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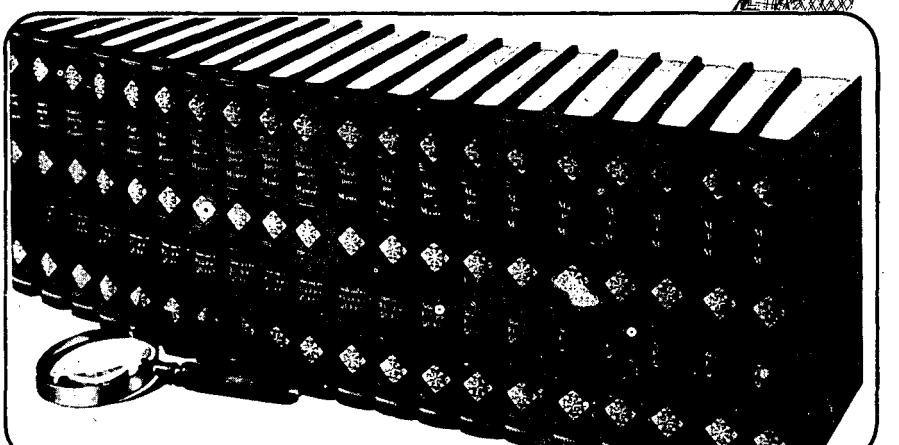

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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MOVIES AND TELEVISION

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 24, No. 11, Nov., 1979. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.00 a copy. Annual subscription $12.00 in the U.S.A. and possessions, $14.00 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017, (212) 557-9100. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2640, Greenwich, Ct.06835. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices.

ISSN: 0002-5224

November 1979

Dear Reader:

It's that time of year when the frost is on the punkin and the shadows grow longer with each passing day — a good time to snuggle under a warm quilt with a hot drink and some chilling stories.

A couple of small-time ripoff artists find a horrifying addition to their "Stolen Goods" in the story by Richard Deming. "A Funny Thing Happened" to William Bankier's professional comedians, but their forced mirth is easily distinguished from Ron Goulart's hero's "Nervous Laughter." Lest you be carried away with a fit of the giggles, I'd like to remind you that, like everyone else, Chick Kelly goes to the dentist, and finds it even more harrowing than most of us.

A. E. Housman called this season "the beautiful and death-struck," but strange things can happen at any time of year, as they do, for example, in Robert Edward Eckels' "Night to Remember." I hope you'll find this an issue to remember.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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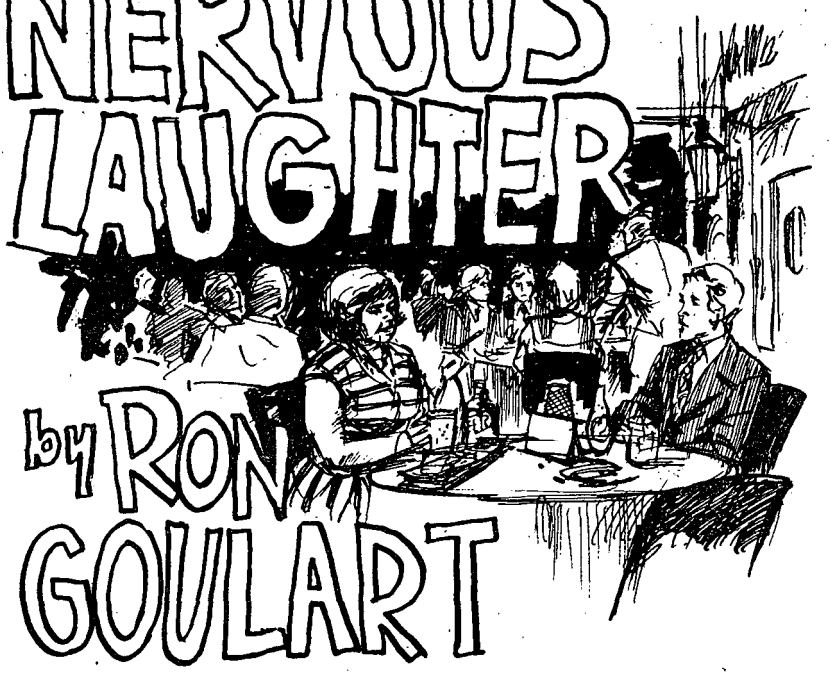
Rufe was losing confidence in his sense of humor . . .

NERVOUS LAUGHTER

by RON GOULART



It was a clear spring day and we were sitting around talking about coffins.

"Sure, they'll have to keep the lid shut," insisted Ty Banner after sampling his second martini. "When somebody shuffles off in such a messy way–"

"But undertakers nowadays are terrific," put in Heinz. "You can get run down by a steamroller and put through a baloney slicer and you'll still end up in your bier looking better than Robert Redford."

"They'll probably get somebody from the Impressive Features bullpen to fix up the head," suggested Zarley. "They've got some great retouch men–"

"C'mon." A frown was forming on Banner's handsome, slightly puffy face. "Let's be a little more respectful of the dead."

"Excuse it–it must be an allergic reaction," said Zarley as he massaged his cheekbones. "This time of year everything starts looking very macabre to me. They've been complaining about it up at *The New Yorker* of late."

"Nobody ever agrees about what's funny," said Heinz, glancing out at the peaceful Saugatuck River beyond the window. "Even with an obviously hilarious strip like my *Seaweed Sam* I get a letter now and then complaining about one of my gags."

