get angry, Wiggins thought. He looked down at his empty plate and felt the gnawing in his stomach.

"I think the guy's crazy," the rider said to the waitress. He caressed the tooth on his chain. "With all the cross-country traffic at the cloverleaf here, you never know what'll come in."

The waitress glanced nervously at Wiggins.

"Well, don't just stand there," the rider said. "Get me my order."

Wiggins considered him closely as the waitress went back behind the counter. More and more of late he had run into people like this, and he was finding it hard to take. But what could you do except ignore it?

Behind the counter, the waitress looked back and forth between Wiggins and the rider, biting at her lip. The rider pointed a finger at her and raised his thumb above it like a cocked gun, his manner somewhat menacing now. She sighed wearily and began to make the malted.

She's only trying to do a job, Wiggins thought. Hell, that's all any of us can do—just try to do our jobs. Except for punks like this one, who didn't do any job at all, they just kept other people from doing theirs. That tooth around his neck, for instance—it was the sign of an evil man.

"Hurry it up," the rider said to the waitress. "I haven't got all day. I got things to do, roads to travel."

"I'm doing the best I can," she said.

"Your best isn't good enough. You—"

"Leave her alone," Wiggins said.

"What?"

"You heard me. Leave her alone."

The rider curled his lip contemptuously. "Are you trying to start trouble, Cheeseburger?"

Cheeseburger, Wiggins thought, and he was reminded again of how hungry he was. "Look, Miss," he said to the waitress, "I've got to go to work pretty soon. Would you mind putting my cheeseburger on?"

She hesitated, holding a scoop of vanilla ice cream over the malted container. The rider was scowling and seemed even more menacing. He stood and swaggered over to where Wiggins was sitting.

"I asked you a question a minute ago," he said. "Are you trying to start trouble with me?"

"Please," Wiggins said to the waitress.

The rider shoved him on the shoulder with the palm of one hand, hard enough to jar. "Big cheeseburger man," he said. "How'd you like to be a cheeseburger, huh?"

Wiggins had had enough. There was only so much you could take, piece by piece, because eventually it all came together and got tangled up—cheeseburgers and business, punks and waitresses, resentment and hunger.

He took the .38 automatic from under his coat, slid out of the booth, and pointed the gun at the rider's stomach.

The rider blinked and stared at him in disbelief. The waitress made a small gasping sound and looked as if she was about to faint.

"It's all right, Miss," Wiggins said to her. "Everything is just fine. Put my cheeseburger on and make it rare."

He had to say it again before she moved over to the griddle, walking like someone in a trance, and put a hamburger patty on to cook. The sound and smell of the sizzling meat came to Wiggins and made his mouth water in anticipation.

The rider was still staring at the gun. "What are you going to do with that?" he said finally.

"What do you think I'm going to do with it?"

"You better put it away, man," the rider said and licked his lips. He had adopted a tone of voice now that was careful and patronizing, as if he was talking to a lunatic. "Holding a gun on someone is a serious offense."

"Serious?" Wiggins said. "No, you're wrong. Nothing is serious any more." He glanced over at the waitress who was just placing a large slice of cheese on top of the sizzling patty. "Except to say that you should think more carefully before you act. You should consider the consequences of your actions, the pain that they cause other people."

"Is that so?" the rider said.

"Yes, it is," Wiggins said, and shot him in the right ear.

The sound of the shot combined with a shrill cry from the waitress. They filled the diner for three or four satisfying seconds. Wiggins watched the rider fall bonelessly to the floor and the waitress faint at almost the same time. Then it was blissfully quiet except for the burger patty cooking away on the griddle.

Wiggins put the gun inside his jacket, then hurried behind the

counter and used a spatula to slide the patty with its cap of melted cheese onto a bun. He added tomato, lettuce, and two slices of pickle, and wrapped a napkin around the completed cheeseburger.

He ate swiftly, standing, gorging himself. The cheeseburger was very good, much better than the first.

When he finished, he checked his watch. It was time to go to work. He tucked a five-dollar bill into a pocket of the waitress's uniform and hurried out into the parking lot to his car.

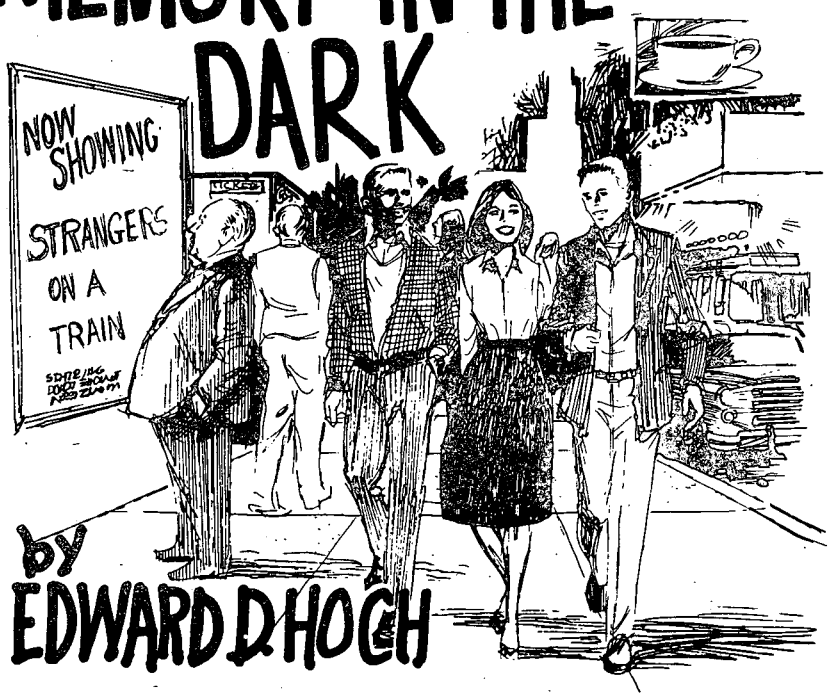
Twenty minutes later he parked the car in an alley downtown, got out, and entered the rear door of a building. It was dark inside, except for a light glowing in an office at the opposite end. Wiggins crossed the floor in soft strides and looked inside. Then he opened the door with one hand, drew the .38 automatic with the other, and shot the man sitting at the desk through the right ear, taking careful aim as always. He had a great deal of respect for his profession.

This time, though, when the gun spoke in his hand, it seemed to say *cheeseburger.*

Funny. Wiggins was hungry again.

Johnny and Kay seemed made for each other . . .

MEMORY IN THE DARK



by EDWARD D. HOCH

The other morning I woke up while it was still dark, and I remembered something that happened more than twenty-five years ago.

I remembered Johnny Dell and Kay Koster, and how it was when the three of us were friends.

I first met Johnny when we were both in military police training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, during those bleak years of the Korean War. He was tall, blond, and handsome, always smiling, always staring with his

steel-blue eyes at something just out of sight. There were two things about Johnny that attracted my attention at once. Of the sixty-five men in our barracks he was the only one who slept in the nude. And of the sixty-five men in our barracks he was the only one who had a lovely long-haired girl visit him nearly every day.

Her name was Kay Koster and she was a dancer who performed regularly with the USO troupe on the base. Her sparkling brown hair hung halfway down her back. She was a friendly smiling girl and we gradually became good friends—mainly, I suppose, because I'd become a good friend of Johnny's.

In all the time I knew her, I never did see her dance. I'd see her outside the barracks or at the PX or just around the base, sometimes driving a little white sports car whose make I can't even remember now. Once, near the end of our grueling eight weeks of training, we received a rare weekend pass. I went with Johnny and Kay to a party on the Saturday night at a friend's home in East Orange. Most of the people there were strangers to me, and though they'd considerately supplied me with a girl I fell asleep on the sofa.

It was early spring when we finished training. Despite the rumors that we'd soon be on our way to Korea, where casualties were heavy, our orders sent us to New York City instead. We were to take up duties at Fort Jay, on Governors Island in New York harbor. Since most of our unit was from New York State, it was like going home. They shipped us up one sunny morning by bus, and there was a cheer as we crossed the state line in the middle of the Lincoln Tunnel.

Fort Jay was First Army Headquarters at that time, and the main duties of the military police stationed there involved guard duty at the Manhattan side and loading vehicles on the ferryboats for the eight-minute journey across the water. Since the boats departed every fifteen minutes from either side, this was enough to keep a pair of MPs occupied, with another pair riding the boats. Occasionally we would be assigned to guard prisoners on work details around the island, standing over them with a loaded carbine while they cleaned up yards or painted some officer's house.

I didn't like guarding prisoners. A grim old fortress called The Castle served as the First Army prison. It was a circular building with thick walls of dark stone and an inner courtyard for exercise and recreation. They said it was escape-proof, and that meant the work details were

the only chance the men had for breaking away. Swimming across New York harbor with its deadly currents was also said to be impossible, but there were always desperate men willing to try the impossible. Mostly, though, the prisoners seemed resigned to their fate. There were rumors that drugs sometimes made their nights more bearable.

In those early weeks at Fort Jay I felt much more comfortable directing traffic onto and off the ferries and checking passes on the Manhattan side at the Battery, where we had docking facilities next to the Staten Island Ferry slip. When we worked that side we had to carry .38-caliber revolvers since the more powerful .45 automatics were barred by a city ordinance.

I was checking passes one day about a week after our arrival when Kay Koster appeared. It was the first time I'd seen her since we left Dix. "Hello, stranger," she said with a grin. "Enjoying the big city?"

"Kay! What are you doing here?" It was a foolish question; naturally she'd come to see Johnny Dell.

"Oh, I just wanted to see how you boys were making out here. Is Johnny around?"

"He's working the other side."

She showed me her USO pass. "Will this get me on the boat?"

"Sure." It was a First Army pass, not specifically for Fort Jay, but I figured I could stretch the rules for Kay.

After that she started coming more often, and it was almost like Fort Dix all over again. She couldn't bring her car on base as she had at Dix, where state highways bisected the camp, but she didn't seem to miss it. Some nights when I was off duty I would join her and Johnny on a subway ride to Times Square, where the three of us would wander among the bars and dance halls. "It sure isn't like Wrightstown," Johnny said, referring to a town located at the main gate of Fort Dix.

He was right—it wasn't. But for all the pleasures of New York, I found myself a bit lonely at times. Kay was fun to be with but she wasn't my girl. She belonged to Johnny Dell and I never forgot that. They made a handsome couple.

I hadn't wanted to be in the military police, but I'd ended up there after applying for the Army's Criminal Investigation Division. The CID men usually wore plainclothes and investigated real crime, while the uniformed MPs directed traffic or guarded prisoners. One day my

sergeant called me into his office and introduced me to a real CID investigator, and I knew something important was afoot.

The man's name was Yeager, and he had a casual friendly way about him that concealed a detective's analytic mind. "Good to meet you," he said, shaking my hand. "Your sergeant tells me you'll be riding the ferry this afternoon."

"That's right, sir." I didn't know if he held officer's rank, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"I want you to do something for us. It's quite important."

"Certainly, sir."

"You may not be aware of it, but drugs are becoming a problem on the island. We've discovered various narcotics—especially cocaine—in some of the prisoners' cells at The Castle."

I admitted I'd heard a few rumors, but nothing more. "How's it getting to them, sir?"

"As near as we can figure it comes by way of the mess hall, smuggled to the prisoners with their food. They must arrange payment in advance somehow."

"And you want my help in catching the smuggler?" I was feeling pretty good, on the verge of some real police work at last.

"Do you know Sammy Johnson, a black cook at the mess hall?" Yeager consulted his notes. "That's Private Samuel Johnson?"

"Sure, I know Sammy."

"He's in the city now, but he goes on duty at four o'clock. We think he'll be bringing some cocaine over with him. I want you to ride over on the ferry with him, engage him in conversation, and make certain he doesn't throw it over the side. We'll be waiting for him on this end."

"You think he might try to get rid of it?"

"He might, if he's suspicious. Or he might just drop it in shallow water to be picked up later. It's up to you to keep him away from the railing."

"Why can't you arrest him on the other side, sir?"

"We need proof he's bringing the stuff onto Governors Island." He looked at his watch. "With two ferry boats this gets a bit tricky. You should remain on the other side from two o'clock on, so you're certain to be on the same boat."

"Right, sir."

He stared at me through sleepy eyes. "One more thing—you don't need to call me sir."

Sammy Johnson was a friendly fellow who always wore a broad grin. He'd been a mess sergeant at one time but had been busted back to private for some long-forgotten offense. Such things were common and nobody thought twice about it. Chances were it was nothing more serious than sneaking a few drinks while on duty one night.

But now, riding over on the ferry with him, I was acutely aware that he might be carrying a pouch of cocaine. I tried to keep the conversation light, though the very fact that I was talking so much must have seemed suspicious to Sammy. It was more than I'd had to say to him in all the time I'd known him. As the ferry pulled into the Governors Island slip, I even experienced an instant of doubt, when I wanted to warn him of the waiting danger.

But the moment passed, and Sammy walked off the ferry into the waiting arms of Yeager and one of his men. They hustled him into an Army staff car and drove off.

It was all for nothing. I heard later that day that the search had failed to turn up any narcotics.

Sammy was back in the mess hall by dinner time.

A few days later I saw Yeager come off the ferry while I was directing traffic, but he didn't speak. I wondered if he suspected I'd tipped Sammy off and the thought bothered me. I mentioned it that night to Johnny Dell as he was climbing into the bunk next to mine.

"Don't let it worry you," he said. "There are fifty guys working in that mess hall that I'd suspect before Sammy. He's clean, and those CID fellows should know it." He pulled the covers up to his neck. "Turn out the light, will you?"

"Sure. Where's Kay tonight?"

"In town. She'll be over tomorrow."

She came the following day, and we lunched together at the post exchange. When I told her of my encounter with the CID she seemed interested. "Do you have a lot of drugs on the island?"

Johnny shrugged. "Not that we ever hear about, but I guess it's a problem at the prison."

Then something happened that was to bother me all day. Johnny

reached over to stroke Kay's long hair, as he often did, and she pulled away. He was surprised by the motion, and a little hurt, I think. I kept remembering it later, trying to read some meaning into her sudden gesture. It might have been rejection, but I didn't think so. She still seemed to love Johnny as much as she ever had. But something was wrong and I couldn't get it out of my mind.

I was even more troubled by what happened a few days later. I was working the night shift and had taken the subway up to Times Square on my own while Johnny was on a guard detail. On Eighth Avenue, in one of the less appealing blocks near the newly opened Port Authority Bus Terminal, I suddenly spotted Kay's long glistening hair. She was leaning down talking through a car window to someone I couldn't quite see. It was odd to see her in this neighborhood without Johnny, though I knew there were some dance rehearsal halls in the buildings along Forty-second Street.

Something about her made me decide not to approach her. If she had another guy on the string it was none of my business. But I couldn't help noting the license plate of the car, an expensive blue Caddy. It was my initials reversed, followed by 6767—and it stuck in my mind.

As the car pulled away I had a glimpse of the driver. He was a fat balding man who seemed old enough to be her father. I couldn't imagine what they had in common.

When I returned to the island to go on duty that evening I said nothing to Johnny. There might be some perfectly innocent explanation. After all, Kay must have a great many friends in show business. The man could have been her agent, for all I knew.

My shift changed again and I was back on days, working the Battery side and checking passes. It was early the following week when Kay appeared again, as jaunty as ever. "What are the chances for a girl dancer visiting the island today?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Go ahead." Then, as we waited together for the ferry to dock, I noticed Yeager on the fringes of the crowd and pointed him out to Kay. "There's the guy I was telling you about, the one who had me ride over with Sammy Johnson a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh?" She glanced casually in his direction, and it seemed to me that he turned away quickly.

I walked out into the roadway to direct the cars leaving the boat. Kay went on with the rest of the passengers and Yeager followed behind her. I went down to chat with the MP on board, keeping my eye on Kay. She was near the railing, staring at the ancient sides of the ferry slip and the water below. I thought she glanced once more in Yeager's direction and then she seemed to reach a sudden decision. Her hand moved quickly to the back of her neck and came away with a small object that she threw over the railing. Then she turned and came quickly off the ferry.

"I forgot something," she told me as she passed. "I'll see you later."

She hurried across the street and had disappeared from sight by the time Yeager made his way off the boat. "Where'd she go?" he asked.

"Who's that, sir?"

"The girl—the one with the long hair!"

"Across the street somewhere. I didn't really notice. What's the trouble, sir?"

"She's been bringing the stuff over in her hair! She just threw a packet into the water."

"You mean cocaine?"

"Damn right! She's that USO dancer, isn't she? Kay Koster?"

"I—"

"Oh, come on," Yeager said, growing angry. "I know you and Private Dell are friends of hers."

"Johnny's known her longer than I have," I blurted out, feeling that I was betraying them both.

"All right, I'd better talk to you. Phone your sergeant and get someone to relieve you. Tell him I want to see Private Dell too."

He questioned us, together and then separately, for the better part of an hour. I didn't mention the man in the blue Cadillac; I figured Kay was in enough trouble already.

Johnny was on duty at the Battery side from five till midnight. I was still awake when he returned to the barracks a little before two the next morning. It was my first chance to talk with him privately since our questioning.

"Do you think he's right about Kay?" I asked.

His eyes were tired and he looked terrible. "God, I don't know what to think. I tried to phone her apartment but nobody answered."

"That Yeager's a real bastard, the way he went after her. Maybe he's

arrested her by now."

Johnny hung up his shirt and pants and stood by the bunk in his underwear. "I've known Kay ever since I got out of high school," he said, turning back the blankets of his bed. "I always used to think we'd get married someday." He slipped between the sheets and turned his face away from me.

"Maybe you still will. Maybe Yeager's wrong about her."

"Maybe," he mumbled, but I knew he didn't believe it.

I don't know how well either of us slept that night. In the morning, though, Johnny was still sleeping when I got up. I finally had to shake him awake, and he hurried to breakfast without his usual shower.

We were just finishing breakfast when Yeager found us in the mess hall and told us that Kay Koster had been murdered.

That day still seems like a nightmare to me, especially the grilling in Yeager's office, attended by a pair of New York City homicide detectives.

Kay's body had been found in her apartment by a girl friend who lived next door and often came over for breakfast. She'd been killed sometime during the night—beaten and then strangled.

"She put up a hell of a fight," one of the homicide men said.

Johnny looked like he was going to be sick. "I can't believe it," he said over and over again.

"There was cocaine in her apartment," Yeager told them. "Somebody got to her before we did."

That was when I told them about the man in the blue Cadillac and gave them the license number. It couldn't do Kay any harm then.

They took Johnny downtown to look at the body and he came back looking sicker than before. In the meantime the license number had been traced to a narcotics dealer named Mike Fusco and he was picked up for questioning. They also arrested a cook from the mess hall who'd known Kay. It wasn't Sammy Johnson.

The thing drifted like that for a few days. Johnny and I attended Kay's funeral and returned to the island to learn that Yeager had cleared us both of any involvement in the narcotics ring. It made me feel better, knowing that Johnny was clear. I'd had my doubts about how much he really knew.

"You thought I was in on it too?" he asked over a beer.

"Hell, you slept with her. I figured you must know about it."

He shook his head sadly. "I didn't know about it. Not any of it."

And then I remembered the day he'd reached for her hair and she'd jerked away. There had been cocaine hidden in it that day too, and she'd been afraid he'd find it.

Yeager was right. Johnny hadn't known.

The police were convinced that Mike Fusco had killed Kay to keep her from talking, once she admitted the CID was onto her. But as it turned out they never did indict him for her murder. It was much easier to get convictions on a string of drug charges that put him away for something like twenty years.

Johnny and I were separated soon after that. I was assigned to the MP detachment at Fort Slocum, north of New York City. It was an island post much like Fort Jay, and I had another—if smaller—ferryboat to guard.

Long Island Sound was pleasant in the summer, a great deal more pleasant than Korea, which was where Johnny went. We tried corresponding for a while, but he wasn't much of a letter writer. I never saw him again.

Years later I ran into Sammy Johnson. He was playing the drums with a little combo at the old Astor Hotel in Times Square. He told me Johnny Dell had been killed by a land mine somewhere near the 38th Parallel.

And that was the end of it.

I suppose I wouldn't have bothered thinking about it at all, twenty-five years after it happened, except that I woke up the other morning remembering how Johnny had looked standing by my bunk the night Kay was murdered.

Why did I think of it then? I don't know, except that it must have been buried in my subconscious all these years.

Johnny Dell, who always slept in the nude, had worn his underwear to bed that night.

Johnny, who usually showered in the morning, had gotten up too late to shower the next morning.

And Kay Koster had put up quite a struggle, the homicide man had said—enough perhaps to show on her killer.

He'd had from midnight when he went off duty until nearly two

o'clock when he came back to the barracks.

Yeager had cleared Johnny because Johnny knew nothing about the cocaine traffic. But Johnny might have killed Kay for that very reason—because he didn't know. Because she was playing him for a fool.

Might have.

But I guess after twenty-five years I won't convict him simply because he went to bed in his underwear one night.

Instead I'll keep remembering the good times we had—the three of us—when we were very young.

You have to understand, criminals are stupid . . .

COP GOES THE WEASEL

by LAWRENCE TREAT

I guess the most valuable thing I learned at the Police Academy, during the week or so that I was still enrolled, was that you have to understand the criminal mind, and that criminals are stupid. The lieutenant didn't put the two ideas together at the same time, but there they were, glaring me right in the face.

When I left the Academy shortly after the first exam, I headed west. I guess it was fate that made my car conk out in Bubblesburg, where

Maple lived.

Maybe lived isn't exactly the right word. She sort of tore through life without looking around much. Once in a while, though, she saw something, and on that particular day what she saw was me. I'd just gotten the estimate on repairs to my car and I was staggering under the blow when Maple spotted me on the street.

But first maybe I'd better explain what she looked like. She was large for her size, which was ample to begin with, and she had a heart as big as a melon and a maternity instinct that was even riper.

"Little man," she said, "you look unhappy."

"I am," I said. "I drove over two hundred miles and my car broke down. And you know where? Right in front of a No Parking sign."

"Think nothing of it," she said. "I'll take the sign down."

"Won't you get arrested?" I said.

"Who's going to arrest me? Chief Prenderheim died last week. and that leaves nobody except me."

"You?"

"I was his deputy, only I resigned after he died. The town wasn't paying me anyhow, so why should I work for nothing?"

"But as his deputy—"

"Little man," she said, "instead of a salary he gave me twenty-five percent of everything he didn't earn. And now that he's not not earning it, I can't very well get along, can I?"

"Twenty-five percent of nothing," I said, "is nothing."

"Twenty-five percent of what he didn't earn," she said, "was quite a lot."

I understood then. As I said, you have to understand the criminal mind. Maple was born with it, and the late Chief of Police must have had it too because what he took in was several times his salary. He got it by occasionally arresting strangers for speeding or parking, but mostly he arrested them for collaborating together without a marriage certificate.

Get the point? How many people travel with their marriage certificates? So what Wendell Prenderheim, late Chief of Police in Bubblesburg, did was to knock on motel doors and accuse the occupants of formulation, or at the very least of being adulterated. And rather than get pulled out of bed in the middle of the night, they usually forked over. However, he hated to bother people, so if they refused to pay,

he let them go back to sleep.

But to get back to what Maple said, it made a lot of ideas start ticking in the back of my head. Here I had a car that wouldn't go and no money to fix it, and I was in a town without any police. They had to find someone quick, so why not me? I'd kept my enrollment certificate to the Police Academy and my pass to the pistol range, along with a couple of other things. So when Maple told me the town council was meeting that night, my mind kept grinding away.

Maple was a big help. Besides corroborating with me at the town meeting, she gave me Chief Prenderheim's pants (taking them in two inches), and after that she boarded me up.

She owned a house—the downstairs part of it was the jail—that the town rented out from her. It wasn't much of a jail, as jails come and go, but it had iron bars on the window and a door that usually locked, and it had a bed. That's where I slept for free until I found out that Maple's was a lot more comfortable, and it had Maple in it besides.

I got a temporary appointment as police chief and made Maple my deputy on the old basis. I thought I was sitting pretty, because how much crime is there in a town the size of Bubblesburg? Not much, except that the one crime they did have was a real boo-boo, and it happened at the end of my first week.

I got to my office around ten on the Friday morning. If you want to know the exact truth, it wasn't much of an office, merely a cubbyhole partitioned off in a corner of the firehouse. I'd just about got there when Andy Klamus came running in to report the crime. Andy's chief claim to fame was the time he'd been at a pro football game and the TV camera had picked him up. For almost a quarter of a minute some ten million people had been looking right at Andy Klamus and nothing else. He'd been dead center in the focus and he figured that made him famous, but he'd never done anything else heroic until the morning he came running into the firehouse with the news.

"Chief!" he yelled. "You know what?"

When people say "You know what?" you're supposed to say "What?" and then they can go ahead with what they have to say. But I made the mistake of asking Andy who he was. Then he told me about how he'd been on TV and how he had waved his hands and by accident had jabbed his elbow into the face of the girl sitting next to him, and her

boy friend had objected.

I finally outspoke him by saying, "What did you come to tell me?"

"Rena got murdered," he said.

"Who's Rena and where is she and who did it?" I asked.

That was too much for him, and I suddenly remembered how a cop ought to ask one question at a time, so I said, "Who's Rena?"

"Rena?" Andy said. "Everybody knows Rena. Rena Blakesly. Don't you know her?"

"I'm doing the questioning," I said. "Now tell me where she lives."

"She's out at Dakota Corners," he said, "which is a couple of miles from here. She's dead."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw her when I brought the milk to the porch. I looked inside and there she was. Dead. So I told Pa, who was waiting in the truck, and he drove me straight here. You're the first person I told about it."

"Let's get going," I said, and led the way out. Then I remembered I didn't have a car and the police cruiser had no battery. Andy didn't have a car either, his father having gone on with the wagon, so I went out and flagged down the first one that came along.

"I'm commanding this," I said.

I think the guy was too dumb to grasp the situation. He opened his mouth to say something, couldn't get it out, and tried again. "Are you nuts?" he said and drove off.

Then Hosea, who's Andy's father, came back with the milk truck. "Are you the new Chief of Police?" he asked.

I nodded, and he examined me as if he wasn't quite sure. "You don't look it," he said finally. "But I reckon I might as well take you out there. I'd have done it right off, except I still had some deliveries to make. And when a person gets murdered, you don't expect her to run away, do you?"

"I'm asking the questions," I said. "How do you know she got murdered?"

"Andy said so after he looked through the window." Hosea thought that one over. "And Andy's an expert at windows. He does it every night."

I memorialized that one for future use. Andy was what they called a Peeking Tom, so I warned myself that any time anybody called me in

the middle of the night and claimed somebody was sulking around, I could figure on Andy.

On the ride out I pumped Hosea a little and got some of the town gossip—things that the police ought to know—and by the time we got to the Blakesly place, I had a storehouse collected in my mind.

At Rena's, I walked up to the porch and looked inside. I could see right off that she'd crawled across the room and dragged herself over to a chair. I yelled in to her and she managed to call back in a kind of a fainting voice.

She was a small stringy woman who looked like she'd been overcooked, except for the baby-blue eyes that she must have had ever since she'd been born. But right now she was all puckered out and she could just about gasp.

"Door," she said. "Key—under porch." And then she leaned back and closed her eyes.

I poked around under the porch and got a few splinters in my hand, but I located the key and opened the door.

She looked up at me.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I fell," she said. "I tripped on the stairs last night. I think I broke my leg."

I did some fast thinking. If she'd fallen down the stairs, she not only hadn't been murdered but she hadn't even been assaulted, and I had no case.

"I'll phone for an ambulance," I said.

"The line's dead," she said.

I take nothing for granted, so I picked up the phone and tried it. She was right.

That was when Hosea walked in.

"Rena," he said, "who done it?"

"Me," she said. "I slipped, and that dolt over there keeps asking me questions, when all I need is an ambulance."

"I'll drive back to town and put in a call," Hosea said. "Your phone's out—I just looked at the wires and somebody must have cut them."

That meant I probably had a case after all, so I took charge. "You better get to town right away and phone for an ambulance," I said to Hosea. "I'll take full responsibility."

He gave me a funny look and went out.

I studied first aid while I was at the Academy and I knew what to do. Instead of moving Rena, I sat down next to her and held her hand and tried to make her comfortable, in case she was in shock. With that, she seemed to perk up a little.

"Who are you?" she said.

"The new Chief of Police," I said.

"Well," she said, and her voice was stronger. "Where'd you get those pants?"

"They belonged to Chief Prenderheim," I said. "They go with the job. You could call them a kind of a fringed benefit."

"I can see that," she said, "but as soon as I get on my feet again I'm going to buy you a new pair of pants, if only for the self-respect of Bubblesburg."

That isn't exactly the kind of respect for the law that I'd expect but here I had an injured party and even if she'd perpetrated it on herself, my first priority was to get some liquid inside her. "Tea or coffee?" I said.

Pain and all, she busted out laughing. She had spunk, right up to her elbows, but laughing must have hurt her, because in the middle of it she started to moan and her face screwed up in pain.

"Tea," she said.

I found the kitchen and put some water on to boil. While it was cooking I looked around. The living room had a staircase on one side and doors on two others, one of which went to the kitchen and the other to a small room that had a TV set and a chest in it. As I started to go in, I saw something on the floor. It was a ten-dollar bill, only not like one I'd ever seen before. First of all it was orange, and in the second place it was a lot bigger than any ten-dollar bill I'd ever seen before.

I showed it to Rena.

She let out a gasp. "My collection!" she said. "So there *was* somebody here! I thought I heard a noise. That's why I came downstairs. Oh! That chest in there—please look!"

I looked and all I saw was a couple of empty drawers.

When I told her, she let out a groan. "It's worth thousands!" she

cried. "Bills—coins—all the way back to the Revolution."

"Aren't you insured?" I asked.

"What's insurance?" she said. "All they'll do is give me new currency, and what good is that?"

It took the tea to revive her, and then she explained how her bills weren't legal tender any more and it was against the law to have some of the coins, which were gold. I've never been high on finance and I didn't understand some of the things she said, but I know a felony when I see one, and I summed it up for her.

"Somebody robbed you," I said. "They cut the telephone line and broke in and took your collection. The question is, who did it, and how they got in."

I went to work, and if I say so myself nobody could have made a more thorough investigation. I checked the doors and windows for signs of entry, and since there were none I deducted that she hadn't locked her doors.

"But I did," she said.

"In that case," I said, "somebody used the key under the porch, and then put it back."

"Nobody could possibly know it was there," she said. "You had trouble finding it, didn't you?"

"But I'm not a crook. Any experienced crook would look under the door mat, and then under the porch."

"Nonsense!" she said.

I don't like to argue with amateur hypostases, so I went about my business and looked for fingerprints, which I didn't find. After that I borrowed Rena's camera and took a picture of the living room and then one of her.

While we were waiting for the ambulance to come and take us to the hospital, where I could have the splinters taken out of my finger, I sat down and thought. I remembered what the lieutenant at the Academy had said about criminals being dumb, and the dumbest thing I could think of Rena's robber doing was to try to buy something in a store with a 1920 silver certificate. So as soon as the hospital let me go, I notified all police departments in the state that somebody had stolen those big bills and to arrest anybody who tried to pass them.

By afternoon I had my man. Arthur Lopes. He was on the small side

and he had a head like a mushroom and somebody else's moustache. It was a real soup-trapper—bushy and brambly and a lot too big for him. It seems he'd gone into a grocery store in Lafayette, which is the county seat, and tried to pay for his groceries with this oversized five-dollar bill. The storekeeper got suspicious and called the police, who came right over and arrested Lopes. As soon as they told me, I went up there in a taxi and took Lopes back and put him in the lockup at Maple's.

I didn't see much point in interrogating Lopes in depth because on Monday morning when court was in session, he was due to go before the judge and the D.A. would ask the questions. Still, I was curious and I asked Lopes one thing.

"That five-dollar bill," I said. "You knew it would be spotted, so why did you use it?"

"It was all I had," he said. "And if I didn't pay, that would be stealing, wouldn't it?"

After I had him locked up, I did some personal business, which was shopping for a pair of pants that fit. What Rena had said about them hurt me, and I wanted Bubblesburg to be proud of me. But I couldn't find police pants at the Best Clothing Store, so I started back to Maple's. On the way I passed the garage where the police cruiser was, and I asked Don, who ran the place, to put in a battery.

"Sure," he said. "I was wondering why you didn't ask me before."

"I didn't think of it," I said. Then, to show him I was nobody's fool, I said, "Did you?"

That stumped him and he went inside to where he kept the batteries and brought one out. I signed for the town, and he put the battery in and I drove home.

I found Maple lying on the couch in the living room. She had a bandage around her head, and I sat down next to her and took her hand.

"Maple, what happened?"

"He escaped," she said. "He's dangerous, I don't know what he'll do! Maybe he'll kill somebody!"

"Does he have a gun?"

"I didn't see one."

"How did it happen?" I asked.

"I'm an innocent fool," she said, sobbing. "He told me he was hun-

gry because he never got to eat those groceries he bought, so I went to the kitchen to get some food, only I forgot to lock the door of his cell. He followed me and hit me over the head. Here." She pointed to her bandage. "He's a desperate character. I don't know what he'll do next."

That was when I rose to the occasion and showed what kind of metal I'm made of. "I do," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Because he's stupid. It was stupid to try and pass off that bill, wasn't it? So the next thing he's going to do will also be stupid. He'll go to the bus station and try to take the next bus out."

Maple sat up abruptly. "Let's kill him! He's a dangerous criminal and nobody's safe. I'm coming with you and we'll both shoot him."

"Nobody's going to shoot anybody," I said, "but I'll be armed, just in case."

"We'll both be armed," Maple said. "I'll get back at him, you wait and see."

That's the kind of woman she is. She'd shoot somebody and then grieve over it for the rest of her life. So I went to the armory closet in the police station and got a shotgun for myself and a revolver for Maple, only hers wasn't loaded. Then we drove to the bus station.

Lopes was there, talking to a couple of people and telling them how he'd escaped, only nobody believed him. At least not until they saw us walk in, me in my police pants with a shotgun, and Maple with a pistol, which she tried to shoot Lopes with.

"Murderer!" she yelled. "Killer! You don't deserve to live!"

Lopes put his hands up and ran over to me for protection. "Lock me up," he pleaded. "Please. Get that crazy woman away from me!"

For some reason, that set Maple off all over again, and she went after him like a motorcycle jumping over a barrel, with me as the barrel. I tried to hold her off, but she kept going and knocked me over, flipping the shotgun clean out of my hands. In the twinkle of an eye, Lopes grabbed it and pointed it at her, which finally stopped her. Whereupon Lopes handed the gun back to me.

"Take me back," he said. "There's only one more bus out tonight, and it's going in the wrong direction."

This time I locked him up good—turning the key twice and putting a chair up against the door in case he tried to escape again. Then I went

upstairs to Maple.

She was crying. "I'm sorry," she said. "I lost my temper. I really ought to pity him. Let him go, please. After all, what did he do? He meant to pay for the groceries he bought, and what's wrong with that? It was a real five-dollar bill."

"It was stolen," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Rena said so."

"Maybe he just picked it up on the street. What about the rest of her collection? If he stole it, where is it?"

"I forgot to ask him," I said. "I'll try to remember in the morning."

I got up a couple of times during the night and went down to make sure Lopes was still there. I never saw a man sleep better. He wasn't even snoring. And the fact is he couldn't have. Or *it* couldn't have, because what I was looking at was his extra blanket stuffed underneath the regular one to look like he was still there.

The way I got it pieced together later, after my investigation, was a couple of kids had heard I'd arrested somebody and put him in jail, so they went to look. Lopes was standing behind the barred window. He said hello to them and they said hello to him, and it was a red-letter, deluxe experience for them to be talking to a real crook. He told them how Maple had tried to shoot him and how he'd grabbed a shotgun to defend himself, and they listened bug-eyed. When he'd got friendly with them, he asked if they could get him a hack saw, and one of the kids said his old man had one. "What do you want it for?" he asked.

"To escape," Lopes said.

The kid thought that if Lopes really meant to escape, he wouldn't have said so, so the kid went and got the hack saw. By then it was time to go home for supper, which the kid did.

It took Lopes about an hour to saw through the iron bars, which were a little rusty, then he made up that blanket dummy and beat it.

One of the things I learned at the Academy was that criminals have a pattern—they always do the same thing in the same way. It followed that if Lopes had tried to leave town by bus yesterday, he'd try the same thing today. In consequence, I drove to the bus station and there he was, sitting on a bench and waiting for the northbound bus to come in.

He had no particular objection to being arrested again, he was used to it, but he was in a panic at the prospective of Maple.

"Don't take me to where that woman is," he said. "She's crazy! She tried to kill me."

"She only tried once," I said, "and everybody has the right to a second chance."

His eyes got big, like sorcerers. "You're crazy too," he said.

I don't take that from anybody. "I'm going to handcuff you," I said, "but my handcuffs are at the office, and that's where we're bound for."

He came willingly and I put the cuffs on him, but that left me on the horns of a crisis, because what good was the jail, and what was going to hold him unless I tied him up? Only there was nothing to tie him up to. That's when I had my stroke of genius—I saw the fire truck standing there innocently and doing nothing.

Lopes didn't say a word when I told him to climb up into the driver's seat. There I unlocked him and handcuffed him to the steering wheel. I figured that ought to hold him, and I went back to Maple's.

An hour later I heard a siren and rushed out of Maple's. There was Lopes driving down the street in the fire truck. He was going slow and a bunch of people were yelling at him. What he was yelling back I couldn't hear. I ran after him, but he didn't stop until he was alongside the hamburger place. Then he jammed on the brakes and called out to me.

"Get me out of this!" he screamed. "It's cruel and unusual punishment and illogical under the Constitution!"

"You stole the fire truck," I said, "and that's a felony."

"I'm hungry," he said, "and the law says you have to feed me."

Well, he had a point, but I was on the other horn of that crisis I mentioned before, because the fire chief was coming at me and accusing me of illicit misuse of his fire truck. I countered with what kind of a fire department leaves the key in a public place where anybody can get hold of it, and he said where did the key belong except in the ignition?

I don't like to think too hard about what happened after that. I had the weight of public opinion on my neck and the crowd was screaming at me to unlock Lopes so the fire department could get the truck back in case there was a fire, only I couldn't find the handcuff key because there was a hole in Chief Prenderheim's pants.

Somebody brought Lopes a couple of hamburgers and some coffee, and he was sitting there on top of the fire truck as if he was a king. He'd never had so many people looking up to him, and he ate up their admiration along with the hamburgers. So, with the crowd's attention on him, I sneaked off. I've always told myself that no matter what, there's always a drop in the bucket.

The drop turned out to be Maple. When I told her about the hole in my pants, she handed me a key.

"I found this on the floor a little while ago," she said. "Is it the one you're looking for?"

It was, and I ran back to the fire truck, but by that time somebody'd found a hacksaw and was separating the handcuffs in two. I didn't say anything, I just hung around until Lopes was out from behind the steering wheel and back down on terra firmer. And he was the same old Lopes. Stupid. Not talking. Hiding behind that bushel of a moustache.

What with no handcuffs and a jail that had a wide-open window, I decided to take Lopes to Lafayette and turn him over to custody until Monday morning, when he was due for arrangement before the judge. And Lopes was glad to get away from Maple and Bubblesburg, both at the same time. It was like killing two birds with one bush. And Lopes almost cracked a smile when I handed him over to the sheriff in Lafayette and told him to keep Lopes until Monday morning.

"He tried to escape twice," I said, "so watch him. He may not look dangerous, but he's the silent type."

"I wasn't aiming to have a conversation with him," the sheriff said. "What's he here for?"

"Larceny," I said, "and breaking and entering and driving a fire truck to endanger the species."

"Sounds interesting," the sheriff said. "Better come to my office and sign him in."

I expected that would be the end of things. I had Lopes out of my hair and into somebody else's, and a lot of people in Bubblesburg had got to know me, even if under unnatural circumstances. I decided I'd get friendly with a few key people and get consolidated as police chief, and I did. By evening I'd repaired most of the damage to my prestige, and people were sorry for me instead of mad.

All in all, I felt pretty good.

Next morning I was still on a high. I was due to get rid of Lopes, and there wasn't likely to be another real crime within memory. On my way to Lafayette I saw a state trooper speeding in the opposite direction. He was speaking into his mike and he gave me a funny look as he went by.

I guessed he was talking to me, but I didn't know how to operate the radio phone—there were too many buttons on the dashboard and I didn't want to push the wrong one. The fact is, I've never driven cars much and I don't even have a driving license. As the trooper went by, I just waved at him. I wanted him to know I was full of good will, even if we weren't on speaking terms.

But there's a cloud in every silver lining, and the cloud was the assistant D.A. who was on the Lopes case. He was young and snappily dressed, with city written all over him. Our meeting started off on the wrong feet.

He opened by saying, "I had a talk with Lopes this morning. He claims he found an obsolete silver certificate on the street. It's perfectly good legal tender, and unless you have evidence to prove that he stole it, I can't see how you can substantiate a charge of larceny."

"If he claims he found it lying on the street, why didn't he say so?"

"Because nobody asked him."

"He tried to escape from jail."

"I doubt that there was a legal arrest. Did you tell him what his rights were?"

"Well," I said, "I was protecting him."