This got us sidetracked into a debate on whether certain gags were innately funny. We're all of us professional cartoonists of one kind or another, all residing in various parts of Fairfield County, Connecticut. Every Monday we get together at the Inkwell Restaurant in Westport to talk shop and to complain about our editors, our wives, and what are kids are up to.

"The question of what's funny is at the root of Rufe Chaney's whole problem," said Wisebeck, "the basic cause of the closed coffin you guys've been talking about."

We all turned toward him. Wisebeck was new to our group, having moved into the area only a few months before. He wasn't a bad fellow, but he had a few strikes against him. He was, at thirty-three, a good ten years younger than any of us. His new newspaper strip, *Manny's Motel*, which Impressive Features, Inc., had launched early last year, already had an impressive list of over 300 client papers. And he had a big bushy bandit moustache.

"Hooey," countered Banner. "Rufe's tragedy is–"

"It all started, trust me," said Wisebeck, twisting one end of his moustache, "seven months ago when we got the new comics editor up at IFI."

"Debra LaViolet," said Zarley.

"If Debra LaViolet had agreed with Rufe as to what's funny," said Wisebeck, "he never would have gone ahead and plotted her murder."

Heinz gave him one of his skeptical looks, broad enough to be seen from the second balcony. "You have inside dope, I suppose?"

Nodding, Wisebeck said, "For a while Debra used to confide certain things in me. And, lately, because I'm a basically sympathetic sort and

work for the same syndicate, Rufe's been phoning me about his troubles."

"Do you know," asked Zarley, "what actually happened up there the other night?"

"Most of it," he replied. "And what I don't know for sure I can guess at."

Banner studied his martini olive. "Tell us," he invited. "But go easy on the ghoulish details."

Rufe Chaney's comic strip was never a smash success (began Wisebeck), but at its peak, a few years back, he made a comfortable $50,000 a year off it. Not bad for a strip whose protagonist was a chicken. IFI did pretty well with it, peddling *Dumb Cluck* to a shade over 200 papers. Ten years ago, when Rufe was confident the strip would hold on, he and his wife moved over from Long Island and bought that refurbished barn in New Milford. She started raising horses and Rufe turned into an almost fanatic jock. Not your typical gentleman cartoonist golfer, but a gung-ho physical fitness nut who–

"You have to be in darn good shape to play eighteen holes of golf, my boy," cut in Banner. "I bet you couldn't–"

"No," admitted Wisebeck. "Long-distance running is more my style."

"Ty thinks golf is even better for you than Wonder Bread," said Heinz.

Banner said, "Hey, why are you guys all ganging up on me?"

"Let's get back to the gruesome details," urged Zarley.

Rufe (continued Wisebeck) remodeled himself. He lost thirty pounds, went in for jogging, weight-lifting, and swimming. He quit smoking, cut down on his drinking. When he hit his fiftieth birthday last year he was in better shape than he'd been in since high school.

The day after that birthday Debra LaViolet called him in for his first lunch, what she liked to call an eat-and-think session.

Rufe had never met her before, and even advance descriptions from others and the sound of her buttery voice over the phone hadn't fully prepared him for his first glimpse. Debra had asked him to meet her at Roughneck's Steak House, around the corner from the syndicate's Lexington Avenue offices.

Rufe came striding in a little after one, very trim and tan, looking about as commanding as a middle-aged man of five-feet-five can. He had on his National Cartoonist Society blazer and a new paisley tie.

Debra was decked out in one of those striped sack dresses she went in for and jammed in a corner booth smoking a tiny cigar.

A lost Macy's float, thought Rufe, catching her wave. A circus tent full of elephants–

She had a pile of something in front of her. The rim of her beer glass was almost touching it. "Do you like *Tristram Shandy*?" she asked as he settled down opposite her.

Rufe was a dropout from the High School of Graphic Arts, so he wasn't sure if Tristram Shandy was the new anchorman on WPIX or the latest brand of gin. He shrugged with one shoulder. "How about you, Miss LaViolet?"

"Ms.," she corrected. "But why not make it Debra? Never call me Debbie, by the way."

"You brought some of my drawings along?"

Rufe was incredibly fastidious about his originals. A guy like Reisberson, who loves to work with his lapboard right smack in the middle of a goodly portion of his cavorting eight kids, quite often turns in a strip with peanut butter and jelly smeared in the margins. Not Rufe. He missed a deadline once redrawing an entire Sunday page because a fly had walked through the wet ink in one panel. Seeing his six most recent pristine *Dumb Cluck* dailies lying there unprotected and in danger of getting splashed and splotched unnerved him.

"You ought to read *Tristram Shandy*," she told him, "it's a funny book."

"A funny book? Who publishes it?" Rufe had an image of something called Tristram Shandy Comics until she clarified.

"Oh, I like the Modern Library edition, but the point is–signal the waiter, will you, Rufe?"

He didn't really want to take his eyes off the strips, but he didn't want to annoy his new editor either. So he did a very quick turn-and-beckon. "Any reason for having my latest batch of dailies here, Debra?"

"I wanted to go over them with you."

Rufe's stomach commenced feeling odd. "Oh, yes? Something wrong?"

"I'm going to let this set go, but– Oh, Hugo, another Germeshausen's ale, please, and something for Mr. Chaney."

"Yes, Miss LaViolet. Sir?"

"Perrier with a twist."

"Do you know Mr. Chaney's work, Hugo?"

"What field does he labor in, Miss LaViolet?"

"The same one I do," she told the red-coated waiter. "Mr. Chaney draws *Dumb Cluck*."

The waiter's broad pink face remained blank. Bowing, he went off toward the bar.

"I don't have a New York City paper," Rufe said into the silence at their table. "Now whenever I'm in Buffalo or Hartford I always get what amounts to a standing ovation when I go into any–"

"I'd hate like hell to have to go to Buffalo for my recognition," she said, exhaling smoke. "I'm going to pass this week through, Rufe, but we're going to have to work harder."

"We? You and me?"

"Basically there's nothing wrong with *Dumb Cluck*. A chicken–or a rooster actually–is a perfectly legitimate focal point for a humor strip. Although you might have picked a dog or a cat, since more people–"

"IFI already had a dog strip when I signed on back in 1959. A thing called *Bowser*."

"I'm not familiar with it," said Debra. "Basically I'm concerned with where Impressive Features is right now."

The waiter, who was nearly as immense as Debra, brought her second ale and placed the dewy bottle right on the edge of the top *Dumb Cluck* strip. Making a strangled sound, Rufe reached across for the bottle. "Watch it!"

"You have very good reflexes for a man your age," Debra said, setting the damp bottle elsewhere and blotting the drawing with her scarlet napkin.

"Fifty isn't exactly–" He got control of himself and concentrated on his Perrier for a few seconds. "You're hinting, Debra, that some of this week's gags aren't as funny as they ought to be?"

"I'm bluntly stating that all six of 'em, Monday through Saturday, aren't the least bit funny at all."

He sank in his chair. "Not funny?" His whole life had been devoted to being funny. He often told his wife that if he wasn't funny he wasn't anything. Before the strip he'd sold gags to *Collier's*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post*–all the major slicks. He'd won two NCS awards and a Katzie from the Newspaper Artists Guild. He was funny, he knew that. "Not funny how?"

"Not funny in that they don't make me laugh," she said, her face backing up her statement.

The butt of her tiny cigar was smoldering in the ashtray close to Rufe's side of the table. The smell of it was starting to annoy him, but he decided not to mention it right yet. He shifted in his chair, saying, "Can you give me an example of what you feel is wrong?"

"That's exactly why I brought these along, Rufe." She smacked the small pile of drawings with a damp palm. "Let's start with Monday's strip. I notice, by the bye, you're only eleven weeks ahead of deadline."

"My contract only calls for me to be nine weeks ahead."

"I like people who do a little more than they have to. Now to Exhibit A." She held the top *Dumb Cluck* daily toward him, dangling a plump finger down over it as a pointer. "In the first panel your rooster is sitting up in his bed. Have you thought of having him live in a chicken house?"

"No," admitted Rufe. "He's sort of a humanized chicken, Debra. You know–he wears clothes, lives in a suburban community, drives a car. Like a person."

"Almost no reason for his being a rooster then, is there?"

"People like to see birds and animals dressed up like people. Mickey Mouse. Donald Duck."

"Still, I wonder how many more papers we'd have if you didn't anthropomorphize Dumb Cluck," she mused. "Well, that's a problem we can tackle later–"

"Lots of the gags have to do with his job," Rufe pointed out. "Going to the office, commuting. If he's a real rooster, he can't commute."

"True, but he might be able to do funnier stuff than this. Now, he sits up in bed and we see a cat is yowling outside his window. Judging by the way you've tried to show the sky and moon, it's supposed to be late at night. Why doesn't the cat wear clothes?"

"It's a *real* cat." His grip on his glass was tightening. A little more pressure and he'd crack the damn thing. "See, even when you humanize your central animal characters, you can still–"

"Something to think about, though. Might be funnier–couldn't be less–if your cat's wearing a tiny little tuxedo and a jaunty top hat."

Rufe gave a noncommittal grunt.

"Let's see. Cluck throws his shoe at the cat, hollering, 'Aw, dry up!' The cat keeps making noise. Then there's a closeup of Cluck saying, 'Gee, maybe he's hungry. I never thought of that.' He gets sardines out of the refrigerator and–"

"Do you want to put little suits on the fish too?"

"–gives the sardines to the cat. He thinks he can sleep, but in the last panel we see a dozen cats are now howling under his bedroom window." She shoved the drawing to the bottom of the stack. "Why?"

"They want some sardines too."

"They think he's got some?"

"The first cat told them. You know–here's a soft touch."

"So the joke is that Cluck's good-samaritan gesture is rewarded by only more annoyance for him. We're dealing in irony–is that it?"

"Yeah. Irony."

"Not very funny, whatever it is."

He shrugged.

She picked up the next strip and displayed it to him. "Let's consider Tuesday," she said. "Cluck seems to have a dog with a long furry tail. This is a dog, isn't it?"

"A *real* dog, yes."

"The thing that bothers me most about this one, Rufe–are chickens really ticklish?"

Well, they went through the whole damn week at that lunch session. Rufe never could remember what he'd eaten, but it was there he came to the realization that this immense woman was trying to destroy his confidence in his once true and sure asset, his sense of humor. He concluded that if he and *Dumb Cluck* were going to survive, he'd have to get rid of her.