"I know all about that. He states that some woman of yours assaulted him with a deadly weapon."

"It wasn't loaded," I said, "and she's not my woman. She just happened to be furnished with the office."

"He states that she assaulted him on the occasion when he went into the kitchen to get something to eat. He says she struck him and that he had to defend himself by hitting her with a frying pan."

"He had no right to go into the kitchen," I said, but I knew I was sitting on shaky ground.

"He says she attacked him when he asked her about some bills that he'd noticed protruding from her cookie jar. I have a pretty strong suspicion that those bills came from the Blakesly collection. Furthermore,

a woman like this Maple, who had acted as a deputy, might have been a caretaker for Mrs. Blakesly and would have had a key to the house. I phoned Mrs. Blakesly at the hospital and she said that was indeed the case."

"I hope she's feeling better," I said.

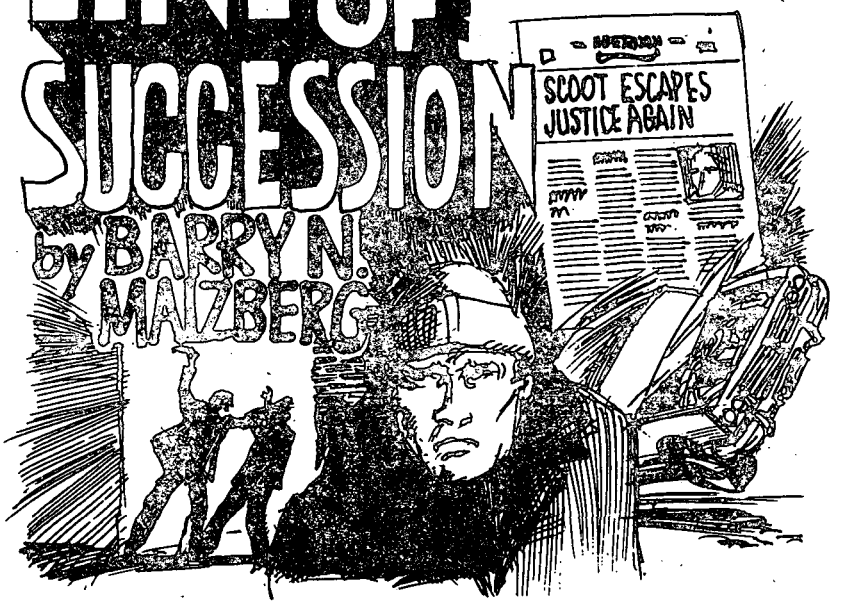
"She'll feel a lot better if it turns out that her collection is in that cookie jar. I sent a trooper to investigate, and I'm not pleading Lopes until I hear from the trooper."

Ten minutes later he heard, and the end result was that Maple's in jail, I got a ten-dollar fine for driving without a license, and Bubblesburg has a new police chief—by the name of Lopes.

You'd better be on guard when Scoot's around . . .

LINE OF SUCCESSION

by BARRY N. MALZBERG



I am Scoot the felon. You all know of me, although perhaps until this moment you have not known my name. Scoot is a conjuration, it need not concern you. It is not my name but my destiny that enrages you so.

I am the recidivist, the bail-jumpee, the mugger of old ladies while out on parole for assaulting young ones. Because of a failure in the correct reading of my rights under Miranda statute, because of a cop's

tainting goods I have stolen with his own clumsy fingerprints, because the foreman of the jury concealed an indictment of his own, I am returned over and again to the streets to perpetrate my horrid and rewarding existence.

You all know of me from the tabloid press and its editorials. I am the one who slips through the interstices of the law—soft-headed judges, cowardly district attorneys, and libertarian court-appointed lawyers eager to advance their own careers. I strike fear into the heart of the city, ignite flinders of rage in the suburbs. I'm the subject of angry tenants' meetings and the mumblings of old whiskey sergeants. I am Scoot the defendant; I commit my crimes and slip free, return to my well-appointed home (furnished, of course, with stolen goods) to collect welfare under a false identity and plan further outrages.

None of this is easy, you know. I am completely dedicated to my calling, which leaves very little room for human companionship or even relaxation. By keeping all of you so very mad at me, I feel that I am shoring up your very sanity. Otherwise, who might you get mad at, and how?

I entrap a middle-aged man in an alley, hit him over the head, seize his wallet and umbrella, and sprint into the night. Halfway through the intersection, however, I catch the attention of a skidding prowl car. Angry police emerge, pin me against a wall, spread-eagle me, seize the umbrella roughly and then the wallet. "We've got you now, Scoot," one of them, an old adversary, says. "This time you won't get away."

The victim, however, when sought proves to have disappeared from where I left him and when I am arraigned it is without testimony. The judge and my adversary, Patrolman Kelly, get into a furious argument over the worthlessness of the evidence and exchange insults as I back courteously away from the desk. The judge waves me off into the night.

At the door I retrieve the umbrella, a poor return for a night's work but better than nothing for what proves to be a gathering rain. I use the rain to steal hubcaps from cars on the deserted street and add them to my collection. So that the night should not be a total waste, I use the last hour before sleep to write letters of extortion.

In the morning the papers run headlines on pages three or five:

SCOOT ESCAPES JUSTICE AGAIN. There is a poor picture of me being escorted from the police car raising a taunting hand to the camera. The editorials in both papers are outraged, pointing out that the law is truly lawless if such as I am permitted to use it to be free.

I shrug, toss the papers, which I have stolen from a blind newsdealer, over the curb, littering shamelessly, and walk into the subway to investigate new stations uptown, which I have heard are excellent for muggings. I am wearing my dark glasses and am a little fearful of being recognized, but most of my fellow passengers are too engrossed in their newspapers to pay attention. Just to keep in practice, I pick their pockets.

The welfare worker visits me as she does once every six months and asks if any details of my life have changed. They never do, of course. I am receiving aid to the disabled as the result of a false diagnosis of psychoneurosis given me by a bleeding-heart department psychiatrist many years ago. My claimed inability to work is in itself, the psychiatrist pointed out, a symptom of disability. The welfare worker asks for rent receipts, medical receipts, transportation receipts, and clothing receipts, and I hand her a forged clump that she transcribes in her black book.

Looking at her I think idly of theft or more atrocious crimes but repress the impulse. I am not a psychopath; I am fully dedicated to my work for my own sad reasons. Collecting welfare as I do under a false identity at a different address, it would be foolish to jeopardize this minor source of income.

In the morning, I make my extortion collections, then visit a schoolyard where I discuss with children the many advantages of starting life with an important drug habit.

Breaking for lunch in a restaurant (I stroll out without paying the check, brandishing a menacing fist at the aged cashier), I walk downtown and steal a 1973 Eldorado convertible parked snazzily at the curb, top down, and take it joyriding prior to stripping it of all expensive options and changing the serial number on the discarded hulk.

It is a pleasure to be on the highways again and I madly exceed the speed limit, moving beyond seventy-five miles an hour, scattering businessmen and housewives from the center lane as, horn blaring, I

move straight through. They scream curses at me and a 1971 Impala Caprice station wagon overturns.

I move beyond them all, laughing, the radar warning device in the expensive car protecting me from apprehension. All I miss is a sixteen-ounce can of beer to consume while doing this, but I am a teetotaler, soberly committed to the tasks at hand and taking essentially—I warn you, this is the point of this entire confession—no joy from what I must do, but only the weary certitude of necessity.

SCOOT SUSPECTED OF WILD JOYRIDE THROUGH UPPER CLIFFS THAT INJURES SIX, the headlines read. In an interview, an exasperated assistant district attorney points out that this could hardly be possible—my license was revoked for hit-and-run violations seven years ago. As an enterprising investigative reporter points out further in the news story, however, the revocation was rescinded by the State Department of Motor Vehicles—I had been denied counsel at the last hearing and not advised of my right to remain silent.

I ransack five apartments on the exclusive Lower West Side and, while finding few valuables, manage to leave a note in every one of them: SCOOT APPRECIATES YOUR GENEROSITY. They must have me to hate; they must be reminded of my hateful presence at all times. Otherwise, or at least as headquarters has reminded me, they might get too close to the more intolerable truths.

ALL CITY WRITHES UNDER SCOOT REIGN OF TERROR, I read.

My old adversary, Patrolman Kelly, arrests me in the early hours out of simple frustration, but he had, of course, no warrant to enter my apartment, nor evidence of hot pursuit, so his case is thrown out peremptorily. As I whisk through the corridors I again hear loud argument between him and the judge, and I feel a quiver of sympathy for both of them. Sometimes I think that they are as hated as I am and they are not even being well paid for it!

"I'm sorry," the headquarters emissary says to me later that night, "we're going to have to take you off this assignment." He has appeared in the guise of a thin nervous young man with blotches on his palms and has the intensity of a cleric. "We're taking you off immediately."

"I don't understand,'" I say, surprised. "I can't see why you're doing this. Haven't I performed my job satisfactorily?"

"Of course you have."

"So?"

"So," he says, holding his hands together tightly, "that's precisely the point. You've performed it *too* satisfactorily. You've completely personalized your function. It's Scoot they hate, Scoot who is the object of their rage, Scoot who they hold responsible for the misery, bankruptcy, and tear of their lives. You've completely overtaken their consciousness."

"But that's what I was supposed to do," I say in an aggrieved tone. "I only fulfilled the conditions as they were given to me—"

"Yes," the cleric says to me, "but you've done it too well. It isn't the faceless or the multitude they hate now, Scoot, it's you. You've become fully identified as the source of their terror."

"So what?" I say again. "This is very unfair, I must say, to be condemned simply for having done my job so well."

"So this," the emissary says to me. "What happens if you *are* apprehended, if you are properly read your rights, if you are caught at the scene of a crime, if your adversary does not taint the evidence, or the judge is replaced? What if your collection of welfare under a false identity is exposed? What if you are incarcerated for fraud? What then?" He is quivering, possibly with rage.

"That's all very doubtful."

"*Anything* in this world is doubtful. But what happens if you're put away and they're still miserable, eh? What then? What then, smart-aleck?"

"I don't know," I say. The concept is too sophisticated for me to grasp. "It never concerned me. It's not my problem."

"Well, it's ours," the emissary says. He removes a large and frightening pistol from his overcoat, one with whose caliber I am unfamiliar. Most of the time I avoid concealed weapons; it's too easy to run afoul of silly laws. "It's very much ours and we're going to have to take you off this job."

"But why the gun?" I say, although I know. "You don't mean—"

"I'm afraid so," he says. "We couldn't have you around trying to live legally. You make too many people angry."

"They'll get you," I say to him, "they'll get you for this. You won't

get away with it. You can't just murder a man for doing a job—"

"Oh, yes we can," the emissary says. He slips a bullet into the chamber, giving me the slyest and sweetest of smiles. "I'm taking over for you, you see, and the first thing the idiots are going to do is not read me my rights."

He raises the gun.

"Don't worry about the implications," he adds. "You can rest assured that I'll call myself Scoot too. They'll never notice the difference."

How could a man completely vanish, as Gene Bragg had? . . .

DISAPPEARING MAN

by KENNETH GAVRELL

We have a saying in Missing Persons Division that there is no such thing as an unsolved case. This is not strictly true, but there are damned few of them. In the nine years that I've been there, I can only remember one, and it was almost certainly a mob killing. That MP is wrestling with concrete somewhere under the river or out in the lake. But there isn't much mob activity in this town, and not that many homicides either; most of our targets are runaways—kids running away

from parents, husbands from wives, wives with lovers. A lot of teenagers have been taking off on their own for the Coast in the past few years. Eventually we turn them all up. It's much harder to get lost in this world than you would think. I'd say it's almost impossible.

This one began about four in the morning with the usual phone call from the wife. At the time, there was no way of knowing just how unusual the case would turn out to be. The sergeant took down all the details and told her to let us know if her husband turned up. If he wasn't back by nine in the morning, one of us would pop over. I was the one of us with the smallest case load that week so I got to do the popping.

It was a damned cold morning. Icicles kept trying to grow from the tip of my nose, the snow under the sun was shining and hard, and the department car wasn't in the mood to try it out. It moved as if its oil had turned to airplane glue overnight. I didn't know which of us was enjoying the trip less.

The wife lived in a fancy place on Wood Drive, way out on the edge of town; the sort of neighborhood where you feel shifty driving through in anything less than a Lincoln. I parked in the semicircular drive near the front door and rang the doorbell—chimes, of course. I was surprised when she came to the door herself. My first impression was that she looked pretty cool for a woman whose husband hadn't shown up since 8 A.M. the previous day.

"My name's Bob Timothy. I'm from Missing Persons Division."

"You look like a policeman," she said. "Come in."

I couldn't tell from her tone whether that was a favorable comment on my looks or the opposite. I entered the hall and looked around at the place, and felt as if I should take off my shoes.

"Come into the living room," she said, leading the way.

I followed her cigarette smoke into a big room on the left. We sat down opposite each other on beautiful cream-colored furniture.

"Now if you'd give me the details, Mrs. Bragg," I said, taking out my pad and my T-Ball.

In ten minutes I had the story. It wasn't much more than they'd had downtown. He left for work at 8:00 the previous day—he was a business executive with Astey Implements—and he always ate lunch downtown. He almost always had a few drinks at his club before driving home. She'd called the club and was told he hadn't shown up yes-

terday. His car had been found in the parking lot at his office this morning. He'd left work at about 4:30 and just disappeared. Nothing like this had ever occurred before, she said. She didn't know what to make of it.

"Do you have any children?" I asked.

"We have two. Alex is fifteen, in high school. Janet is thirteen."

She was, I judged, about forty—neither good-looking nor very plain. Makeup would make a difference, and I thought she had on a bit too much of it.

"Do you work?" I asked.

"No."

"I've got to ask a few questions you won't like," I said. "I'm sorry, but it's procedure."

"I know," she said. "I expected that. Before you even ask, the answer is we don't get along very well."

"You think he might have run off?"

"No, Gene wouldn't do that." She blew some cigarette smoke towards the frosted window. "If you knew him, you'd understand. He'd never do something like that." She paused, and then spit it out. "He hasn't the guts!"

I took out a cigarette of my own and lit it. All of the ashtrays looked like the sort that are put out just for show but I decided to use the nearest one anyway—an alabaster job with what looked like a hand-carved elephant on its edge.

"Either he left on his own, or someone took him away, or"—it was hard to put this nicely—"there's been an accident."

"I suppose you've already checked the hospitals," she said.

"Yes, nothing there. No muggings or anything of that sort last night either."

"Gene isn't the sort to have accidents," she said.

"Does he carry a lot of money on him?"

"No, usually less than one hundred dollars."

"Some people might consider that a lot."

"Gene didn't have any accident," she said.

"If there's been a kidnapping, we'll hear about it soon enough," I offered.

"I doubt it," she said.

"Well, what is *your* theory, Mrs. Bragg? You tell me he wouldn't

run off—even though you don't get along. You tell me accidents are out, kidnapping is out. What do *you* think has happened?"

"If I had a theory," she said acidly, "I might not have had to call the police in. I'm not exactly enjoying this, you know."

I snubbed out my cigarette and started pushing my pen again. She watched me with obvious distaste. "He's never done anything like this before?" I asked.

"No," she said shortly. "I thought that was already quite clear."

"Well," I said, "we'll check his office, of course. Also his bank and his club and where he had lunch yesterday. And we'll keep an eye on the crime reports and the hospitals. I'll need a description and a recent picture. We'll put it all on the machine. You want it in the newspapers and the radio?"

"No."

"Then I'll try to keep it out."

"I'll get you some pictures," she said and left the room briskly. I played with the alabaster elephant until she returned. She handed me three photos—two posed (one with her) and one snapshot. In the snapshot he was in swimming trunks at a lake with his daughter. All were good clear photos, showing a man of forty or so with light hair, dark-blue eyes, and a likeable face. She gave me the statistics: age forty-one, height five eleven and a half, weight about one-ninety, hair blond, eyes blue, no birthmarks. Average.

I got up to leave. "You'll let us know if you get a phone call or anything," I said.

"Of course."

"Ask for me—Lieutenant Timothy. If I'm not in, leave a message."

She nodded.

"How are your children taking it?"

"I haven't had time to find out," she said.

"You're not very close to them?"

"No. Gene is closer to them than I am."

"I see. And about this club of his, what's it called?"

She made a sour face. "The Refuge. The people in town refer to it sarcastically as 'The Upper Forty'; there are exactly forty members."

"I've heard of it," I said. "Men only."

"Yes."

"All of them pretty well-to-do, most of them married, but no women

or children allowed in the club."

"That's why it's called The Refuge," she said sardonically.

"I'll check it," I said.

"Go between 4:30 and 7:30," she said. "That's when most of them are getting themselves tight."

"All right," I said. "Does your husband drink pretty heavily?"

"Just average," she said.

"Average being two or three after work?"

"Sometimes four."

I closed my pad. "There's just one more thing," I said.

"I was waiting for that," she said. "No, there isn't another woman, as far as I know. He had one about ten years ago, but no one I've known of since. Of course," she added, leading me to the door, "you can ask his friends at the club."

"I try to be discreet," I said. "But it may come up."

"You'll be wasting your time," she said. "He doesn't have enough spirit left to be attractive to another woman, not after the sixteen years we've had together."

You couldn't say she wasn't frank. While I chewed on that, she opened the door for me.

"He has money," I said. "Some women prefer that to spirit."

"He isn't the type," Mrs. Bragg said.

I stepped out into the merciless cold and she shut the door behind me. The car looked frozen and lonely. I talked it into starting up and we suffered together back to headquarters.

Nothing new had come in on the case during my absence. In fact, the whole town had been unusually quiet for the last twenty-four hours, perhaps because of the weather. I decided to make a check of the train station, the bus depot, and the airport.

The car and I huffed and puffed our way to the bus depot near the center of town and from there to the train station out on the south side and from there to the airport eight miles to the north. It was enough winter driving to keep me happy for a while, and with absolutely no results. One person at the airport thought he recognized the picture, but a check of the flight to San Francisco, which he was supposed to have been on, turned up no Eugene Bragg. I checked all the other flights, too, just to be thorough.

Bragg's office was on the thirteenth floor of the Astey Building. The receptionist was a Latin woman with big black eyes. There was a suite of seven offices. I asked to talk to Bragg's boss and discovered that in this suite he had been the boss, so I talked to the six men who worked for him and the receptionist. They all seemed really upset by his disappearance.

The picture that developed over the next hour and a half was disturbingly consistent—everyone liked Gene Bragg, and everyone felt sorry for him. Nobody thought he'd ever run out on his wife, but he hadn't an enemy in the world—except, maybe, his wife. It was common knowledge that his married life had been hell. I asked the men about the good-looking receptionist. They laughed. Gene Bragg was harmless where women were concerned, they said.

An interview with Bragg's immediate boss upstairs gave me nothing I didn't know, except the information that his car was still parked in the lot behind the building. I went down to look at it.

It was not as expensive as I might have expected—a year-old Oldsmobile, long, sleek, and white with a black vinyl roof. Nothing inside that I could see. I went out to the street and flagged down the first patrol car I saw, and the two prowlers and myself forced open the car door and the trunk. There was nothing in the trunk aside from a spare and jack. In the glove compartment I found a box of tissues, a state map, a pack of Marlboros, two matchbooks, a parking ticket, and a pair of theater stubs. I put the theater stubs in my coat pocket. I'd ask Mrs. Bragg about those.

I gave the prowlers Bragg's home address and told them to have the car taken there. Then I went back to Bragg's office and found out where he usually ate lunch. It turned out to be the restaurant on the ground floor. I went down in the elevator again. I kept repeating to myself that there's no such thing as an unsolved MP case. Alive or dead, you eventually find them. I would find Eugene Bragg. I hoped alive.

It was almost five when I got back to the office. My chief was waiting for me. He took a greater interest in well-off MP's.

"Well?"

"Apparently he vanished into thin air somewhere in the four blocks between his office and his club."

"Who'd you talk to?"

"Just about everybody. He arrived at work a little past nine, as usual. He went down to lunch in the building's restaurant at 12:30, as usual."

"By himself?"

"Yes, as usual. None of the employees in the restaurant noticed anything out of the ordinary in his behavior. Neither did the people in his office. He left the office at 4:30."

"As usual," said the chief, clipping a cigarette from my pack on his desk. "You go to his club?"

"Not yet. I can go now," I said. "His wife called there last night. He never showed."

"Take the night off," said the chief, "but check it tomorrow. Do you want someone to help you run the leads? I can give you McCoy."

"I think I can handle it myself. I'll check his bank, of course."

"Which one is it?"

"I forgot to ask his wife. I'll call her. She says he usually carried less than a hundred; a man can't run away on that."

"We'll turn him up," the chief said.

"If he's not dead," I said.

"You think he might be? Killing? Suicide?"