First he tried a subtle and cautious approach. Feigning casualness, he dropped in at the health club in Manhattan where old P. T. Dorneckey, the chairman of the board of the whole blasted Impressive Features syndicate, hung out most every afternoon. Dorneckey liked Rufe, always made it a point to shake his hand at all the company gatherings, and even asked him to inscribe a *Dumb Cluck* original to his oldest grandson back in 1967.

Rufe, wrapped in a shaggy white towel, pretended to be surprised to encounter the old guy in the steam room. "How're you, P.T.?"

"Fine as always, Rufe. You?"

Readjusting his towel, Rufe said, "How's your new comics editor doing? I hear rumors she's sort of rubbing some of the boys the wrong way–"

"Debbie's doing a tip-top job."

"Really? I heard her only newspaper experience comes from the time

she worked as a short-order cook in a Chicago greasy spoon frequented by reporters off the *Trib*."

"No, no–Debbie's worked in the communications field for years, Rufe. She edited *Teeniglamma* for four years over at Maximus Publications and doubled its circulation."

"That's a magazine?"

"I'm surprised you haven't heard of it. It reaches millions of young people, the sort of audience we'd like to add to *Dumb Cluck*," old Dorneckey said. "Say, have you thought about turning him into a real chicken? Might liven up your gags."

"Good idea, P.T."

She let the old man call her Debbie and she'd been able to sell herself and the notion that Rufe's strip was slipping. He nodded at the old syndicate head and slipped away into the mist.

For a while Rufe attempted to placate Debra LaViolet. He even checked a copy of *Tristram Shandy* out of the library. It didn't help.

She allowed two weeks of *Dumb Cluck* strips to go by, then bounced two dailies out of the next batch. Nobody'd ever done that to Rufe before. He'd gone through three editors up at IFI and in all that time only one strip had ever been rejected and that was because he'd put belly buttons on some of the hens.

He grew very anxious. I believe he even came into the Inkwell a few Mondays and showed the rejected strips around. They got laughs, though not big ones. He was getting scared that Debra might be right. He wasn't funny any longer. "If I'm not funny, I'm not anything," he'd say to his wife while she shoveled out the stables.

He started to slip behind on his deadlines because he'd taken to roughing out three or four gags for every one he would use. A week of strips would go in to the syndicate and Debra would accept them all. The next week she'd kill three. Rufe would have to sit up at his drawing board for twenty-four hours at a stretch to turn out strips to replace the rejected ones.

Even when she accepted the stuff, she'd phone him. Usually around seven or eight at night, his dinner hour. Debra loved to work late all by herself up at the syndicate offices.

"Rufe?"

"Yeah, Debra–what's wrong?"

"There's got to be something wrong for your editor to phone you?"

"So what isn't wrong?"

"Your strip for June fourteenth needs a little clarifying."

"How?" He began doodling knives and nooses on the memo pad next to the wall phone.

"Cluck meets his friend–what's the goat's name again?"

"William."

"Odd name for a goat."

"What exactly is bothering you about the gag?"

"You sound somewhat hostile, Rufe. Believe me, I'm not going out of my way to make it hard for you. What we all want is a better strip. I tell the salesmen you aren't deliberately trying to sabotage–"

"The salesmen!"

"Well, it is their job to take *Dumb Cluck* out on the road and sign up more papers for our paltry list."

"Two hundred isn't paltry, Debra."

"Ah, if we only *had* that many papers."

"I do have–"

"We won't argue until you see your next quarterly statement, Rufe. And anyway, I've assured the salesmen you and I are working on improving the gags and making them funny."

"The salesmen all like *Dumb Cluck*. At the last picnic I did a chalk talk and had them rolling in the–"

"Chalk isn't ink! Now then, here's Cluck and William the goat and apparently Cluck owes this goat money. Is that the premise?"

"Right. Ten bucks."

"But Dumb's fallen asleep under a sunlamp and has a tan. The goat thinks he can afford a vacation in Florida but can't pay the ten dollars. He punches him in the nose–the beak, rather. Am I following it so far?"

"Yeah, that's the joke."

"How does a rooster get a suntan?"

"A real rooster couldn't. But Dumb Cluck is a fantasy character, so he–"

"Did you know the editor of one of our biggest client papers in the South has a pet chicken?"

"I didn't, but it sounds likely."

"He's been complaining that Cluck doesn't behave like a real chicken. Chickens, after all, scratch a lot, dig for worms, swallow gravel. If we

can come up with some reality-based gags that everyday people can relate to, especially young people, then we're going to be able to hold on."

"Which paper is it where the guy owns a chicken?"

"You worry about improving the gags–I'll worry about the business end, Rufe. I think you can fix the strip and we won't have to bring a younger man in to take over. We'll let the sunburn gag go. 'Night."

Rufe didn't own *Dumb Cluck*–most of us don't own our features. And he had a clause in his contract that he could be dropped off his strip if his material didn't come up to an acceptable standard. Right now the standard was Debra LaViolet's, and he was growing more and more afraid he couldn't keep satisfying her. He loved that rooster of his. He'd been drawing it for twenty years. He wasn't going to give the strip up.

He cut out all his athletic stuff and concentrated on his gags. Rufe was a guy who never had to buy gags, but he started doing that now too. He solicited material from some of the top writers around the country.

"Give me realistic chicken gags," he'd request, "that'll appeal to a younger audience."

The first week he used outside material Debra rejected all six dailies.

Rufe got mad. Scared too–but basically mad.

He decided to go in for another lunch session with her.

Debra was stuffed into the same booth at Roughneck's, decked out in a candy-striped tent dress.

Pregnant barber pole, thought Rufe.

At first he believed the drawings on the checkered tablecloth were more of his. But then he realized, with a cold feeling inside his chest, that they were *Dumb Cluck* dailies drawn by someone else.

"What's that stuff?"

"Do you know Moogins? Incredibly handsome young man in the IFI art department. Twenty-four, with heavenly blue eyes."

"I haven't met him, but he sounds like a prize. Why's he messing with my strip?"

"This is just a notion he had."

"Why does he have a notion he's going to do *Dumb Cluck*?"

"All Moogins is doing is suggesting a fresh approach–one you can use, Rufe. I like to have the people who work around me come up with new ideas for our features." She handed the top strip across to him.

"Dumb Cluck's got hair."

"Since we've agreed he's a fantasy rooster, hair isn't ruled out."

"Long shaggy hair and a sequined suit. And what's this he's supposed to be holding under his arm?"

"A guitar, obviously."

"It doesn't look much like a guitar, and the perspective's off."

"Perspective isn't what sells papers. Fresh ideas are what all editors want. When they see Cluck as a rock singer they–"

"You want to change my rooster to a *rock singer?*"

"It's one of the notions P.T. and I are keen on," Debra told him. "We've got to do something to turn the strip around."

"Around? It's still one of IFI's best-selling–"

"You're down to less than a hundred papers, Rufe. We're getting cancellations right and–"

"Because you insisted on all those eating-worms gags, and the business with the eggs."

"I don't turn out your strip, you do. And I'm suggesting, very strongly, that you consider our ideas for improving the property before it's too late. Otherwise–"

"Otherwise what?"

"Otherwise we may have to bring Moogins in to do *Dumb Cluck* for a while."

Rufe slapped the strip in his hand. "This isn't funny," he said. "I know what's funny. If I'm not funny, I'm not anything. I know what's funny, I know what isn't. This isn't."

"We think it is," she said. "You decide whether you can work in this new format or not. It's up to you."

Rufe went home and brooded. What he decided to do was get rid of Debra LaViolet. All the other editors he'd worked with at IFI had thought he was funny as hell. The odds were in favor of the next editor's being of that mind too. If he kept on working with Debra he'd really start to have doubts about himself. When your whole life is built on a foundation of knowing what's funny and what isn't, you can't let anyone dynamite that foundation.

He made up his mind to kill her.

None of this did he confide in anyone. Not to me, not to his wife. But I've been able to guess most of it from what hints he did let drop.

One of the guys he used to play tennis with knew somebody in Bridgeport and that somebody put him in touch with a junk-shop proprietor who had guns for sale in his back room. Rufe bought an unregistered .45 automatic and a box of ammunition. He wouldn't need all that–only one clip.

Debra, as she'd often boasted to him, always worked late up in the IFI offices. She was usually there after everyone else was gone.

Rufe worked out a fairly simple plan, based on juggling time a little. He picked a Wednesday and told his wife he was going to make the rounds of the magazines again. He worked up a few cartoon roughs and actually went in to *The New Yorker, Cosmo,* and *Good Housekeeping* to see the cartoon editors. Then he had dinner with some of his fellow gag cartoonists and told them he was staying in town late to catch a new foreign film he was anxious to see. What he'd really done was sneak into the movie in the afternoon between calls. He was sure the near-sighted old lady who took the tickets wouldn't know when or if he'd been there.

He waited until the IFI building night watchman went off to the john, then popped inside the lobby and headed up the stairs. Debra's office was on the twenty-second floor, but he was still in fairly good physical shape and he reached his destination hardly breathing heavily at all.

The rear door on the editorial floor wasn't locked at night, he knew from previous visits. He used it, then stayed in the shadows of the large room. All the desks were empty, the lamps out.

Only one typewriter was clacking, across the room in one of the big private offices. The one with the best view—Debra's.

Rufe could see light and cigar smoke spilling out of the half-open door.

He was going to shoot her dead, leave the gun, and swipe her purse. It would be written off as just another Manhattan killing by a crazed junkie. Debra'd be gone, *Dumb Cluck* would be safe, and Rufe could start believing in his sense of humor again.

He eased across the big room, passing the silent computer terminals and the shrouded electric typewriters.

She was smacking away at her old portable, wearing a dark-brown sack dress.

World's biggest bran muffin, he thought, sliding the .45 out of his briefcase and clutching it in his gloved right hand.

"Rufe?" She'd sensed him standing in the doorway and her eyes went wide.

"That's right."

"I wanted to talk to you about–"

"Nope. I don't have to listen to you any more." He crossed her threshold.

She saw the gun and took the tiny cigar from between her lips. "What are you–?"

"I'm going to kill you, Debra," he explained. "Before I do, though, I'm going to tell you a few things. I wanted to be in this business ever since I was a little undernourished kid growing up in The Bronx. My father ran away when I was six and my mother, in spite of a game leg, supported me and my two brothers and my sister. Thank God I discovered the funny papers. You don't know what they meant to me, how thrilled I was at those damn images. I loved those images, those bright-colored bits of paper that could bring a tear or a laugh into a drab life such as mine. I yearned to be a part of that world, to be able to draw and make people laugh. I think every man has a mission in life and my mission is to use my God-given gift for humor to cheer up millions of depressed people. It was a wonderful thing to dream."