"I doubt it. Kidnapping would be more likely."

"We'll know pretty quick if that's what it is. Go on home. If anything comes in tonight, we'll give you a call."

I got up to go.

"Say, leave me another butt, will you?" The chief smiled.

"I thought you'd quit."

"Whew," said the chief, "one miserable butt."

We like to think that banks are noble institutions—it makes us feel good, since they handle so much of our money. But experience has taught me that most banks will give the police any information they want about almost any customer's "confidential" account. I had no trouble with Bragg's.

I'd been surprised when his wife had told me that he did all of his dealings with only one bank. For a successful businessman, that suggested unusual honesty. I'd been less surprised when she said that the theater stubs were from a play they'd seen together last week.

There had been no big withdrawals from any of Bragg's accounts—he had three—during the past month. The most he'd ever withdrawn at one time was six hundred dollars. That had been two weeks ago. His checking account was healthy and his savings accounts much healthier. They were all joint accounts. I decided I'd have to talk to Mrs. Bragg about his investments. But it seemed clear that if he never materialized, she would be left in very good shape financially.

I thanked the helpful people at the bank and drove once again to Wood Drive. Mrs. Bragg didn't look ecstatic to see me again, but she ushered me into the living room and I got to the point as quickly as I could.

"All Gene's investments are handled by the same broker, Lieutenant Timothy—Frank Tenner in the Astey Building. I can call him right now if you like—or you can."

"You call him," I said. "Then put me on."

Tenner was in. She explained who I was and what I wanted and gave me the phone.

"There are almost $70,000 in investments," he said genially. "All going very well until the last few years. The market's been dropping steadily, you know."

"Has Mr. Bragg converted anything into cash recently?" I asked. "Or asked you to turn over any bonds to his personal possession?"

"Oh, he'd never do that. I handle everything. And he hasn't converted anything into cash in—if I remember correctly—more than a year."

"Would you check it?" I requested.

"It'll take a minute."

"I'll wait."

It took about five minutes. "Nothing since the November before last," Tenner said when he came back on. "At that time he cashed in about five thousand dollars—I believe it was to pay for renovations on the house."

I thanked him for his trouble and rang off. Mrs. Bragg asked me how I was getting on with the case. I told her not very well. "Was your husband married before?"

"No," she said, as if the question were the height of absurdity.

"No illegitimate children?" I suggested.

She snuffed her over-long cigarette in a Venetian-glass ashtray. "Get

out," she said.

That afternoon I did the paperwork on some other cases, cases that, unlike this one, provided leads. Then I gave my report on the morning's activities to the chief. He seemed satisfied. At 4:15 I left headquarters and drove to The Refuge. It was getting dark already, and it looked like it might snow again.

I arrived at the club before a quarter to five and parked in a loading zone near the front entrance.

I suppose any club of forty rich men that excluded women would have to be a bit kinky, and that's the way this place struck me. The entranceway was inconspicuous enough, but inside I found a lobby of red wall-to-wall plush, huge paintings of Renoiresque nudes on either side, and what looked like a genuine Picasso facing me. A man in a dinner jacket and bow tie stood just inside the entrance, probably to keep out straying riffraff like me. He politely inquired what I wanted.

I showed him my badge and said I'd like to talk to the club president on police business.

He said he wasn't sure if the president was in; would I mind waiting here until he checked. There seemed to be the slightest trace of emphasis on the "here."

In a couple of minutes the dinner jacket returned with a man in a dark-blue business suit and a red silk necktie that probably cost more than my whole outfit. He smiled and asked what he could do for me.

I showed him the badge also. "I'm investigating the disappearance of Eugene Bragg. No doubt you've heard about it by now."

He traded his smile for a look of concern. "His wife Vivian called here the night before last. She said he hadn't come home."

"He still hasn't come home," I said.

This guy looked like the quintessential American businessman: middle-aged, greying hair, fairly fit, an air of self-confidence.

"Come inside," he said. "We'll have a drink while we talk."

He ushered me into the interior of the club. I found myself in a big dimly-lit room with an oval bar in the center. Two men worked behind the bar. There were good paintings on the walls, many of them nudes. A group of men were playing a polite game of poker at a corner table under an overhead lamp. Another section of the room, on the far side of the bar, was laid out with expensive easy chairs, tables, and potted

plants that looked well cared for.

"Quite a place," I commented. "Are there other rooms?"

"Oh, yes, three more," he said. He motioned me to a fancy stool at the bar. The bar itself was leather and dark expensive wood.

"What do you have in the other rooms?" I asked.

"One is our library," he said. "A very good one. Then there is the game room—billiards, etcetera."

He said the etcetera in such a way as to make me wonder if it might include a roulette or crap table.

"And the third?" I asked.

"Oh, a kind of 'recovery room'," he said, "for those of us who have had a bit too much. It sometimes happens. But this is our main room."

There were perhaps twenty people there besides ourselves. Most were around the bar. Two sat reading newspapers in the easy-chair section. The rest were at the poker table.

"Very nice," I said. "I'm surprised you don't have a pool and a gymnasium."

"Most of us belong to our own exercise club," he said. "We come here to relax." He stuck out a firm hand. "By the way, the name's Harris."

I shook the hand. "Bob Timothy, Missing Persons Division. It wouldn't be Walter Harris?"

"Yes."

"I've heard about you." Who hadn't? I'd probably heard about several others in the room as well.

"What will you have?" he asked. "Or don't you drink on duty?"

"Scotch on the rocks."

He ordered two from the nearest bartender. It was very good Scotch. After we'd both had a sip I got down to business. "Mrs. Bragg says that her husband always comes here after work. The people at his office say he left at 4:30. It's a four-block walk. He never takes the car because of the parking problem, and it was found in the parking lot at his office. So where did he go at 4:30?"

"He didn't come here," Harris said. "Of course, he doesn't come every evening."

"What do you think happened to him?" I asked.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I wouldn't know."

"Do you like him?"

"Everybody likes Gene." He sipped his Scotch. "I don't suppose anything's really happened to him. He has his problems like the rest of us—his wife, his gambling. Did you know he gambled?"

"No."

"Well, he does. And I'm told he sometimes loses rather heavily."

"Here?" I asked.

He stiffened a bit and didn't answer.

"I've checked his bank accounts. There have been no big withdrawals recently. His investments show the same picture."

"That doesn't mean he hasn't lost," Harris said. "You can lose without paying."

"Or his broker could have been lying to me," I suggested.

He shrugged again. "I'm afraid I can't help you much," he said.

"Is it all right with you if I talk with some of the other club members?"

"Go ahead. But I don't think they'll be able to help any more than I can."

Ten minutes later I was standing further down the bar, talking to a short red-haired man named Page who was in textiles. He had freckles and thick glasses.

"Was he gambling heavily as far as you know?"

"I don't think so. I wouldn't know."

"What about his home life?"

"Dante's Inferno. Why do you think he spent so much time here?"

"Why didn't they get a divorce?"

"She didn't want one, according to Gene. And he wasn't ready for the long-drawn-out battle it would require."

"What do you think happened to him?" I asked.

He peered at me through the thick lenses. "Maybe he just wanted to be by himself for a few days. Sometimes a man feels like that."

"What about the possibility of violence?"

"I doubt that Vivian murdered him, or had him murdered, if that's what you mean."

"Kidnapping?"

"Why Gene? Most of us here have more money than him."

"That's a point," I agreed.

I was sitting across a table from an older man in an armchair who

had *The Wall Street Journal* folded across his lap. His name was Wells.

"Do you think Mr. Bragg might have been seeing some woman on the side?" I asked.

He raised his shaggy eyebrows slightly. "Gene?" was all he said.

"I see. That's a question we usually ask in cases like this."

"There was something of that sort years ago," he said. "Or at least so I've heard. But Gene was much younger then."

"I hope I never get that old," I said.

He leaned forward confidentially. "I *have* heard—just heard, mind you—of something between Gene's wife and his broker. What's his name?"

"Frank Tenner."

"Yes, that's it. There's something you might check on."

"Do you know if Gene has been losing heavily at gambling?" I asked him.

"I don't know. It's possible."

"Do you think his broker, this Tenner, might lie to me about his financial situation?"

"If he has a good reason, probably. Brokers aren't Boy Scouts, you know."

I said I knew. This one was beginning to look less and less like a Boy Scout.

The man I talked to next was one I'd drawn away from watching the poker game on Wells' advice. He was supposed to be one of the men closest to Gene Bragg in the club, a urologist called Evers.

"What kind of a library have you got in there?" I asked.

"Oh, a little of everything," he said.

"Film too?"

"Some film."

"It's a nice club," I said.

I had noticed that more and more members were drifting off into what I'd been told was the game room.

"Has there ever been a woman in here?" I asked.

"I don't think so," he said. I knew he was lying.

"Would you know if Gene Bragg was seeing another woman?"

"No," he said shortly.

"What do you think happened to him?"

"I can't imagine," he said. "But I'm concerned. We all are. Gene was well liked. He wouldn't harm a fly."

"Could I get permission to look into those other rooms or will I have to get a search warrant?"

"You'll have to ask the president," Dr. Evers said. "But I don't think—"

I left him with his mouth open and went back to Harris, who was still at the bar.

"You didn't tell me about Mrs. Bragg and Frank Tenner," I said.

"A rumor," he said. "It's not true that the fair sex does all the gossiping. We do a lot of it here every night. But outside that door"—he indicated the front entrance—"nobody does any gossiping."

"About what happens inside the club, you mean?"

"Take it any way you want."

"I'd like to see those other three rooms in back, if you don't mind."

"No," he said. "I don't mind at all." He stood up and led the way.

They had the money out of sight before I got to the door of the game room. I'd guessed perfectly: both roulette and crap tables, as well as billiards. The crowd of men regarded me a bit sheepishly.

The second room looked rather like a bachelor's pad—a couple of sofa beds, some modernistic cubes, tables, and pictures, and three vases of what looked like artificial flowers. Nobody was in it. There was no back door. The game room hadn't had a back door either.

I made an innocent trip to the bathroom before proceeding to the library, which was also empty. As I'd suspected, there was a good collection of pornography. There was also an excellent selection of current newspapers and magazines. A long wooden cabinet housed the film library; it had special sections for storing the projector and screen. There was no back door.

I'd seen the whole place. I said my goodbyes and left.

Light flurries were beginning to fall. I looked at my watch. I'd been in The Refuge two hours.

The next logical step would be to go and talk with Frank Tenner in the morning. But I wasn't going to do that. I didn't have to, because I knew the answers already. It would take me a few days to do the necessary checking, but I knew.

There were no calls for ransom money during the next few days, as

I'd known there wouldn't be. I spent my time trying to keep the chief happy and visiting most of the banks in the city.

When I'd collected all the information I needed, I looked up Walter Harris's office and gave him a phone call. He told me he could spare me an hour between two and three the following afternoon. I said that would be fine.

It was exactly the sort of office you would expect a guy like Harris to have. The plate-glass walls looked out over the slushy yellow center of the city in three directions. There was less light than the Parthenon and he probably had fewer secretaries than the Shah of Iran. Harris informed them all that he didn't want to be disturbed for an hour, then leaned back in his padded swivel chair and regarded me across his desk.

"You've whetted my curiosity," he said.

"I thought I might have."

"Have you found Eugene?"

"You should know the answer to that."

"I don't follow you."

"I have most of the pieces," I said. "I was hoping you'd be kind enough to fill in the few that are missing. Shall I give it to you as I see it?"

"By all means." He looked genuinely interested.

"Well, you boys at the club are not such wonderful actors as you think you are. In fact, I'd say you were damned poor actors. Number one: a supposedly well liked member of your little group has utterly vanished just about outside your club door and nobody seems to be really concerned—no matter what they might say. They don't even seem to be normally *curious*.

"Number two," I continued, "in a case where I had turned up almost no interesting information in two days of footwork, here I suddenly run into all kinds of piquant possibilities. Everyone seems anxious to tell me that Eugene was a gambler. Maybe his broker is covering up his big losses. In addition, this same broker may well be having an affair with Bragg's wife. It's a little overwhelming, all at once.

"And then a new bonanza of information tends to contradict some of what I've learned before, both about Bragg's finances and about his character. Of course, such things do happen, some men do have hidden sides to their lives, but this is a bit much, even for a jaded old pro

like me. It didn't need much thought to realize that I was being had. The next question, naturally, was *why*."

Harris still looked interested, merely interested. He uncrossed his legs and recrossed them in the opposite direction. I continued.

"The only logical answer was that you people were somehow involved in Bragg's disappearance and were trying to throw up a smoke screen to confuse the case. But that left me with a *how*: how were you all involved?

"Had you murdered Bragg? That seemed absurd.

"Perhaps you were hiding him at the club. I asked to look into the other rooms and you permitted me, almost too cooperatively. All I found was a little illegal gambling. That left one other possibility, as I saw it. You were all part of a plot to have Bragg disappear. Since I knew what sort of club you had, I could even come up with a motive: Bragg's marriage. God knows how many unhappily married men in this country have 'disappeared' in just the past year."

Harris still regarded me thoughtfully, as though waiting until I'd had my complete say. And he was right—I wasn't through yet.

"So on a hunch I spent several days trying to check the bank accounts of all the members of your club. It was a bitch of a job, and without some friends I probably wouldn't have been able to do it. But eventually I got enough, I think, to bear out my thesis.

"During the two days before Bragg's disappearance just about every member of your club withdrew at least $2,000 from one of his accounts. Now, I believe that coincidences are possible, but I'm convinced the club has paid for Bragg's disappearance. I knew the how and I knew the why. What I don't know is the where. And that's what you're going to tell me, Mr. Harris."

He almost sighed as he uncrossed his legs and sat forward in his chair. The sun ducked in behind a greyish cloud outside the glass windows. "You're quite a detective, Mr. Timothy," he said. "I'm sure they don't pay you what you're worth."

"Policemen don't have offices like yours," I agreed.

"All right," he said finally. "Here are the pieces. There was no one in that club who didn't like Gene Bragg. He was—*is*—simply one hell of a nice guy. But he was weak. He was too damned nice, if you know what I mean. That woman walked all over him. The story about her affair with Frank Tenner was a lie, but it wasn't necessary. She had

made Gene's life miserable for nearly sixteen years without even having to be unfaithful."

He paused.

"He'd come to the club most every night, and after having one too many, he'd spill out all his misery. Gene's a dreamer by nature. I'm surprised he did so well in business actually, but he got a lot of help from his father. Anyway, after a few drinks he'd start dreaming.

"He'd talk about how he would like to start all over again, somewhere far away. He was sure he could make a go of it from scratch if he could only get away from Vivian. He was even willing to leave the kids—they're pretty well grown up now. He'd talk about how he had never traveled, never seen any of the world. He wanted to see Tahiti, Hong Kong, Rio de Janeiro—all those exotic places—before he died. He wanted everything except what he had. We listened indulgently. We knew he'd never have the guts to break away and follow that crazy dream."

Harris leaned back again in his chair. He was looking out the window at the yellow city.

"I don't know which of us first came up with the scheme of actually fleshing out Gene's dreams. But anyway, the whole plan blossomed in an hour one night after Gene had just left, very reluctantly, for home. We would construct the perfect disappearance. Nobody would ever find him. There wouldn't be a clue for anyone who tried to."

He stopped to leave me space to say something, but I didn't.

"You'll have to admit there wasn't a clue in the usual sense of the word. His finances were totally in order. No man purposely runs off without money. There was no evidence of kidnapping, murder, or suicide—nothing—just an absolutely inexplicable disappearance."

"How did you get him to agree to it?" I asked. "You've already said he wasn't the kind of guy to have the courage to really go through with it."

"He wasn't," Harris said. "There was only one way: to present him with a *fait accompli*, as it were, when he was quite drunk and lost in his dreams. That's what we did. We gave him nearly $80,000 with no strings, air tickets in another name to San Francisco, and then overseas.

"The kids are almost old enough to take care of themselves, and Vivian will be left with plenty of money for all of them. The toughest part

for him was the kids, but we talked him into it. Four of us personally saw him to the plane."

"And where is he now?" I asked.

The all-American businessman grinned like a kid caught smoking in the bathroom. "Well, I told you his dreams were pretty exotic. He's in Kuala Lumpur."

"It's all pretty elaborate," I said. "Wouldn't a divorce from Vivian have been a lot simpler?"

"In this state, as you know, we don't have mutual consent or no fault. You need grounds. If the wife doesn't go along with it, you have to go through hell to get the divorce. Gene wasn't up to it. He knew himself—and he knew Vivian."

"Why wouldn't she go along with it?"

"Some people can live with their own unhappiness as long as they're making someone else unhappy too," Harris said. "What will you do?" he asked. He tried to sound offhand.

"I don't know," I said. "I think it may turn out to be an unsolved case. We don't have many in Missing Persons. My chief won't like it at all."

He stood up and thrust me his hand. He was smiling broadly. We shook hands and I realized I was shaking his with feeling.

I took my coat from the arm of the chair. "Well, I guess that's it," I said. "I'll be going."

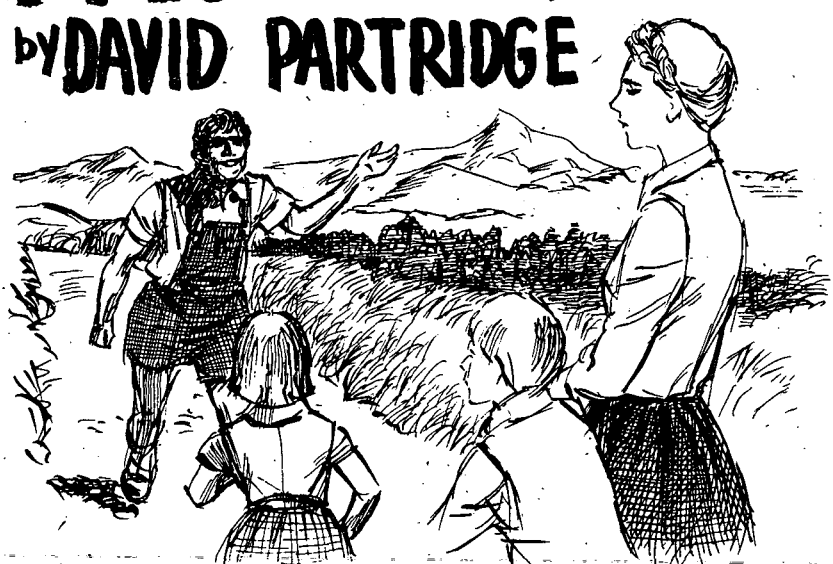
"If you ever need anything," Harris said, "I have a few connections in this town."

"I know that," I said. "And I *will* remember."

This governess was a genuine Rubens . . .

FRÖKEN ELSA

by DAVID PARTRIDGE



Looking back now across the years, I can see what my father meant when he said she was a Rubens, this governess of ours. A genuine Peter Paul Rubens, he said. A sister of Hélène Fourment herself, golden and voluptuous.

He had not addressed us youngsters, naturally, but we had long ears and anything my father said was worthy of note in those days. And besides, we knew very well who Rubens was—we had seen a room full of

his paintings in the Metropolitan Museum back home. But not even my cousin Edna, who was a year ahead of me in school and always a good jump ahead of me in everything else, not even my lively and alert cousin Edna was able to see the connection between those fleshy, well rounded Rubens figures in their flimsy costumes and our new Swedish governess, who always seemed to wear a dark skirt and a simple white shirtwaist, prim and proper.

One night, as I have never forgotten, and surely quite late, she came into my room because I was sick. This was in Berne, I think. We were stopping over there on our way to a little resort in the mountains. And she came in to give me my medicine. She was in her night clothes, and what I noticed especially was how tall she seemed, even in her slippers, with her yellow hair hanging down her back in two long braids. The skin of her bare arms as she handed me the glass was golden in the lamplight. But I didn't think of Rubens at the time. I was sick and I thanked her, and she tucked me in and turned off the light.

She seemed so much younger and less severe than the governesses before her, especially when she was alone with us. But still we were to call her Miss, naturally. Either Miss or Mademoiselle or Fröken, at our option, my father said—Fröken being Swedish, of course. But she did not want to be called by her last name, which was too difficult to pronounce—too complicated, she told us. So it was Fröken Elsa, and everybody was delighted.

We went up to this little place in the mountains—my grandmother, our new governess, my cousin Edna, and myself.

My parents had gone on to Paris—St. Cloud, Chantilly, Longchamp—my father had been dying to see all that again. Not to mention the seafood at Prunier's. Not to mention the shopwindows on the Rue de la Paix for Mamma. And Paris was noplace for children, he said. Switzerland was ideal. Everything so calm and clean and pure, and the air like wine, as the saying went.