He hesitated. She was starting to make an odd sound.

"Listen, this is important, damn it. I worked, struggled, did the lowest kind of menial work. Nothing mattered so long as I could hone my talent. I'm usually a funny guy, but I want you to know my serious side now, to understand how important it is to me to know I'm funny. That if I'm not–I'm nothing. I usually don't open my heart, my innermost feelings, to anyone, but since you're going to–"

The sound was unmistakable now.

Debra was laughing, rocking in her metal chair, slapping at one of her enormous thighs. Little tears were forming at the corners of her eyes. "Wonderful, marvelous," she gasped. "You're finally being funny, Rufe! If you can start being this funny in the strip we'll really have something!"

He stopped pointing the gun at her. He suddenly realized he *didn't* know what was funny any longer.

He pressed the automatic to his temple and squeezed the trigger.

Having seen his share of James Bond movies, he knew what to do . . .

A twenty-story drop to concrete can be hazardous to one's health. But that was the prospect I faced unless I told Dumbo where the key was.

Dumbo wasn't his real name, but he reminded me of the cartoon elephant I remember from my youth–big ears, long nose, and a shape like a 747. Under different circumstances it would have been laughable.

"I'll count to ten," he croaked. "If you don't tell me by then, it's 'Hello, Main Street' from 250 feet."

I didn't bother to tell him that it was more like 220 feet and the street below was Central Avenue. It was a moot point, and I had more important things on my mind—like, did he know how to count to ten?

"All right," I whimpered. "Just put me down–gently, please."

He grinned through teeth that looked as if they had been capped by a bricklayer and set me down. His idea of gently was not the same as mine.

I picked myself up off the floor and rubbed my neck.

"O.K., Griffin," Dumbo said. "Where is it?"

I nodded in the direction of the dresser on the far side of the room. "Second drawer. There's a false bottom."

It's amazing how gullible some people can be. They rough you up a little, hang you out of a twentieth-story window, and think you'll tell them the truth just because they ask. Dumbo lumbered across the room and tore the drawer out of the dresser. He was in the process of dismantling it when I put his lights out with the brass ashtray from my night stand.

The key in question wasn't mine, and I had no idea why it was so important that people were willing to kill for it. If I had been smart, I would have given it to Dumbo and gone about my business, which is clerking in a department store–safe if humdrum. But the method by which I came into possession of the key and the ensuing circumstances had piqued my curiosity.

It happened four weeks ago. I was sitting at the bar in Clarence's Haven trying to make some headway with the gorgeous brunette on my left. I had used my repertoire of one-liners and was about to launch into the "my wife doesn't understand me" routine (I'm a bachelor), when the little man seated on my right nudged me in the ribs.

His face was red, he was breathing hard, and the look of urgency on his face made me forget for a moment that I was striking out with the brunette.

He didn't look at me, but his left hand slid quietly across the bar and dropped something in my lap. He lifted his glass with the other hand, took a long drink, then set the glass down on the bar and melted into the crowd.

I started to follow the man, but halfway across the room I ran into a mass of revelers and by the time I had untangled myself he had gone.

I made my way to the men's room and examined the paper the man had given me. It was folded in quarters. I unfolded it to find a key. It appeared to be a key to a rental locker, large, with a plastic jacket on the head containing red numerals–32. The paper had writing on it:

Urgent. Memorize and destroy.
Lloyd Bascomb, 133 Maclyn Drive.

Below this was more writing, nonsensical stuff that appeared as if it had been written by a disturbed child:

Rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief, doctor.

Either the man had forgotten the rest of the poem or he had left off where he did for some reason. Neither explanation appealed to me, but Mr. Bascomb, I hoped, would know what the message meant. There was more to the message, a statement I didn't care for in the least.

Blow Up State Department. Encourage, Promote Organized Terrorism.

I read the note again quickly, then tore it into pieces and flushed it down the toilet. The very act had a touch of adventure and intrigue about it. But at the moment the only emotion I felt was fear.

The key was obviously important, and the man who had given it to me must have been in imminent danger to entrust it to someone he didn't know. The thought made me nervous. I walked as inconspicuously as possible through the lounge and out the door. Like it or not, I seemed to be involved in some underground movement dedicated to the overthrow of the government. My first reaction was to get rid of the key and wash my hands of the whole mess, but the message on the scrap of paper could have many meanings. Perhaps the man who had given it to me was trying to warn the officials about a plot to blow up the State Department and the second part of the message was a smokescreen.

I started down the street toward my car. At the entrance to the alley next to the bar, I heard a scuffling noise and looked in time to see two figures run out the other end of the alley, leaving a third person lying face down on the ground.

Having seen my share of James Bond movies, I knew what to do, although every cell in my brain cried out to me to use a little restraint. I ran to the fallen man and turned him on his back. I wasn't really surprised to see he was the same man who had given me the key. He was still alive, but barely, and his lips moved as his glazed eyes stared up at me. I put my head close to his mouth.

"Please," he murmured. "Cover blown. Acronym."

His lips moved again, but no sound came out. He was dead.

I ran to my car and drove to the nearest telephone. Without identifying myself, I directed the police to the alley, hung up, and went home. Bascomb could wait until morning. I had had enough excitement for one night.

I didn't sleep well. When morning finally arrived I found myself exhausted from tossing and turning while I waited for someone to break down my door and threaten to kill me if I didn't give him the key. For the record, I would have given it to him.

It occurred to me over my second cup of coffee that no one knew I had the key. But eventually, when the hoods who'd killed my friend put two and two together, they'd be after me. No doubt they had seen me try to follow him in the bar. And later in the alley they had probably seen him speak to me. I decided to take the day off and pay a visit to Mr. Bascomb.

I was too late. I arrived at 133 Maclyn Drive in time to see the ambulance pull away from the house–slowly, without sirens. There could be only one explanation. Mr. Bascomb would not be counted in the 1980 census. I drove by, pretending mild interest, and returned home.

Once inside, with the door securely locked, I sat down and reached for a pen and paper. I wrote down the message as I remembered it. The cryptic note most likely contained the address or location of the box the key fitted. The State Department? I didn't believe so. A medical center? That could be what the man meant when he left off in the middle of the nursery rhyme. But I couldn't think of a medical center that had public lockers. I looked at the note again, formulating and rejecting theories as I scanned the contents. I drew one blank after another.

My thoughts returned to the dying man in the alley. What had he been trying to tell me? "Cover blown." Had his killers let it slip that they were on to Bascomb? Knowing that, he would have had to trust me with information that he had tried to hide in the note.

With that in mind, I remembered his final word. Acronym. I had heard the word before, and searched my memory for its definition. An acronym is a word that is made up of the first letters of a series of words, like NASA or UNESCO.

I took my pen and wrote down the first letter of each word of the nursery rhyme. RMPMBTD. I couldn't even pronounce it. Then I tried the second message. Eureka! With growing excitement, I wrote out the words BUS DEPOT.

I removed my shoe and pried off the heel. With a penknife I carved out a crude hole, inserted the key, and replaced the heel. Grabbing my coat, I crossed the room, unlocked the door, and opened it. Thus bringing myself face to face with Dumbo.

Now he lay prone over my broken dresser drawer and I had no desire to be around when he woke up. And he wasn't the only goon in town who wanted the key. Next time they would probably send someone who knew how to think.

I took a suitcase out of the closet and threw in a few necessary items. I decided against using the elevator. Huffing and puffing down twenty flights of stairs, I left the building by way of the back door and hailed a cab.

I asked to be taken to the bus depot, then sat back and mapped out my strategy. The bad guys evidently didn't know where the locker was, or else my contact wouldn't have taken the trouble to hide the location in code. They might have people stationed at the airport, train depot, and bus depot, as well as the YMCA and the bowling alleys, but I suspected they were counting on me to lead them to the spot. From time to time I looked out the rear window, but as far as I could tell we weren't being followed. Still, prudent man that I am, I stayed in the cab when we reached the depot.

"There's an extra five for you if you'll do me a favor," I told the cabbie.

"What is it?" he said with a note of suspicion.

I handed him the key. "Bring me the contents of the locker that this key fits."

The cabbie eyed the key, shifted his doubting gaze back to me, and frowned. "Why can't you do it?"

Still breathing hard from my trip down twenty flights of stairs I said, "I'm exhausted—or haven't you noticed?"

He wasn't convinced. "Is the stuff hot?"

I laughed. "No. Nothing like that. Look, I'm paying you well for just a few minutes' work."

He eyed me again and I held out a five-dollar bill. With a heavy sigh, he took the key and the money and disappeared into the depot.

He emerged a few minutes later with a box, threw it through the window, and climbed inside. I thanked him and gave him the address of a motel on the outskirts of town.

My luck seemed to be holding out. There were no suspicious-looking cars lurking in the next block. If anyone was following me they were being very clever about it. I paid the cabbie, tipped him another five, and ducked into the office.

I registered, using a phony name and address, and paid the dour-looking woman in cash.

"You ain't a hustler, are you?" she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"A hustler. Nobody pays cash except hustlers, pushers, and prostitutes."

"I'm a salesman," I said, which was the truth.

She pushed a lock of grey hair out of her eye, hesitated, then shrugged. "What the hell. Business is bad enough as it is. I don't care who you are as long as you don't make trouble." She tore out a receipt and threw it across the counter with a key. "Room Seventeen. Last door down the walk. First floor."

I pocketed the receipt and started down the corridor.

"Don't give me no trouble!" she called after me. "One peep out of you and I call the cops–understand?"

Stopping long enough to get the evening paper from the vending machine, I hurried to my room. It was a sleazy place with plastic drinking cups and a black-and-white TV set that required a quarter to operate. I set my suitcase in the doorless closet and sat on the bed. I held the box in my lap, toying with the string that held the lid on. Maybe it was a bomb. I looked around the room again, wondering if I wanted to meet my Maker in such a shabby environment.

But the package seemed much too light to be a bomb. With this reassuring thought, I untied the string with unsteady fingers and slowly lifted the lid–with my eyes shut, still half expecting an explosion.

With a sigh of relief I opened them and looked at the contents of the

box. Inside was a housedress, plain, inexpensive, the kind that could be found on the rack of any Goodwill store in the country. It was covered with garish flowers of every imaginable color and had atrocious brass-plated metal buttons that ran from the neck to the hem. The puffed sleeves were decorated with pink bows. It was a dressmaker's nightmare and, furthermore, it wasn't even new.