So there we were, in this quiet resort. There were two or three small hotels with big resonant names, possibly a dozen villas and pensions, and a conservative and somewhat boring mountain peak overlooking the entire facade: And to the rear of the hotels, a good ten minutes' walk away, was the lake. This dark and often motionless body of water that was said to be miles deep in spots was an endless source

of interest and entertainment, a magnet for young and old.

Our hotel, the Gipfelblick und Metropol, was a solid establishment, the sort of place families returned to year after year, and not only families with children. I don't seem to remember many youngsters we played with. What I remember best was the size and solidity of the bathtub in our suite, the generous jar of pale honey on the breakfast table, and the big white pot of hot chocolate—in fact, the whole business of having breakfast with the sun streaming in through the lace curtains—all that. And then, of course, the woman with the little white dog. She was a tragic woman, with a husband who came to see her weekends.

Dogs were not allowed in the dining room, needless to say, but this woman was a somewhat special case. She had been coming there for years, spending the entire summer and occupying the same top-floor room with a balcony. She always had the same corner table in the dining room, where she could sit with her back to the wall and the dog at her feet, invisible and never a sound out of him. He was a sort of fox terrier, on the small side, with oversized, pointy ears and one black spot on his back. My cousin Edna said he looked more French than Italian to her. The expressions, she said, in his sharp little face and his wonderfully intelligent eyes were just like some of the minor characters she had seen in the French movies back home.

The woman was not well. Nobody seemed to know just what was wrong with her—she didn't cough, she didn't limp, she didn't keep bottles of medicine on her table, as some of the older people did. She wasn't so old, anyway, although it was hard for us to tell at the time. Anybody over twenty-five seemed pretty old, and anybody over thirty really ancient, ready for the grave. Anybody but our parents, of course, and a very few other exceptions.

But this woman, in retrospect, could not have been more than forty or forty-five. She was small and slight, as sharp and angular as a witch. Her hair was black and she generally wore black, and, evenings, when she took the dog out for his last walk, she would wear a black shawl, and then she really looked like a witch.

It was known that she kept to herself all week long, going out early in the morning for a walk down to the lake with her dog—very early, it was said, so as to avoid running into people. And she would sit on her balcony for hours at a time, holding what looked like heavy binoculars

to her eyes. Her room was in the front, facing the mountain, and we saw her more than once, sitting there, watching.

Our governess told us she had heard of a case of somebody reading lips through strong field glasses, actually eavesdropping from a distance. But my cousin Edna said it wouldn't be so easy here in Switzerland with so many different languages being spoken. And someday, Edna said, when this woman was spying through those glasses, Fröken Elsa ought to speak to us in Swedish. That would really drive her crazy, wouldn't it?

She was Italian, this woman, from one of the big industrial cities in the North, Milan or Turin, just a few hours away. And her husband, who came to see her faithfully every weekend, would arrive Friday evenings and generally leave Sunday afternoons.

He was said to be a prosperous businessman, and he looked the part. He would arrive in a sort of a rich brown suit with beautifully shined black shoes, always carrying a handsome black briefcase that almost made him look like a diplomat. Almost but not quite, my grandmother said. You could practically see the toothbrush in there, and the pajamas—canary-yellow silk pajamas, and surely a bottle of highly pungent *eau de cologne*.

I think Fröken Elsa was a little surprised to hear the old lady express herself in that manner. But she was my father's mother and inclined to take strong likes and dislikes to people, and she had intensely disliked this man from the first moment, even before she had good reason to resent him.

He would arrive, as I say, in a city suit, trim and tight and strictly business. But on Saturday mornings he would emerge in some very inappropriate sports costume, such as heavy hobnailed boots and Tyrolean leather shorts, just for a stroll up that perfectly harmless mountain. Or he would appear in creamy white flannels and a Basque shirt for a muscular turn on the lake in one of the small rowboats. His wife, clutching the little dog, would be sitting in the stern, a stiff straw hat shielding her from the sun.

He was not a big man, not much taller than his wife, but broad and strong, with thick black hair on his arms and wrists and even on his fingers. We saw all this very clearly, at close range, because we became acquainted with him, or rather he became acquainted with us. The three of us were taking a quiet walk up the mountainside one

Sunday morning and all of a sudden there he was, lifting his little green hat with the brush and introducing himself in French, and then tagging along.

We ran ahead, Edna and I, allowing the man to walk alone with Fröken Elsa. And it was then, on this first day, that my clever cousin told me this man was wildly and insanely in love with our Fröken Elsa. She had noticed it in the dining room on the previous weekend—the way he couldn't keep his eyes away from our table, the way he was simply devouring Fröken Elsa. And wasn't that a wonderful expression—devouring?

We looked back and saw them, Fröken Elsa head and shoulders taller than the man. He seemed to be doing all the talking, looking up at her and talking, talking, all the time. But whether or not she was interested, we couldn't tell. She was wearing dark sunglasses, and we couldn't guess how she was feeling. She was walking along calmly, as always. She was not wearing a hat, and in the bright light you could see how blonde she really was, and how strong. And pretty too—only pretty was not exactly the word for her. But at the time I knew of no other.

We went on ahead, Edna and I. And after a minute or two, not more, we looked back again. And this time I clearly saw that Fröken Elsa was giving us a sign, a sly signal with one hand, telling us to wait, not to run ahead any more, not to leave her alone with this man.

We were overwhelmed with small gifts, and apparently there was no way of discouraging him. He presented them in person or had them delivered, sometimes with, sometimes without, his card. Chocolates. Undreamed-of quantities and varieties of the finest in the world: bittersweet chocolate, milk chocolate, great bars stuffed with almonds, and occasionally a giant box of bonbons filled with genuine liqueurs and cordials—peach brandy, kirsch, creme de cacao. My grandmother said the man must be mad, we would be transformed into alcoholics if we ate all this candy. But she tried some herself, naturally, and admitted they were very tasty, very interesting. But it had to stop, she said.

Fröken Elsa also received flowers several times a week: bouquets from a florist in Berne and handsome boxes of cut flowers shipped from a place on the Italian Riviera. But no card was enclosed any more, since she had begged him to stop. Politely, always politely, always a

lady, she had asked him to stop.

My grandmother seemed increasingly upset. Wasn't there any way of putting an end to this nonsense, she demanded. And then one day Fröken Elsa said, why, yes, there was one good way, Madame. She, Elsa, could leave. But my grandmother said she wouldn't think of it, any more than she would think of having us all leave, running away from that beast.

Naturally, we enjoyed that kind of talk, Edna and I. And we were very glad Fröken Elsa was not going to be allowed to leave. My grandmother was being fair, and we were glad of that.

But, as Edna said to me, the man wasn't so much a beast as just a common fly. A housefly, she said, always coming back no matter how many times you brushed it off. That was pretty good, I thought at the time, and I still think so. Just how violent and dangerous a beast he might have become, I have no way of knowing, but certainly, like the housefly, he had the gift of omnipresence.

Wherever the three of us went for a walk, there he was. If it was the mountain there he would be, coming around the bend. If we went down to the lake he would be on his way to or from the boathouse. A man had to keep his muscles, he would say. A businessman was not necessarily weak and soft, Mademoiselle.

I don't know how many times he asked if he could take us for an outing on the lake in his favorite rowboat. Or for a swim. Of course, swimming was considered a little dangerous there, because of the cold currents, and there was always some danger of a cramp, he admitted, but not if one stayed near the shore. Besides, he added, he would be there.

Wherever we went, there he was—always correct and soft-spoken, and always there.

One Saturday afternoon, we had decided to go to the neighboring village for a change. We went two kilometers or so along the upland footpath to this little place where there was a coffeehouse with tables outside. We had just settled down to our dishes of Dickmilch, which is something like yogurt, served with cinnamon and powdered sugar.

We had just begun to enjoy ourselves and there he was, approaching rapidly. Edna and I both looked over at Fröken Elsa, I think to see how she was taking it, to see whether she was the least bit pleased by this whole business or not. She sat up stiffly, her blue eyes flashing

with something that must have been contempt. And a few minutes later she announced politely that we were leaving. We were expected back early at the hotel. The man came tagging along.

He certainly had a flair for finding us, but he was almost equally clever at keeping out of our way when necessary.

We rarely saw him together with his wife, and never once ran directly into them. Even in the dining room, he managed to behave as though he were not really acquainted with anyone in the place, slipping in and out practically on tiptoe, and sitting at their table with his back to the room.

Sometimes Edna and I watched to see if they ever conversed at the table, but there never seemed to be much going on in the way of conversation. But pretty soon we began to notice that the wife looked over every once in a while, directly at our table, and watched us too.

One evening at dinner, Edna said, "Did you notice that woman's eyes? I know what's the matter with her!" And then she made the classic gesture of tapping her forehead with her forefinger. The worst part of it was that the woman must have seen it. She couldn't have heard what Edna had said, but she could hardly have missed the gesture.

My cousin was sent up to her room for that. A young lady didn't express herself so in public, my grandmother told her. It was thoughtless, cruel.

She was right, certainly. But I think my cousin Edna was right too—in her diagnosis, I mean. Although the woman might well have done what she did without being deranged.

Whether or not she had openly quarreled with him, warned him, or threatened him, nobody seemed to know. There had been no loud scenes in that top-floor room—no screaming, no hysterics. The guests and the servants alike were in full agreement. There had been no indication of trouble ahead. But, on the other hand, she must have known very well what was going on. She could not have failed to see it with her own eyes. And fiercely loving the man, perhaps, she might have imagined he was having success with this glorious young creature.

At any rate, looking back and remembering her tormented face and strange eyes, she could have been expected to scream and rant and

tear her hair. But she apparently did nothing to put him on his guard. Perhaps it was her nature to remain silent. Or perhaps it was part of her plan.

What happened was witnessed by a number of people at different points about the lake, leaving no room for doubt or conjecture. The visibility was excellent and the water was calm, almost without a ripple.

The attendant at the boathouse testified that they had shown no sign whatever of agitation. They had come down quite early, as was their custom. She had quietly stepped into the rowboat and taken her seat in the stern with the little dog in his customary place on her lap. Then the husband had rolled up his sleeves and lit his cigar, taken his place at the oars and said, *"Auf Wiedersehen."*

What happened then was that the husband, rowing strongly and energetically as always, had pulled away from the shore, headed for the center of the lake. Theirs was the only boat out, the other guests still being in bed or at the breakfast table. They had the lake to themselves.

She was the one who upset the boat—observers were in complete agreement on that point. She stood up and upset it intentionally. Beyond any doubt intentionally, the witnesses said.

The little dog was the only one who managed to reach shore.

My cousin Edna immediately said she wanted to adopt him, the dear sweet little dog, the little orphan. Fröken Elsa said we'd see, and then my grandmother said we'd see. We would have to speak to the Management. Which we did, and there was no objection. So, not knowing the dog's real name, we named him Spot, naturally.

He was sent back to solve his own murder . . .

LIFE AFTER LIFE

by LAWRENCE BLOCK

When the bullets struck, my first thought was that someone had raced up behind me to give me an abrupt shove. An instant later I registered the sound of the gunshots, and then there was fire in my side, burning pain, and the impact had lifted me off my feet and sent me sprawling at the edge of the lawn in front of my house.

I noticed the smell of the grass. Fresh, cut the night before, and with the dew still on it.

I can recall fragments of the ambulance ride as if it took place in some dim dream. I worried at the impropriety of running the siren so early in the morning. They'd wake half the town.

Another time, I heard one of the white-coated attendants say something about a red blanket and I recalled the blanket that lay on my bed when I was a boy almost forty years ago. It was plaid, mostly red with some green in it. Was that what they were talking about?

These bits of awareness came one after another, like fast cuts in a film, with no sensation of time passing between them.

I was in a hospital room—the operating room, I suppose. I was spread out on a long white table while a masked and green-gowned doctor probed a wound in the left side of my chest. I must have been under anesthetic—there was a mask on my face with a tube connected to it—and I believe my eyes were closed. Nevertheless, I was aware of what was happening, and I could see.

There was a sensation I was able to identify as pain, although it didn't actually hurt me. Then I felt as though my side were a bottle and a cork was being drawn from it. It popped free. The doctor held up a misshapen bullet for examination. I watched it fall in slow motion from his forceps, landing with a plinking sound in an aluminum pan.

"The other's too close to the heart," I heard him say. "I can't get a grip on it. I don't dare touch it, the way it's positioned. It'll kill him if it moves."

Same place, an indefinite period of time later. A nurse saying, "Oh, God, he's going," and then all of them talking at once.

Then I was out of my body.

It just happened, just like that. One moment I was in my dying body on the table and a moment later I was floating somewhere beneath the ceiling. I could look down and see myself on the table and the doctors and nurses standing around me.

I'm dead, I thought.

I was very busy trying to decide how I felt about it. It didn't hurt. I had always thought it would hurt, that it would be awful, but it wasn't so terrible.

But it was odd seeing my body lying there. I thought, you were a good body. I'm all right, I don't need you, but you were a good body.

Then I was gone from the room. There was a rush of light that be-

came brighter and brighter, and I was sucked through a long tunnel at a furious speed. Then I was in a world of light and in the presence of a Being of light.

This is hard to explain.

I couldn't tell if the Being was a man or a woman. It could have been both, or maybe it changed back and forth—I don't know. It was dressed all in white, and it emanated a light that surrounded it.

And in the distance I saw my father and my mother and my grandparents—people who had gone before me—and they were holding out their hands to me, and beaming at me with faces radiant with light and love.

I was drawn to the Being, which held out its arm and said, "Behold your life!"

And I looked, and I could see my entire life. I don't know how to describe what I saw. It was as if my whole life had happened at once and someone had taken a photograph of it. I could see in it everything that I remembered in my life and everything I had forgotten, and it was all happening at once and I was seeing it happen. I would see something bad that I'd done and think, I'm sorry about that, then I would see something good and be glad about it.

At the end I woke and had breakfast and left the house to walk to work and a car passed by and a gun came out the window. There were two shots and I fell and the ambulance came and all the rest of it.

And I thought, Who killed me?

The Being said, "You must find out the answer."

I thought, I don't care, it doesn't matter.

He said, "You must go back and find out the answer."

I thought, No, I don't want to go back.

All of the brilliant light began to fade. I reached out toward it because I didn't want to go back, I didn't want to be alive again. But it continued to fade.

Then I was back in my body.

"We almost lost you," the nurse said. Her smile was professional but the light in her eyes showed she meant it. "Your heart actually stopped on the operating table. You really had us scared there."

"I'm sorry," I said.

She thought that was funny. "The doctor was only able to remove

one of the two bullets that hit you, so you've still got one in your chest. He sewed you up and put a drain in the wound, but obviously you won't be able to walk around like that. In fact, it's important for you to lie absolutely still or the bullet might shift in position. It's right alongside your heart."

It might shift even if I don't move, I thought. But she knew better than to tell me that.

"In four or five days we'll have you scheduled for another operation," she went on. "By then the bullet may move of its own accord to a more accessible position. If not, there are techniques that can be employed." She told me some of the extraordinary things surgeons could do. I didn't pay attention.

After she left the room, I rolled back and forth on the bed, shifting my body as jerkily as I could. But the bullet did not change position in my chest.

I stayed in the hospital that night. No one came to see me during visiting hours, and I thought that was strange. I asked the nurse and was told I was in intensive care and couldn't have visitors.

I lost control of myself. I shouted that she was crazy. How could I learn who did it if I couldn't see anyone?

"The police will see you as soon as it's allowed," she said. She was terribly earnest. "Believe me," she said, "it's for your own protection. They want to ask you a million questions, naturally, but it would be bad for your health to let you get all excited."

Silly bitch, I thought. And almost put the thought into words. Then I remembered the picture of my life, and the pleasant and unpleasant things I had done and how they had looked in the picture.

I smiled. "I'm sorry I lost control," I said. "But if they didn't want me to get excited they shouldn't have given me such a beautiful nurse."

I didn't sleep. It didn't seem to be necessary. I lay in bed wondering who had killed me.

My wife? We'd married young, then grown apart. Of course, *she* hadn't shot at me because she'd been in bed asleep when I left the house that morning. But she might have a lover. Or she could have hired someone to pull the trigger for her.

My partner? Monty and I had turned a handful of borrowed capital into a million-dollar business, but I was better than Monty at holding onto money. He spent it, gambled it away, paid it out in divorce settlements. Profits were off lately. Had he been helping himself to funds and cooking the books? And did he then decide to cover his thefts the easy way?

My girl? Peg had a decent apartment, a closet full of clothes. Not a bad deal. But for a while I'd let her think I'd divorce Julia when the kids were grown, and now she and I both knew better. She'd seemed to adjust to the situation, but had the resentment festered inside her?

My children? The thought was painful. Mark had gone to work for me after college. The arrangement didn't last long. He'd been too headstrong and I'd been unwilling to give him the responsibility he wanted. Now he was talking about going into business for himself. But he lacked the capital.

If I died, he'd have all he needed.

Debbie was married, and expecting a child. First she'd lived with another young man, one of whom I hadn't approved, and then she'd married Scott, who was hard-working and earnest and ambitious. Was the marriage bad for her, and did she blame me for costing her the other boy? Or did Scott's ambition prompt him to make Debbie an heiress?

Who else? Why?

Some days ago I'd cut off a motorist at a traffic circle. I remembered the sound of his horn, his face in my rearview mirror, red, ferocious. Had he copied down my license plate, determined my address, lain in ambush to gun me down?

It made no sense. But it didn't make sense for anyone to kill me.

Julia? Monty? Peg? Mark? Debbie? Scott? A stranger?

I lay there wondering but didn't truly care. Someone had killed me and I was supposed to be dead. But I was not permitted to be dead until I knew the answer to the question.

Maybe the police would find it for me.

They didn't.

I saw two policemen the following day. I was still in intensive care, still denied visitors, but an exception was made for the police. They were very courteous and spoke in hushed voices. They had no leads in

their investigation and just wanted to know if I could suggest a single possible suspect.

I told them I couldn't.

My nurse turned white as paper.

"You're not supposed to be out of bed! You're not even supposed to move! What do you think you're doing?"

I was up and dressed. There was no pain. As an experiment, I'd been palming the pain pills they issued me every four hours, hiding them in the bedclothes instead of swallowing them. As I'd anticipated, I didn't feel any pain.

The area of the wound was numb, as though that part of me had been excised altogether. I could feel the slug that was still in me and could tell it remained in position. It didn't hurt me, however.

She went on jabbering away at me. I remembered the picture of my life and avoided giving her a sharp answer.

"I'm going home," I said.

"Don't talk nonsense."

"You have no authority over me," I told her. "I'm legally entitled to take responsibility for my own life."

"For your own death, you mean."

"If it comes to that. You can't hold me here against my will. You can't operate on me without my consent."

"If you don't have that operation, you'll die."

"Everyone dies."

"I don't understand," she said, and her eyes were filled with sorrow. My heart went out to her.

"Don't worry about me," I said gently. "I know what I'm doing."

"They wouldn't let me see you," Julia was saying. "And now you're home."

"It was a fast recovery."

"Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"The exercise is supposed to be good for me," I said. I looked at her, and for a moment I saw her as she'd appeared in parts of the picture of my life—as a bride, as a young mother.

"You know, you're a beautiful woman," I said.

She colored.

"I suppose we got married too young," I said. "We each had a lot of growing to do. And the business took too much of my time over the years. I'm afraid I haven't been a very good husband."

"You weren't so bad."

"I'm glad we got married," I said. "And I'm glad we stayed together. And that you were here for me to come home to."

She started to cry. I held her until she stopped. Then, her face to my chest, she said, "At the hospital, waiting, I realized for the first time what it would mean for me to lose you. I thought we'd stopped loving each other a long time ago. I know you've had other women. For that matter, I've had lovers. I don't know if you knew that."

"It's not important."

"No," she said, "it's not. I'm glad we got married, darling. And I'm glad you're going to be all right."

Monty said, "You had everybody worried there, kid. But what do you think you're doing down here? You're supposed to be home in bed."

"I'm supposed to get exercise. Besides, if I don't come down here how do I know you won't steal the firm into bankruptcy?"

My tone was light, but he flushed deeply. "You just hit a nerve," he said.

"What's the matter?"

"When they were busy cutting the bullet out of you, all I could think was you'd die thinking I was a thief."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He lowered his eyes. "I was borrowing partnership funds," he said. "I was in a bind because of my own stupidity and I didn't want to admit it to you, so I dipped into the till. It was a temporary thing, a case of the shorts. I got everything straightened out before that clown took a shot at you. Do they know who it was yet?"

"Not yet."

"The night before you were shot, I stayed late and covered things. I wasn't going to say anything, and then I wondered if you'd been suspicious, and I decided I'd tell you about it first thing in the morning. Then it looked as though I wasn't going to get the chance. You didn't suspect anything?"

"I thought our cash position was light. But after all these years I cer-

tainly wasn't afraid of you stealing from me."

"All these years," he echoed, and I was seeing the picture of my life again. All the work Monty and I had put in side by side—the laughs we'd shared, the bad times we'd survived.

We looked at each other, and a great deal of feeling passed between us. Then he drew a breath and clapped me on the shoulder. "Well, that's enough about old times," he said gruffly. "Somebody's got to do a little work around here."

"I'm glad you're here," Peg said. "I couldn't even go to the hospital. All I could do was call every hour and ask anonymously for a report on your condition. Critical condition, that's what they said. Over and over."

"It must have been rough."

"It did something to me and for me," she said. "It made me realize that I've cheated myself out of a life. And I was the one who did it. You didn't do it to me."

"I told you I'd leave Julia."

"Oh, that was just a game we both played. I never really expected you to leave her. No, it's been my fault. I settled into a nice secure life. But when you were on the critical list I decided my life was on the critical list too, and that it was time I took some responsibility for it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's good you came over tonight and not this afternoon, because you wouldn't have found me at home. I've got a job. It's not much, but it's enough to pay the rent. I've decided it's time I started paying my own rent. In the fall I'll start night classes at the university."

"I see."

"You're not angry?"

"Angry? I'm happy for you."

"I don't regret what we've been to each other. I was a lost little girl with a screwed-up life and you made me feel loved and cared for. But I'm a big girl now. I'll still see you, if you want to see me, but from here on in I pay my own way."

"No more checks?"

"No more checks. I mean it."

I remembered some of our times together, seeing them as I had seen them in the picture of my life. I went and took her in my arms.

Later, while Julia slept, I lay awake in the darkness. I thought, this is crazy. I'm no detective. I'm a businessman. I died and You won't let me stay dead. Why can't I be dead?

I got out of bed, went downstairs, and laid out the cards for a game of solitaire. I toasted a slice of bread and made myself a cup of tea.

I won the game of solitaire. It was a hard variety, one I could normally win only once in fifty or a hundred times.

I thought, it's not Julia, it's not Monty, it's not Peg. All of them have love for me.

I felt good about that.

But who killed me? Who was left on my list?

I didn't feel good about that.

I was finishing my breakfast the following morning when Mark rang the bell. Julia went to the door and let him in. He came into the kitchen and got himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove.

"I was at the hospital," he said. "Night and day, but they wouldn't let any of us see you."

"Your mother told me."

"Then I had to leave town the day before yesterday and I just got back this morning. I had to meet with some men." A smile flickered on his face. He looked just like his mother when he smiled.

"I've got the financing," he said. "I'm in business."

"That's wonderful."

"I know you wanted me to follow in your footsteps, Dad. But I couldn't be happy having my future handed to me that way. I wanted to make it on my own."

"You're my son. I was the same myself."

"When I asked you for a loan—"

"I've been thinking about that," I said, remembering the scene as I'd witnessed it in the picture of my life. "I resented your independence and I envied your youth. I was wrong to turn you down."

"You were right to turn me down." That smile again, just like his mother. "I wanted to make it on my own, and then I turned around and asked you for help. I'm just glad you knew better than to give me

what I was weak enough to ask for. I realized that almost immediately, but I was too proud to say anything. And then some madman shot you and—well, I'm glad everything turned out all right, Dad."

"Yes," I said. "So am I."

Not Mark, then.

Not Debbie either. I always knew that, and knew it with utter certainty when she cried out, "Oh, Daddy!" and rushed to me and threw herself into my arms. "I'm so glad!" she kept saying. "I was so worried."

"Calm down," I told her. "I don't want my grandchild born with a nervous condition."

"Don't worry about your grandchild. Your grandchild's going to be just fine."

"And how about my daughter?"

"Your daughter's fine. Do you want to know something? I've really learned a lot these past few days."

"So have I."

"How close I am to you, for one thing. Waiting at the hospital, there was a time when I thought, God, he's gone. I just had this feeling. And then I shook my head and said, no, it was nonsense, you were all right. And you know what they told us afterward? Your heart stopped during the operation, and it must have happened right when I got that feeling."

When I looked at my son I saw his mother's smile. When I looked at Debbie I saw myself.

"And another thing I learned was how much people need each other. People were so good to us! So many people called and asked about you. Even Philip called, can you imagine? He just wanted to let me know that I should call on him if there was anything he could do."

"What could Philip possibly do?"

"I have no idea. It was funny hearing from him, though. I hadn't heard his voice since we were together. But it was nice of him to call, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "It must have made you wonder what might have been."

"What it made me wonder was how I ever thought he and I were meant for each other. Scott was with me every minute, except when he went down to give blood for you—"

"He gave blood for me?"

"Didn't Mother tell you? You and Scott are the same blood type. Maybe that's why I fell in love with him."

"Not a bad reason."

"He was with me all the time, and by the time you were out of danger I began to realize how close we'd grown, how much I loved him. And then when I heard Philip's voice I thought what kid stuff that relationship of ours had been. I know you never approved."

"It wasn't my business to approve or disapprove."

"Maybe not. But I know you approve of Scott, and that's important to me."

I went home.

I thought, What do You want from me? It's not my son-in-law. You don't try to kill a man and then donate blood for a transfusion. Nobody would do a thing like that.

The person I cut off at the traffic circle? But that was insane. How would I know him? I wouldn't know where to start looking for him.

Some other enemy? But I had no enemies.

Julia said, "The doctor called again. He doesn't see how you could check yourself out of the hospital. He wants to schedule you for surgery."

"Not yet," I told her. "Not until I'm ready."

"When will you be ready?"

"When I feel right about it," I told her.

She called him back and relayed the message. "He's very nice," she reported. "He says any delay is hazardous, so you should let him schedule the surgery as soon as you possibly can."

I was glad he was a caring man, and that she liked him. He might be a comfort to her later when she needed someone to lean on.

Something clicked.

I called Debbie.

"Just the one telephone call," she said, puzzled. "He said he knew you never liked him but he always respected you and he knew what an influence you were in my life. And that I should call on him if I needed someone to turn to. It was kind of him, that's what I told my-

self at the time, but there was something creepy about the conversation."

What had she told him?

"That it was nice to hear from him, and that, you know, my husband and I would be fine. Sort of stressing that I was married but in a nice way. Why?"

The police were very dubious. It was ancient history, they said. The boy had lived with my daughter a while ago, parted amicably, never made any trouble. Had he ever threatened me? Had we ever fought?

"He's the one," I said. "Watch him," I told them. "Keep an eye on him."

So they assigned men to watch Philip, and on the fourth day the surveillance paid off. They caught him tucking a bomb beneath the hood of a car. The car belonged to my son-in-law, Scott.

"He thought you were standing between them. When she said she was happily married, he shifted his sights to the husband."

There had always been something about Philip that I hadn't liked. Something creepy, as Debbie put it. Perhaps he'll get treatment now. In any event, he'll be unable to harm anyone.

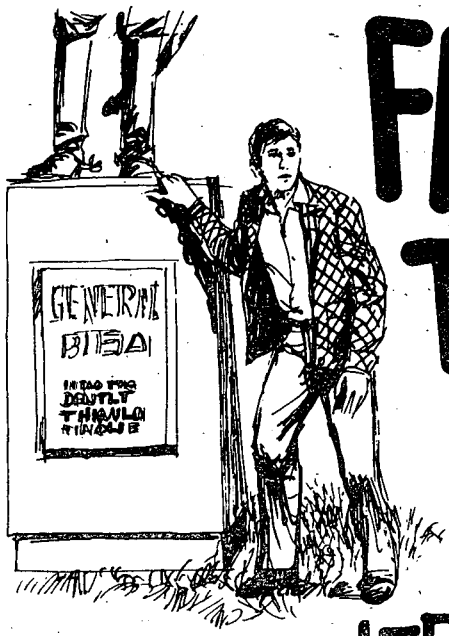
Is that why I was permitted to return? So that I could prevent Philip from harming Scott? Perhaps. But the conversations with Julia, Monty, Peg, Mark, and Debbie, those were fringe benefits.

Or perhaps it was the other way around.

They've prepared me for surgery. And I've prepared myself.

I'm ready now.

There were some who'd put Tibby away for free . . .



FASTER THAN A BULLET

by JEFFRY SCOTT

"Death," the Jacobite general Lord George Murray observed in 1745, "is not an evil and is not to be feared."

Tibby Costergo, civilian, circa 1978, begged to differ. His considered opinion—if you could have crystallized the thoughts swirling around his brain—was that he'd rather not die just yet, thank you. Somebody else could have his turn.

Although fear rooted his feet to the beautifully manicured grass in

front of the statue of Lord George, he managed to extend a shaking forefinger to explore the statue's granite breast where it was marked by a silver-grey splash that might have been a medal, but was not. Burning his finger the instant he touched the gouged stone, he sobbed aloud and fell to his knees.

Passersby frowned or looked sideways because Farway Cove wasn't *that* sort of seaside town. One didn't lounge on the public lawns. In fact, one hardly liked to be seen in a deckchair—so common, my dears.

Tibby sucked his finger, his shoulders hunched, as he tried to digest the enormity of his situation. The metallic gouge was all that remained of a 9mm. pistol bullet aimed at a point where his head had been twenty seconds earlier.

If he hadn't dropped his car keys and stooped to recover them—Tibby fought the urge to throw up; he took hold of Lord George's boot and hauled himself upright. His first task was to get back in among a crowd of people.

Not that there would be another shot for a while. Swiss Georgie, his erstwhile assassin, would have fired and been on his way. A murderer not caught on the job is that much harder to locate.

Tibby laughed hysterically. Many a poker session he'd shared with Swiss Georgie. The man never had been able to stop talking shop, praising the Mauser self-loading pistol. Some might say it was a museum piece, but Swiss Georgie would affirm it was accurate up to half a mile—flat trajectory, high muzzle velocity, and a wooden holster that doubled as a stock when slotted into the weapon's butt, making it a rifle that was as easy to carry and conceal as an automatic. "What you point at, you hit, ya?"

Yes, it had to be Swiss Georgie, and he didn't start talking business under a thousand pounds. They weren't just angry, the survivors, they were furious.

Thomas Burgoyne Costergo hadn't believed Superintendent Pine when the CID man wished him joy with the money, and forecast that he wouldn't live long enough to benefit from it. Sour grapes, he'd thought. The insurance-company bounty and the reward put up by the newspaper amounted to more than Superintendent Pine earned in five years.

"If it's as bad as you say, I demand police protection," Tibby had countered cockily. At which grey old Pine had grinned like a fox.

"You can have it, Sunbeam. But that'll confirm you grassed on them. As it stands, you've got a cat's chance in hell that they won't suspect you. Two chances, actually, if you can run faster than a bullet. Make no mistake, Tibby, they'll have orders out on you."

"But I gave you the whole firm, you've arrested 'em all," Tibby whined. "And you got all the money back. They couldn't afford to have me put out of the way."

Superintendent Pine put his head on one side, looking foxier than ever. "For you, son, people might do it for love."

And that, regrettably, was true. Tibby had put his sister on the streets when he was only seventeen years old, after which he had matured into a *really* unpleasant specimen. The payroll robbery had been hailed as a coup of coups, a triumph for South London crime—until somebody had informed on the robbers.

Further, the police had not arrested the whole bunch, as Pine pointed out with relish. "Hank and Little Disney aren't accounted for, nor The Crazy Blonde. They only had the crumbs from the pickings, granted, a mere thirty thousand between them. But that's quite enough to take care of you, isn't it?"

Sensing Superintendent Pine's loathing, Tibby had pulled himself together.

"I'll leave the country, go to Yankeeland or Brazil or wherever," he boasted. "I have independent means."

Pine sucked his teeth. "There's a lot of red tape, son. It'll take you months to set it up, and you've hardly got minutes, from the rumors I hear. There's visas and Bank of England clearance to take your blood money out of the Sterling area—you can't just walk off abroad like you're going on a paddle-steamer trip to Southend."

"I'll think of something," Tibby said as he left Pine's office and sneaked out through the parking lot. That was a lie, because he'd already thought. Within five hours of getting the insurance company and newspaper checks, he'd had them cashed and transformed into diamonds.

The diamonds were in a metal tube intended for a large Cuban cigar, so that Tibby could carry them around secure from pickpockets. He was ready to endure the embarrassment and discomfort for a few

days, in order to know that his fortune was both safe and instantly accessible.

Walking along the seafront at Farway Cove and staying amid knots of strollers, Tibby wondered how Swiss Georgie had found him.

It proved that Superintendent Pine hadn't been exaggerating. The payroll gang members still at liberty must have put one hell of a price on his head and made it an open contract—first come, first served.

Tibby shuddered, raking the seafront for a glimpse of Swiss Georgie. The sooner he found The Travel Man, the better, but he must make sure he wasn't being tailed there.

He was just as glad he'd kept ten thousand of the bounty in cash. The Bent Copper had wanted a grand just for steering Tibby to The Travel Man. All the same, and despite his narrow squeak beside Lord George, Tibby smirked to himself. Superintendent Flaming Pine didn't know it all. He'd have a heart attack if he discovered that Tibby's escape had been arranged by one of his own coppers, in his own nick.

The Bent Copper had pounced on Tibby in the police station parking lot, drawing him behind a van for a quick conference. The Bent Copper—treacherously fresh-faced and upstanding, creases sharp, boots gleaming—repeated Superintendent Pine's doom-laden predictions, with embellishments. He was able to tell Tibby that Swiss Georgie had already been retained as a sort of lethal barrister in the unofficial case of the Gang-versus-Thomas Burgoyne Costergo.

"You don't scare me," Tibby had sneered.

The Bent Copper laughed in his face. "Stop airing your teeth, Costergo. Shut your face and give your brain a chance, eh? I know somebody who can—well, call him a travel agent. He is a genuine travel agent, as a matter of fact. But he does stuff on the side. He can have you en route to South America by this time tomorrow night, but it'll cost you. Starting with me now."

"Tell me who the bloke is, and I'll chat with him," Tibby suggested. "If we do a deal, you'll get your cut."

"Goodbye," said The Bent Copper. Tibby plucked at his tunic. "All right, all right!"

"That's better. I'm going on leave tonight, and I want everything straight before I go. A thousand quid, here and now, and no messing.

For that you get the name and address. It's guaranteed to get you abroad—no passport, no strings, no trace."

Seeing the informer's hesitation, The Bent Copper said reasonably, "Look, it's not a con. If it is, you can grass on me to Piney—you're good at that. That's why you need my travel arrangements, stupid."

Tibby swapped a crisp block of banknotes for The Travel Man's name and address in Farway Cove, a location that made him snort and reach for his vanishing money.

The Bent Copper sneered all over again. "It's a perfect place, a perfect cover—a snob resort is the last place villains or my lot would look for you. There's a major port only ten miles away from the town, or the coast, remember. You shouldn't laugh, Tibby. . . ."

Now, chilly in the seaside sunlight, Tibby wasn't laughing. Could The Bent Copper have passed the word that he was making for Farway Cove? Or had Swiss Georgie spotted him in London and followed?

Either way, he had to contact The Travel Man, and fast!

Tibby made an agonizingly slow and apparently aimless progress to the address he wanted, to satisfy himself he wasn't being followed. Eventually he found himself in a hushed street full of Georgian houses turned into offices and shops—a patisserie, a solicitor, a travel agency.

His heart beat faster. With its bull's-eye-paned bow window and discreet Wedgwood color scheme, the place looked wonderfully unsuspicious and respectable. No gaudy posters or cut-rate package-tour posters, just a model of a 707 banking gently into a sheaf of fresh gladioli in a copper bowl polished well enough to hurt the eyes.

Tibby went in and, as he'd been briefed, an attractive girl rose from behind the counter, her breasts shifting in a beautifully tailored wool dress. He cleared his throat.

"Er, is the proprietor's son available? I've come from London. I believe he's expecting me."

The girl nodded carelessly. "Mr. Reginald, you mean? He'll be in the garden. Go out and walk round the corner. There's a door in the wall, the first blue door on the left. I'll ring through, and he'll unlock it."

The door yielded to Tibby's push. Here, at the back of the premises, there was no sign of the conversion of the house. It was the quiet secluded home of a merchant of the 1780s, with a mulberry tree, bee-

busy lavender hedges, and floppy, strongly scented pink-and yellow roses.

It was wasted on Tibby, though he liked the privacy. He prowled along sea-gravel paths between the dwarf hedges, and a slim youth in faultless slacks, dark blazer, and sunglasses emerged from the greenhouse to meet him.

Tibby's eye was taken by a strange pit, freshly dug alongside the greenhouse, deep and close enough to uncover its brick wall and the concrete footings.

The blazered youth smiled warmly. "I'm looking after the place while my parents are in Bermuda—even travel agents go on holidays, you know—but I know I'll be able to take care of you."

Something about the voice—

Tibby squinted against the sunlight. His cry got as far as his throat and stuck there as the young man removed the sunglasses with his left hand and produced the Browning with the silencer attached in his right.

"Nobody ever recognizes us out of uniform," said The Bent Copper.

It was Parry's own fault that she had to murder him . . .

THE MORE THE DEADLIER

by NEDRA TYRE

Angelina was annoyed with her husband. Why was Parry being such a nuisance? Why did he have such a stubborn streak? It was his own fault that she had to murder him.

She was so placid and amiable, so much the docile companion, that even to think of murder had been unthinkable until her back was to the wall. Now she knew that there was no way out of the sweet paralysis in which she lived except to kill Parry.

Angelina readily admitted that in most ways Parry was an estimable husband and she would wholeheartedly have recommended him to a second prospective wife. But Angelina and Parry had had enough of each other and she wanted no more to do with him. Why was he so obstinate in refusing to let her go?

A divorce or legal separation, though much desired, wasn't mandatory to Angelina. She just wanted to be rid of Parry once and for all and to leave him gracefully. He was welcome to the house and she had settled much of her fortune on him when they were married, so it wasn't as if she would leave him high and dry.

He wouldn't hear of her leaving. His reaction was so violent that she decided to make no formal farewell but just to write a note and sneak off. She wasn't cruel and she didn't want to make Parry unhappy, but if she stayed with him she would be unhappy. She devised a simple escape. One morning while he was in town doing the daily errands she would put a note on his pillow and then she would walk the two miles, or however far it was, to the superhighway and flag a long-distance bus going in any direction as long as it removed her from Parry.

Why postpone the inevitable? Tomorrow would be best.

But that night after dinner when they had finished their coffee Parry said, "Angelina, when you're as close to someone as I am to you, you sense things. You've been preoccupied all day. You're planning to leave tomorrow, aren't you? Well, I won't let you."

She had been discovered in a shameful act, like an employee whose thieving hand had been discovered in the till. Such clairvoyance was unforgivably rude. Parry was taking unfair advantage of her, but his mind-reading would only delay her leaving for a few days.

No two people could have been more different in background and upbringing than Angelina and Parry. "I was the only child," Angelina had told Parry during the first days of their marriage. "I wasn't only the only child, but my parents were only children too. I longed for brothers and sisters and cousins and aunts and uncles."

"Christ," Parry said. "There were so damned many of us. In the small house we lived in it seemed there were hundreds of us. Don't ever let anybody tell you the more the merrier. It's the more the deadlier. Our personalities were massacred. We were a warped lot of brats."

Angelina had to be free. She had to break out of this bondage. She

couldn't wait for another natural death to set her free, and, anyway, she might die before Parry. Love and duty had kept her willingly beside her invalid mother during the time of her lingering illness, but Angelina felt neither love nor duty toward Parry. He was nice. As a matter of fact, he was rather a dear and most attentive and obliging, and for all his quietness she didn't find him dull. Indeed, there was a kind of mystery about him.

Quiet as he was, and conscientiously as he did everything, there were changes in his mood and she had learned not to let him know that she noticed shifts in his manner and behavior. It embarrassed him if she mentioned some change in the way he had prepared a recipe or noted a difference in how he combed his hair. In more intimate matters there were definite changes. His love-making varied in intensity and frequency; on some occasions there was an urgency and hunger about his passion, as if it were the last time the act of love would be granted to him. Which was silly, because she never refused. For heaven's sake, why should she?

He had been so acquiescent to all her suggestions that she hadn't imagined for a second that he wouldn't agree to a separation.

Angelina and Parry had promised to stay together until death parted them. More realistic persons had long since struck that vow from the marriage ceremony. But Angelina realized that she and Parry had been right to retain that part of the traditional ritual. Death, it was now obvious to her, was the only thing that could part them.

She had been drugged by the ease of their life together on their large estate in deep isolation in the country. She had been delicately corrupted by the leisure, the hours to fill as she liked, the satisfying immersion in magazines and books, and sleep that could last as long as she pleased. Self-indulgence had almost ruined her. Sloth and permissiveness had erased the demanding years when she had held two jobs and had seldom had enough sleep, had not often even sat down to a meal but had bolted food as she was on the run from one job to another or in the middle of a task.

"I can keep you here," Parry said. "I'm stronger than you. And who knows we're here? We've never had visitors. The only people who ever came were the builders and contractors and real estate agent."

That was the first time the thought of murdering Parry had entered Angelina's mind.

The morning after that outburst, Parry was almost excessively attentive when he served her breakfast in bed, and his voice was seductive. "You can't possibly want to leave, Angelina. You haven't the faintest idea of what the world is like. You haven't been hungry and mistreated or you'd realize what a paradise we have here."

Suddenly the world seemed threatening and she doubted that even if she were rid of Parry she would know what to do with her freedom.

She had botched her chance for freedom. Instead of sitting down and deciding sensibly what she wanted of life after she had inherited Miss Allison's money, Angelina had behaved erratically and precipitately and had journeyed to what a travel folder called the Emerald Isle. There the seven others on her deluxe tour had bolted home to the United States instead of going to Belfast, which was under shell fire. But Angelina could not act with their resolution. She could not budge from Killarney, and she had grabbed at the first amenable stranger with such intensity that she had forced him to marry her.

Since then she had done everything she could to show Parry her appreciation for rescuing her. Well, she was sick and tired of Parry. She wanted life. What life was she had no inkling, but she had some idea of what it wasn't. It wasn't roses on the breakfast tray every morning. It wasn't whiling away hours in reading. It wasn't dressing in high fashion. It wasn't eating the most delicious food money could buy. It wasn't making love constantly.

She had no choice but to murder Parry. She sighed. He should have run for his life at his first sight of her in Ireland.

Angelina had been looking into the small grate fire in the Killarney pub and had begun to weep as she sipped brandy. She felt absolutely at the end of her tether. She didn't know how she had been able to leave her room in the hotel and find the pub, and she was positive that she would die there in front of the fire whose hot coals made deep red crisscrosses on her legs. Then someone had moved from the bar to her table and had smiled at her, and she had immediately put herself at his mercy. She begged for help and assured him she could pay for it. Whatever his price, he must see that she got back to the United States because she was so confused by fear and anxiety that she could never find her way back alone.

She had been too enmeshed in her own misery to assess the situation accurately, but she soon realized that Parry, in turn, had looked to

her for his salvation. She had expressed her predicament so badly that he had blurted out his own plight. He was stranded. He said he couldn't even pay for the drink in his hand. Angelina had pulled crumpled pound notes from her purse and ordered another brandy for herself and a drink for Parry, and when they had finished their drinks she invited Parry to lunch at her hotel.

They had sat at a table decorated with blatantly artificial flowers that needed dusting and looked through starched lace curtains onto a downpour of rain. Even the thought of food had nauseated Angelina for days and she couldn't remember when she had last eaten. And Parry, whose name she didn't yet know, admitted that his last meal had been a continental breakfast the day before. He told her his name was Parry and then, as if making it up, he added Brown. She told him that her name was Angelina Green, and though she was bogged down in despair it struck her as amusing that theirs was a colorful meeting if nothing else.

They were married three days after they returned to the United States. She wasn't sure whether she had mentioned Miss Allison's money to Parry before they were married, but Parry was pleased when she settled a large sum on him, and she made another sizable amount available through a joint checking account. That diminished Miss Allison's money only slightly—Angelina still had money galore for herself, and she acceded with delight to Parry's suggestion that they buy a place in the country.

Their search was leisurely and methodical until Angelina wearied of looking and was relieved when a large house in poor repair caught Parry's eye in southwest Virginia. They would have fun restoring it, he said, and its nicest feature was that it was miles from everywhere. The place was situated on property which had been sold for an expressway. Some of the land had been leveled for construction, but for some reason the highway project had been abandoned. On the western boundary there was a deep and sharp decline from which Angelina had backed away in fright, suggesting that they build a stout wall there, but Parry had said it would obstruct the magnificent view.

Parry instantly became lord of the manor. He gave orders and made decisions. He said it was his way of showing appreciation for what Angelina's money had made possible. Brick by brick and stone by stone Angelina and Parry had helped with the restoration, and now

that the house was at its most beautiful they shared the chores. At Parry's insistence he did the cooking. He didn't even want Angelina in the kitchen. Ever since he had worked as a short-order cook he had longed to be a chef, and he had extraordinary talent for it. Yet however great his gift, he sometimes lost it. Occasionally he would burn something or a dish would be too greasy or undercooked, and every now and then he appeared eager to get out of the kitchen and work in the garden or take long hikes and inspection tours around the estate.

He went into town daily to buy the groceries and do the errands and he insisted on going by himself. He also kept the grounds and cultivated roses. Gardening books were mixed with the cookbooks on the shelves he had installed in the pantry—plus a few on woodworking, which was another talent he had.

This ideal life was suffocating Angelina. Damn fate for getting her into this fix. All possible choices had been open to her, and she had muffed her chance for liberty because Parry had appeared like a genie out of a brandy bottle in Killarney.

She had tried to explain to Parry. "I didn't question my life during the years my mother was an invalid. I earned what I could as a typist, and at night I went to the nursing home where my mother was and helped with the chores there to reduce the fees for her care. That was my patch. My furrow. Then my mother died and soon after that Miss Allison left me all her money and I went to Ireland and we met."

"Yes," Parry said, "and I'll always be with you. This is the first happiness I've known. I owe it all to you. It makes up for all the hell I suffered during my rotten childhood."

Damn Parry and his miserable childhood. Her own childhood had been idyllic. She had been the cherished darling of a fond father and an even fonder mother. Parry was intent on hoarding his unhappy memories and capitalizing on them. He spouted rancorously about his childhood, how he had been crammed in with all those yattering children. He didn't specify how many there were and Angelina pictured dozens, even hundreds, of competing, clawing youngsters. After harping on his misery his face would light up. "God," he would say, "the miracle of walking into that pub and ordering a drink I had no money to pay for and finding you."

He often talked about the wretchedness of being poor.

"I've been poor too, Parry. I was desperate for money for my

mother's care."

Parry made no obeisance to her poverty. It was his own poverty he flaunted.

Angelina owed her misery to Miss Allison. Fabulously generous Miss Allison was to blame. Why didn't a woman with that enormous fortune leave it to a home for stray cats? What was there about Angelina that had persuaded Miss Allison that Angelina could be entrusted with a fortune? Instead of having been left the whole kit and caboodle, it would have been fairer and more plausible if Angelina had ended up down at the bottom of a long list of beneficiaries: "and to Angelina Green for her kindness and attention in my last illness I bequeath the sum of one thousand dollars"—or five thousand at the most. And why did a woman with all that money choose to die in such a modest nursing home?

Angelina must be resolute about murdering Parry, and it was only decent to prepare him for death.

"Who is your next of kin, Parry?"

"You are."

"I mean blood kin."

"I've told you I have brothers and sisters—lots of close kin. So close that we suffocated each other."

"What I want to know is, whom should I get in touch with if you die?"

"What makes you think I'm going to die? I'm young and healthy."

"People who are young and healthy die every day."

"While we're on the subject, who is your next of kin—besides me?"

"I haven't any."

"So we're even."

Dinner that night was excellent, lamb with a garland of small potatoes around it, salad, a cheese tray, and fresh pineapple for dessert.

The hours until bedtime seemed long and empty to Angelina. She said to Parry, "Maybe we ought to learn to play some games." She loathed herself for her duplicity. Parry wasn't going to have much time for anything, especially games.

"I don't think either of us would enjoy games," Parry said. "Neither of us has the killer instinct. Anyway, games are just to kill time. Time

goes too quickly as it is. The days here with you gallop past."

He talked like someone under sentence of death.

And of course he was.

Angelina had to get down to specifics—the time, the place, the method. Shooting was unthinkable. She thanked heaven that there was no gun on the premises. What about stabbing? A direct and clean puncture of the heart might not be too bad, but there must be no gushing blood. A stab in the back might be most diplomatic, not for selfish reasons but to save Parry's feelings. He wouldn't like to know that she had murdered him. But she wasn't very adept with her hands. It would be just her luck to make a few ineffectual cuts.

She might shove Parry downstairs, but he would probably end up with only a broken back or paralysis, in which case in all honor she would have to spend the rest of her days nursing him.

What about shoving him into the freezer? It was large, but was it man-size?

No, she couldn't have Parry die all shut up in the cold and dark, shivering and with his teeth chattering.

Damn the man. How was she going to kill him?

Above all, his murder must be committed in such a way that no one could suspect her of having done it. That rather stumped her, for if Parry was found murdered it would be impossible for her to suggest to the authorities that anyone besides herself could be guilty since she and Parry spent their time solely with each other. There were no callers or guests, no servants, no delivery men.

Regarded in cold blood, murdering Parry seemed an unattainable feat. She almost gave up hope.

Why couldn't she be lucky? Why couldn't the whole thing be taken out of her hands? Why couldn't Parry be in the last throes of some deadly disease? And if natural causes didn't carry him off, there was still a chance that he might be killed in a traffic accident. Thousands died every day in them.

Why must she be forced to kill Parry? Wouldn't it be easier to fall in love with him? But that would be the cowardly way out. She wanted to find out what life was, not how to be in love with Parry.

Then after all her woolly and hopeless musing on how to dispose of Parry, he himself most accommodatingly handed Angelina his death on

a platter, or at least in a picnic basket.

"Let's have a picnic," he suggested. "It will be our supper."

She was always compliant with his suggestions, though she privately had misgivings that if they picnicked they would be beset by ants, mosquitoes, gnats, bees, and an assortment of unidentified insects, and no doubt a snake or two would slither in the underbrush.

Parry packed all sorts of delicacies, including two bottles of champagne. Each carried a basket and they stopped several times to rest and look at a view.

"Where are we going?" Angelina asked, a little tired from all the hiking.

"To the most beautiful place on the estate."

Angelina was somewhat frightened when it turned out that Parry meant they were going to the steep drop left from the abandoned highway construction. Her timidity had no effect on Parry. She couldn't budge him from his decision, and with wifely submissiveness she followed him to the very brink of the sharp decline.

Right off, Parry opened a bottle of champagne and handed Angelina a glass.

"I can't get enough of all this space," he said. He walked very close to the precipice and began to drink his champagne. "It's so beautiful here with you, Angelina. I've felt crowded all my life—until I married you."

Parry served her a chicken breast, two ham biscuits, and some asparagus spears. She ate greedily, and complimented Parry on his foresight in bringing two bottles of champagne.

Angelina delved into one of the baskets for fruit and handed some to Parry. They drank more champagne and became a little giddy. Parry told Angelina to open her mouth and close her eyes, and when she obeyed she was surprised to be struck in the face by a grape.

"Sorry," Parry said, "I missed."

"Now it's my turn," she said, and she threw a grape that missed him and then she tossed a large overripe peach that smashed against Parry's forehead.

"That's not fair," he said, and when she saw him pick up a peach and aim it at her she jumped up and began to run. Parry leaped up and chased her and shouted, "Guess what I intend to do when I catch you." She suddenly stopped and held out her arms to Parry, and in

that instant of waiting for him to embrace her she realized that this was what she had been trying to devise for weeks. If she could somehow get him nearer the precipice. She began to run again and forgot all her fear of the steep incline.

It was child's play to manipulate Parry past her shoulder as she swerved from his embrace. She stepped aside at the perfect instant and Parry plunged into the abyss.

Angelina looked far down the decline at Parry's body. She waited for him to move and pull himself up and climb toward her. She was about to lose her foothold and she grasped for something to cling to so that she wouldn't pitch headfirst and join Parry. A bush gave her a handhold and she gripped it and looked again at Parry.

He was absolutely inert. She realized that he was, as the unfeeling cliché had it, as dead as a doornail. He could lie there forever and no one would know.

Parry was dead and she was rid of him at last.

Angelina waited for an appropriate reaction of guilt to overwhelm her, but she had only a sense of freedom and well-being.

What was so very fortunate was that there could be no complications. Parry had told her he had no next of kin, or at least that he knew nothing of his relatives' whereabouts. There was no one to be informed of his death.

She was experiencing none of the dread that ought to ravage a murderer, because of course she had murdered Parry by enticing him to the precipice. Maybe it was just an illusion that Parry was dead. She glanced once more at his still body. Of course he was dead. There was no question about it. She had spent too much time among the dying and the dead in the nursing home not to recognize death.

"Rest in peace, Parry," she said.

She left the precipice and stooped over the remains of the picnic and began to clear away the dirty dishes and to put caps on jars. She and Parry had been loaded down, and it would take at least two trips for her to get the baskets and other picnic paraphernalia back to the house.

Her new freedom made her spirits soar and she was singing happily to herself as she picked up a basket cluttered with leftovers and started toward home. It was inhuman of her to feel no regret. No one had ever died in the nursing home without arousing her sympathy. Yet in

complete honesty she had to admit that she felt nothing but relief ove Parry's death. She was rid of him at last and of her own shallow life The paths now open to her seemed infinite. She must be careful t choose the right one, though she was young enough to have time t experiment. And there had been no need for Parry to be her victim He had only to let her leave. It was his own fault that he was lyin dead at the bottom of the precipice.

Angelina neared the house, and it had never seemed so attractive t her. She entered the kitchen and stood at the sink and washed som dishes. For a while she wasn't going to think about anything. A littl later she would telephone the police and there couldn't possibly be an complications—no shadow of doubt could touch her. Parry's death ha resulted from an accidental fall.

Time passed. Hours might have elapsed. She only wanted to sit an enjoy the quiet.

There was a sound from outside, and an icy hand might have falle on her shoulder. Footsteps were approaching. The door to the east entrance was being opened, and Parry entered the living room. He wa breathing hard and his hands were scratched. There was dried blood on his left arm and his slacks were torn and dirty. Leaves and twig were caught in his hair. He stood in an apologetic attitude like a guest who is late and must make an excuse for a tardy appearance.

Damn the man. Damn Parry Brown and his resurrection. She had thought he was dead. Well, he obviously wasn't dead and she must make the best of it, and the poor thing needed to be attended to.

"Parry, you're hurt and you need a bath. I'll draw the water fo you."

He followed her upstairs and into his bedroom. She turned on the water in his bathtub, helped him out of his shirt and slacks, and when he settled into the tub she began to soap and sponge his back. She got a comb and worked on the tangles in his dark hair. When he emerged from the tub she embraced him in a huge towel and rubbed him down, then patted powder into his light scratches and oil into the deeper ones. She took an orange stick to remove the dirt from beneath his fingernails. Then she went downstairs for a cup of milk and added rum and took it to Parry. He wanted to be babied and she held the cup while he sipped the milk, and between sips he smiled at her.

As composure came back to Parry it deserted Angelina. She almost

dropped the cup. Her hands were shaking and her throat was constricted by Parry's return from the dead.

A generous splash of neat bourbon somewhat restored her, and she was able to think clearly.

Of course this failure to kill Parry altered nothing. She still must murder him. And quickly.

The next day Parry made no reference to the picnic or to his fall. He walked without limping and didn't complain of sore muscles. He acted as if everything was normal. Or was the daft man truly unaware that she had tried to kill him?

It was time for him to make his usual morning trip into town.

"Do you want anything special?" He asked his customary parting question in his customary way, and he and his Porsche were still in sight when she began to weep in frustration that Parry would soon return.

Why wasn't he at the bottom of the ravine where he ought to be?

No interval seemed to have elapsed before Parry was back, smiling and handing her a stack of new books, saying he hoped she would enjoy them and that lunch would be ready in a few minutes. Of course, the food prepared by her intended victim should have choked her. Instead, it tasted so good that she asked for seconds.

After lunch Angelina took the new books to her room, plumped up the pillows on her bed, and lay down to read. An irritating noise disturbed her. At first she failed to identify it and then she realized that Parry was in his basement workshop. It had been a long time since he had done any woodwork. Once he had finished what was necessary to get the house in shape he seemed to have little interest in his shop, and when she asked for some minor repair he would procrastinate in doing it. The shrill screech of the electric saw annoyed her and she got up to close the door. The noise still penetrated the room, but the closed door muffled the sound so that instead of being piercing it became a monotonous humming, an odd kind of lullaby, and she dozed.

At dinner she wanted to ask Parry what he was making in his workshop, but it was no doubt a surprise for her and she didn't ask.

Parry said good night at ten, and Angelina bathed and got into bed to finish her book. Soon she was so drowsy she couldn't hold the book and she turned out the light. She was almost asleep when she heard

Parry leave his room and tiptoe downstairs. In a few minutes there was the sound of a machine. Parry was back in his workshop. She fell asleep again, but much later heard Parry cautiously mounting the stairway. Angelina turned on the lamp to look at her clock. It was four.

Spying was despicable, but nothing could keep Angelina from snooping now. The moment Parry drove off on his morning errands she headed for the basement.

The steep back stairs leading to the basement were quite dark. There was a light somewhere, but Angelina was unfamiliar with this part of the house and couldn't find the switch. She groped her way to the bottom of the stairs and pushed open the door to the workshop. The basement had access to the outside and three small windows let in light from the east.

Everything was in order. There was no sign of any work in progress. The tools were in place and the machines were neatly covered. But Parry had been working on *something* and it had to be somewhere. She peered on shelves and opened cabinets, and then in the shadow of the ell she saw something draped in heavy canvas. She pulled the canvas back to reveal a long narrow box with a hinged lid. It was a simple piece but it showed Parry's fine craftsmanship. There were strong, carefully carved handles at the head and foot so that it would be easy to move. It must be a chest for storage.

It was a surprise for her, just as she had thought. And Parry was very dear to make it. She smoothed the canvas over the box and looked around to make sure nothing had been disturbed that would betray her intrusion, and then she went upstairs.

Angelina and Parry were finishing a bottle of very dry sherry. Angelina's tongue lingered on the last drops in her glass. She had never felt so uninhibited. Above all, she was a person of honor. She couldn't let her attempted murder of Parry just hang there, spoiling the atmosphere.

"Parry, I tried to kill you."

Parry laughed. He couldn't stop laughing.

"But it's true. It was my fault that you fell down the precipice."

"Don't be ridiculous, Angelina. I tripped and lost my footing. It was my fault. I'm ashamed of myself for being so clumsy."

He said it with conviction. He must believe it. No doubt it was for

the best that he refused to believe she had tried to kill him. It would make it simpler for her next attempt—and she must get on with it.

But how was she to do it?

People with real purpose had no trouble in surmounting any difficulty. There had to be a simple and easy way to dispose of Parry.

And then she realized that there *was* a simple and easy way—and one that was safe, bloodless, and painless. She had been a dolt not to think of her mother's pills as a perfect instrument of murder. Her stupidity was beyond belief.

The pills were the only things belonging to her mother that Angelina had kept. Everything else—the slippers, two housecoats as good as new, nightgowns, backrest, bedside clock—had been handed on to grateful patients in the nursing home. Angelina had kept the round squat bottles of pills as evidence of her mother's bravery and endurance. Often her mother would refuse the ease they offered, and the doctor had warned that even a slight overdose would be fatal.

The only way Angelina could give the pills to Parry was in food. But how could she put them in food when Parry did all the cooking and serving?

What a bother.

Then poor guileless Parry accepted her invitation to a picnic which she prepared while he went to town on his errands. The kitchen bewildered her. It belonged solely to Parry and she didn't know where anything was. She pulled trays and containers from the refrigerator and freezer and tried to concoct something lethal yet appetising. Nothing went right. First she made beef sandwiches, but the garish yellow and red pills, crushed as finely as she could manage, were too conspicuous. Parry would be sure to ask what all that red and yellow stuff was.

Bother the beef sandwiches. Angelina put them in the garbage.

If only Parry liked catsup she could easily have disguised the pills in it. But Parry detested catsup. If only he liked cookies she could have sprinkled the pills on the icing. She became more and more frustrated. She put pills in the cottage cheese but they discolored it. She opened a can of vichysoisse but the crushed pills refused to sink.

She must be sensible. There had to be some way to get the pills inside Parry.

Wine! Of course! She would dissolve the pills in the wine, and she

would take along beer for herself—Parry was a snob about beer.

They took a long ramble around the estate and found a lovely picnic spot on level ground. They both seemed purposely to shy away from the precipice. It had pleased Angelina to see Parry's pride of ownership as they had sauntered along—she was glad that his last hours were happy.

The long walk had made them hungry and Parry wolfed his food. But he would not drink. The wine bottle might just have been labeled POISON or LETHAL. Angelina took a long refreshing drink of beer and hoped it would incite Parry to drink. A ray of sun shot through the heavy branches of the trees and highlighted the bottle of wine. Parry ignored it.

"You'll choke to death, Parry, if you don't have something to drink." He kept munching on a chicken sandwich, and then when she had given up hope he reached for the wine and poured a large portion into a glass.

Angelina began to hiccough.

Parry was concerned. "I know a cure for the hiccoughs," he said. "Did you bring any sugar?"

"Yes, it's in the yellow bowl."

Parry removed the cover from the dish and measured out a level spoonful of sugar, which he handed to her. It struck Angelina as monstrous that Parry was trying to cure her hiccoughs while she was trying to murder him. She swallowed the sugar with effort. Moments passed, and Angelina smiled. Her hiccoughs were gone.

Parry smiled at her smugly. He refilled his empty glass and drank the wine with dispatch, then poured more.

The beer had made her drowsy and she dozed. When she awoke it was to silence. There was no sound at all, not even of Parry breathing.

Angelina crawled toward him. He was absolutely still. She dared not believe that he was dead. After all, she had miscalculated on that other occasion. And then the picnic site suddenly seemed alive with sounds—the breeze swayed bushes and limbs, it swept the leaves, it made a pickle jar resound against an olive jar, it rattled a knife against a plate.

She leaned over Parry. She bent more closely and laid her ear against his chest. There was no heart beat. She picked up his wrist. The pulse didn't throb. Parry was dead beyond any doubt.

The wind was rising and she was getting chilly.

Parry had no need of anyone and she could leave him there in the clearing in the twilight. She stooped over him once more to make doubly sure that he was dead, and then she straightened and began to walk toward the house. Her route led her past the rose garden, and the fragrance of the blossoms had never been so sweet. Remorse was what she should have felt, yet in all honesty she felt nothing but peace. Now she would have the life alone she wanted. It was a pity that she had been forced to commit murder to achieve it.

Disposing of Parry's body would be a nuisance, but she would have to manage as best she could. Now she had to give in to the compulsion to sleep. She might have been the one who had taken the sleeping pills. Perhaps it was her great relief that Parry was dead that made her so relaxed. She nodded in the bathtub, and then she somehow managed to get out and dry herself and put on her pajamas. She was asleep by the time she touched the bed.

The next morning Parry appeared as usual with Angelina's breakfast tray.

Her sleep had been so deep that Angelina automatically reached out for the tray, and then she dropped it.

Parry smiled at her indulgently and picked up the pieces of the broken cup and returned the roses to the overturned vase. Then he retrieved the toast from the various places it had landed and excused himself to go prepare another tray.

Angelina pulled the covers over her head and screamed, damning herself for being so inept.

Having decided to kill Parry, she should have done it once and for all. She should have gone down the incline when he was lying there stunned and committed the *coup de grâce* or whatever it was they called the final merciful killing on the field of battle. Since she had failed in the first instance, she should have made doubly sure in the second.

She was disgusted with herself and with Parry. Any other man would have died decently and finally the first time. Damn Parry for bobbing up like a Jack-in-the-box.

There was nothing to do but thank him when he brought up the second tray, apologize for her awkwardness, and ask him how he was.

"I'm fine," he said, "but I didn't sleep very well. I suppose my long nap after the picnic interfered with my regular sleep."

Angelina sighed. Instead of killing him, the pills had given him a nice long nap.

"I think it would be a good morning to clear the grounds where we had our picnic yesterday," he went on. "I noticed that they're much too overgrown."

So while she had been doing her utmost to kill Parry, the lord of the manor had been casting a critical eye about his estate and making plans to tidy it. "Would you like me to help?" It was the only thing she could think to say under the circumstances. But he took her offer as only a pleasantry and left without her.

He looked exhausted when he returned. He didn't seem to have energy enough to open the door, and Angelina opened it for him. He stumbled into the room.

"You've worked too hard, Parry. I'll get lunch."

He waved her aside. "You don't know how to cook."

"I won't have to cook. We'll have sandwiches."

Parry was absolutely spent. She got the Scotch bottle and poured a strong drink for him. He leaned against the counter when she handed it to him and sagged slightly. Perhaps, she thought with wildly throbbing hope, the drugs she had given him the previous afternoon were at last taking hold. Maybe he was at last really and truly dying.

She couldn't have been more mistaken. The Scotch only revived him and by the time he had eaten a chicken sandwich, his strength and vigor had returned.

Angelina was embarrassed by her failures to murder Parry, but she would not be a quitter. His murder could be done. It must be done.

Meantime Parry prospered. His good humor increased. His good health mocked her.

One morning, as usual, Parry asked if there was anything special she wanted in town. There never was anything special she wanted in town. The only thing special she wanted was to dispose of Parry.

"Just pick up the cleaning, please," she said. "Dear."

While he was gone she wondered how she would ever manage to murder him. But when he returned he very obligingly handed her the instrument of his death.

Angelina took the plastic bag of dry cleaning from him and when she hung it in the closet she read the warning. The bag was dangerous, the large, clear print said. Children should not be allowed to play with it.

Angelina was desperate, yet inspired. There must be a third picnic. Parry would be suspicious, but she must try. And three was a magic number. A third attempt to murder Parry should be successful. It had to be successful.

There were still some of her mother's pills left, and when Parry was drugged she would apply the cleaning bag. This time his murder would be accomplished without any possibility of failure.

Angelina's optimism soared.

And Parry was obligingly gullible. Another picnic was exactly what he wanted—the other two had been such fun. He was like a lamb being led to slaughter. He *was* a lamb being led to slaughter.

Angelina packed the food in the picnic baskets and the cleaning bag lay primly folded beneath the slices of baked ham. And Parry's bottle of wine had been generously infiltrated by the pills. Angelina had been as careful as a mother fixing a formula for a baby. When she called to Parry he bounded down the stairs from his bedroom, looking especially handsome. It was a pity that she must kill him, but she reminded herself that he had only himself to blame.

They enjoyed the food and Angelina drank beer. As before, it made her drowsy. She chided herself for being so unfeeling as to doze in the middle of committing murder. She had read of the banality of evil, and she realized that she was a perfect example of it as she yawned and stretched and brushed dried leaves from her hair. The trouble was that a picnic was relaxing and murder wasn't appropriate on such a beautiful afternoon.

Parry poured some wine and sniffed it. "This smells funny," he said.

There went the murder.

"Let me see." She poured a small amount of the wine into her glass and like a professional wine taster she sipped and swished the draft around in her mouth. "It tastes all right to me," she said.

Parry frowned and swallowed his glass of wine quicky as if it were medicine. Then he poured another glass which he drank with equal speed.

"That's absolutely the worst wine I've ever drunk," he said.

Those were his last words. He managed to smile at her as he said

them and then he lay flat on the ground. He was so still Angelina was positive he was dead. But then, she thought wryly, she had been sure he was dead those other times too. She must take special precaution now. She reached for the cleaning bag in the bottom of the picnic basket, knelt before Parry, and applied the folded bag to his nostrils. He did not resist. Even so, she didn't release the pressure for some moments. Then, satisfied he was dead, she folded the bag and put it back in the basket.

Back at the house, as she entered the living room, she thought with gratitude that Parry's death had had dignity. He had died out in the open in a beautiful spot after a meal he had relished. His body hadn't been mutilated in war or broken by an accident. He had not been racked by pain. Surely any sensible person would envy Parry's death.

The minutes passed blissfully as she sat in the living room. She felt calm yet exhilarated.

Then she heard a sound on the terrace that was unmistakable. Parry was returning. He had outwitted her again.

This time he looked angry and indignant. She had never seen such an expression on his face. Where had his sweet temper gone?

Well, *she* had reason to be angry and indignant too. All her efforts to murder Parry had come to nothing. What sort of person was he anyway—a grown man playing games and pretending to be dead. God only knew how he had feigned it, because he had certainly looked dead to her.

Parry braced himself in the stance a batter might take and then he struck Angelina. She stumbled backward and her head hit the wire screen in a window. A marble ashtray was within her reach. She grabbed it and smashed it against Parry's jaw. "Don't you ever strike me again as long as you live," she said. "I will not have violence in this house."

The blow crumpled him. He backed toward a chair and his large body seemed to disappear. Sobs shook him. It startled her to see him give himself up to tears. She went to the kitchen and dampened a dishcloth, then returned and knelt beside him, wiping his eyes and his jaw. "You'll make yourself sick, Parry," she said. "You mustn't cry anymore."

All the thanks she got was to be shoved aside, and Parry stalked upstairs. After a while she heard the sound of running water. He must be taking a bath.

Angelina became terribly miffed. The nerve of him—pretending to lie—leading her up the garden path for the third time—striking her—shoving her!

Where was the Scotch? She poured a glassful even knowing Scotch would not ease her. There were heavy steps on the stairs. The stairway might be disintegrating beneath those menacing footsteps. An ogre from a bloody Grimm Brothers fairy tale might have been approaching. Parry swept the glass of Scotch from Angelina's hand. He looked large and strong and threatening and very healthy.

He stared down at her. She couldn't think of a thing to say and she was angry at him. Her jaw hurt. It was probably broken and she was sorry not to see any mark of the ashtray on his face.

He left her and stormed into the kitchen. She heard him tear an ice tray from the refrigerator. The cubes made a thundering clatter as Parry dislodged them. He added ice cubes to the Scotch and drank deeply, then splashed more Scotch into the glass and gulped it down. "Monster!" he shouted at her. "Bitch!"

What was wrong with the foolish man? Why was he so cross with her? He had never been impolite before. She would ignore his remarks. She would restore order and equilibrium by making a sensible suggestion.

"I think we'd better go to bed," she said.

"There'll be no going to bed tonight."

"I'm going to bed."

"I've other plans for you."

"I don't know what's got into you, Parry. Why are you out of sorts?"

He bellowed at her. "I've cooked for you! I've shopped for you! I've run errands for you! I've cleared the grounds and planted flowers and shrubbery and painted walls."

"I helped paint the walls. I helped clear the grounds. I'd have helped with the cooking and errands but you insisted you wanted to do it alone. You're being rude and impolite." Parry had nothing in the world to complain about. He was fortunate to be alive. She had done everything she could to kill him and nothing had come of it. He ought to thank his lucky stars. "I'm tired of your bad temper. I'll say good night and go to bed."

"I suggest you go upstairs and put on some jeans and loafers."

"You're crazy. I'm not going anywhere with you."

Parry grabbed her hand and jerked her toward the door. He pulled her down the front steps and across the side lawn. He flicked on a flashlight but its beam was dim and unsteady. Angelina was sure that Parry was mad. There had always been something strange about him.

Along the way she lost her satin slippers and the rocks were biting into her bare feet. Briars snatched at her caftan while Parry pulled her forward. At last they stopped and Parry shoved a spade toward her. He gave a sharp order. "Dig."

The ground was like iron and it hurt to use her foot against the shovel to force it into the earth, but she made progress.

"Harder," Parry said. "Put more muscle into it."

She tried to obey, but her palms stung and her feet throbbed. She was sick and tired of Parry's oafishness. "If you want any more digging done, you can do it yourself." She threw the shovel at his feet. Parry picked it up and thrust the flashlight into her hands. "Keep it steady," he said. Angelina watched Parry dig and the depression grew deeper. Finally she dropped the flashlight and began to run. Parry dashed after her and dragged her back, but his mood shifted from macho to beseeching. "I need you, Angelina. Please help me."

Since he had asked politely, she walked toward him—and stumbled over someone's foot. The illumination from the flashlight was dim, yet it unmistakably showed a dead body. "Take his feet, Angelina," Parry said. She did as she was told, and when they let go there was the most final sound she had ever heard.

Parry began to spade the earth into the grave, and when she realized that he had no more need of her she turned and headed home. She entered by way of the kitchen and stopped at the sink to wash her hands. The water was like fire on her blisters. She went upstairs for unguents to soothe her cuts and scratches and put on pajamas. Then she went back downstairs and poured another drink. She sipped it slowly for what seemed to be hours, yet Parry didn't return. Finally, she went to her room and climbed into bed, where she fell into deep sleep.

When she woke she was surprised to see that it was mid-morning. It was the first time since they had moved to the estate that Parry hadn't served her breakfast in bed. She wondered where he was, and then remembered the dead body. How strange and ironic that after she had made her bungling attempts to murder Parry he had committed a real

murder. Of course he couldn't have served her breakfast in bed as usual. He was an honorable man and would have gone to town to give himself up for having killed someone. She had no doubt that Parry was in jail, and jails were such crowded places. Once more he would be jammed in with other human beings just as he had been during his miserable childhood.

She sat up in bed, shocked by memory. Parry had called her a monster and a bitch. She should be indignant, yet she almost smiled. The words were almost welcome after a lifetime of being called a sweet little thing and an angel. And capable and industrious and loving and devoted and unselfish beyond belief.

A car was approaching. It was no doubt the police, come to interrogate her about Parry's crime. A wife wasn't forced to give evidence against her husband, thank heaven, and Parry could count on her to keep her mouth shut. I'll stand beside you, Parry, she thought, whatever you've done. Or was the correct phrase "behind you"?

But that was hardly a suitable greeting for the confident Parry who emerged from the car with his arms encompassing bags of groceries. "Hold the door open, Angelina," he called. "I'm loaded down."

Ordinarily he asked her what her choice for lunch was or he would say he was preparing a surprise, but he showed no such courtesy now as he plopped a greasy package in front of her. "That's a hamburger for your lunch," he said. "I ate downtown."

As a matter of fact, she enjoyed the hamburger. She had practically lived on hamburgers until she had inherited Miss Allison's money. But Parry's behavior was bizarre, to say the least. After tossing the hamburger in her direction he went to his room and locked the door. After that the house had been as quiet as a tomb.

Parry must have tiptoed down the stairs. She hadn't heard a sound, yet there he was all of a sudden, directly in front of her chair in the living room. He almost scared the wits out of her.

His manner had shifted from arrogant to contrite. "Angelina, I must apologize for my behavior. I can't tell you what I've been through. You must have thought I'd lost my mind. I had in a way. It's been hell since I saw him lying on the picnic ground. At first I blamed you, but now I realize it couldn't have been your fault, no matter how it appeared. You wouldn't hurt a fly. And all the while I was hating you and

trying to take the loss out on you, I was wildly happy because you belong to me now—just me." He stopped to kiss her and his lips were dry, yet passionate.

What was the demented man talking about? Angelina shook her head in bewilderment.

He took her hand gently, pulled her to her feet, and led her from the house, along the path they had taken when he had dragged her to help him dig the grave. She saw one of her satin slippers slue-footed along the gravel walk, and the second one not far away, pigeon-toed in a small gulley. Torn strips of her caftan dangled from a holly bush. After a while they came to an opening where the terrain was flat. Parry walked to a place covered with vines and freshly cut roses.

"Why are all the roses here?" Angelina said.

"They're covering the graves."

Graves. What did he mean? She had helped dig a grave, not graves. Parry's efficient hands reached for tendrils and removed the vines, uncovering three mounds.

"Don't you see, darling? Surely you understand."

What she wanted and needed was to sit quietly with some wine or spirits nearby while she listened to Parry elaborate.

Once they had sat down in the living room she chose brandy to steady her.

How could she have known that there were four of him, of Parry? She had dismissed herself as a cobbler at murder, and she had turned out to be remarkably deft and efficient in committing it. The murders she had thought she was botching had, on the contrary, been perfectly contrived. The first Parry had died on the precipice, enticed there by her invitation to sex. The second Parry had succumbed from her mother's pills, as had the third Parry—there had probably been no need of the cleaning-bag *coup de grâce*.

But how had they managed it? How had they fooled her into thinking they were one? When the first Parry had died, why did they let her continue her carnage? Why had Parry cursed her only after the third murder when after the first two he had been meek and loving? But he had already explained that. He had been overwhelmed with guilt when he realized that he was the only survivor.

It was true that she had sensed there was something mysterious

ıbout Parry in spite of his wholesomeness, that she had often noticed :hanges in his behavior.

"My God, Parry, I can't believe I was married to four men!"

"We all loved you, Angelina. We were devoted to you. What woman ıas ever been so coddled and pampered?" Parry took her limp right ıand and kissed it.

The evidence was there, if only she could accept it. She remem-ɔered the continuous whining of the electric tools in Parry's basement vorkshop. The long box she had found there and had assumed was to ɔe a gift for her was actually a coffin. But only one had been made, ınd there had been more than one Parry who needed a coffin. That neant that the Parry who did woodworking had been the second one o die.

The sole surviving Parry, like an eminent professor willing to impart ɜsoterica to an eager but not too bright student, had gladly answered ɜvery question she asked. While the other Parrys were in waiting, or ɔn the bench, so to speak, they had lived in a small house in a rural solated area on the other side of town. When Angelina had talked ıbout leaving, a second Parry was usually somewhere nearby on the ɜstate, as they had no intention of letting her get away. They were de-ɜrmined to be vigilant until she came to her senses. The stand-ins had ɔeen immediately alerted to the deaths of the others.

At that point Parry said, "Angelina, I don't ever want to hear ınother word about you leaving. Do you understand?"

She ignored the question and proposed one that made her blush rom immodesty. "How on earth could I satisfy four men?"

"Don't you see, Angelina? We'd never had anything before. Our par-ɜnts exploited us. We were quadruplets and from the time we were ɔorn our pictures were used for endorsements. They wanted us to ɜupport them and all the other kids. We rebelled and left home when ve were eighteen, but we had little education and less skill. Life was ıell, multiplied by four. We swore that if anything good ever hap-ɔened to one of us it would happen to us all, and a miracle happened *vhen Parry found you.*"

There was another kiss of her limp right hand.

"Angelina, listen, darling, I have something to confess. I am the only ɔne who couldn't cook. The others were truly good chefs. When it was ny turn with you, whoever was leaving would put all sorts of food in

the refrigerator and freezer for me to use. So we had to keep you out of the kitchen. We knew that if you ever came in when I was cooking you'd know I didn't have the vaguest idea how to cook. Breakfast wasn't so bad, though sometimes I'd ruin half a dozen eggs before I could bring one up to you. Cooking is an unbelievable chore for me. I don't intend to go into the kitchen again as long as I live. It's all yours from now on."

Parry yawned. The yawn was catching, and Angelina yawned too. She went into the kitchen and prepared a cold supper and they yawned and dozed over their plates. Shortly afterward, when Parry came to her room, Angelina's response to his lovemaking surprised her. But her mind was engaged in more serious matters. Her situation was intolerable, and what she had been subjected to was base and demeaning. She was more determined than ever to leave, and she realized that it could only be accomplished by Parry's death. In for a penny, in for a pound. Since, without knowing it, she had committed three murders, she must commit a fourth. The fourth was the most necessary of all. And the sooner the better.

Late the next morning when Parry greeted Angelina jauntily on his return from doing the errands in town, she asked him what he would like for lunch. Food was food, he shrugged, and anything she wanted to fix was fine.

In all the neat packages and containers of food in the freezer and refrigerator prepared and left by the provident Parrys there were bound to be a dozen dishes whose colors matched her mother's pills. She ran upstairs and brought down the bottles with their remaining contents. When she returned to the kitchen she called out to Parry in the living room, "Get yourself a drink, Parry, while I prepare lunch. It won't take long."

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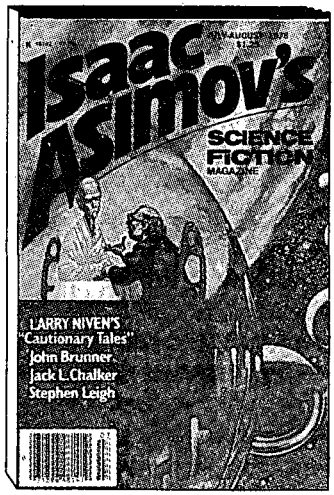

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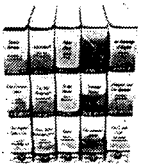

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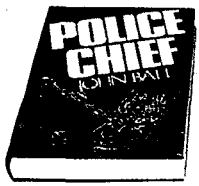

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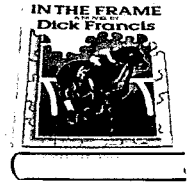

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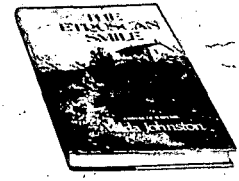

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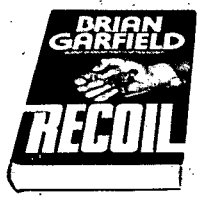

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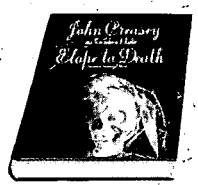

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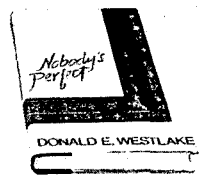

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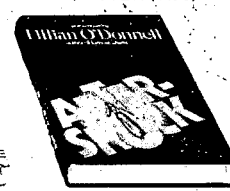

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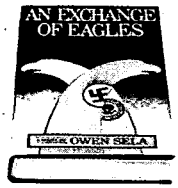

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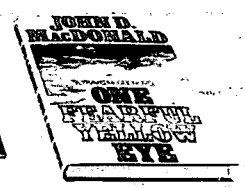

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