I held it up to the light, felt inside the hem and sleeves, and rummaged through the oversized pocket. I found nothing. I swore out loud and threw the dress on the bed—I had risked my life for *this*? At least two men were dead, and I was in danger of joining them, over a lousy housedress?

I picked up the newspaper and skimmed through it. The story of the murder of my friend in the alley was on page three. His name was Warren Simmons, who had been linked with dope rings around the country. So that was it. All this business with the key was so much hogwash, a desperate move by a marked man to throw his killers off the track.

But there were too many holes in that theory to give me satisfaction. Why had he been so secretive about giving me the key? And what did he mean when he said "Cover blown"? What about Bascomb? He was dead too. There had to be a connection. I flipped through the paper, finding what I wanted on the next page. Lloyd Bascomb had been killed when he discovered a burglar in the act of robbing his home, the story said. No occupation was listed and the details were suspiciously lacking. I didn't buy it. He must have known Simmons. To believe anything else was stretching even my wild imagination beyond its limit.

I searched for another explanation. Maybe Simmons was an undercover agent and Bascomb was his contact. That would explain some of the elements. Obviously his cover had been blown–along with his life. But what was the significance of the dress? Perhaps it would only mean something to Bascomb, a prearranged code to convey information.

Housedress. House. Rich man, poor man, beggarman. . .

"Oh, hell," I said out loud. I was tired. I fished a quarter out of my pocket and fed it to the TV. In a few minutes a fuzzy picture appeared. I sat back to watch, too tired to turn the knob. A children's show of some kind. I didn't care. At least it was company.

I dozed off. I don't know how long I slept, but I woke to the clapping of hands as a group of children on the TV set were singing, "Button, button, who's got the button?"

I sat up, suddenly wide awake. That was it! The buttons! Rich man, poor man–the childhood game you played by counting the buttons.

I picked up the dress and examined the buttons carefully. The silly dress had twelve of the things. I decided against investigating them further. I was pretty sure what I'd find, and it was safe in there where nobody else would find it unless I told them. And I planned to tell no one except the proper authorities.

I turned my thoughts to the problem of getting out of the motel. I wasn't eager to reveal myself to the outdoors. By now the killers had most likely picked up my trail and were waiting for me to come outside. I reached for the phone, but there was none.

"Damn," I muttered, cursing myself for my lack of discretion in choosing a hideout.

I went into the bathroom. The tiny window over the sink was too small to crawl through. The only way out was through the door I came in.

Cleverness has never been my long suit, but desperation can do funny things to a man. Hadn't the woman at the desk threatened to call the cops if I gave her any trouble? I hoped she was a woman of her word. I crossed the room and turned the TV set up full volume, hoping the next room was occupied.

It was. "Keep it down in there!" someone yelled.

"Go to hell!" I yelled back.

A few minutes later there was a pounding on my door. I opened it a crack. The man on the other side, bleary-eyed and plainly perturbed, threw me a look that would forge steel. "Turn that damn TV down!" he snarled.

"Don't you like kiddie shows?" I baited him.

"Listen, mister, I'm a truck driver–I've been driving all night and I have to get some sleep!"

"What do you expect for a twelve-dollar room—the Taj Mahal?"

"O.K., Mac—you asked for it." He started to push the door, but I slammed it shut and locked it. He pounded for a minute or two, then left. I sat on the bed and waited.

The police in this city are very prompt. In less than ten minutes they were there, accompanied by a very irate desk clerk. "Police! Open up!"

I unhooked the chain and opened the door. "Boy, am I glad to see you guys," I said.

At the police station I was booked for disturbing the peace. "I'm allowed one phone call," I reminded the desk sergeant. He glowered and pushed the phone across the desk.

"May I trouble you for a phone directory?"

Another glower. I thanked him politely and took the directory. Moments later I dialed a number.

"FBI," the voice said.

"Lloyd Bascomb," I said.

There was a moment's hesitation. "There's no one here by that name," came the cautious reply.

"Technically, you're correct," I said. "He's dead. But until this morning he was working for you. He was a contact for Warren Simmons, who was working with him on a drug case. I have some very important information that Simmons was trying to get to him before he was killed. If you want to see it you'd better send someone down to police headquarters. My name is Paul Griffin."

"I'll pass the information along," the man said, his voice betraying interest.

The FBI doesn't move as fast as the local police. It was several hours before my visitor arrived. I was lounging in my cell, which was cheerier and better furnished than the motel room, when a well dressed man with a briefcase approached. He was accompanied by the jailer brandishing a set of keys. The jailer selected one, inserted it in the door of my cell, and let the gentleman in.

"I'm Edward Madison, FBI," he said in a businesslike voice. "Are you the gentleman who phoned?"

I nodded. "I've gone to a lot of trouble to help you guys. I hope you appreciate it."

He didn't acknowledge my remark, but sat on the edge of the bunk stiffly. "I'm not sure you have anything we're interested in," he said. "But we make it a policy to check out all leads."

I shrugged. If he wanted to play charades that was all right with me. The fact that he was here was all the information I needed to convince me I had guessed correctly.

He studied me through his horn-rimmed glasses, waiting for me to speak. I stared back at him. He combed his moustache with his fingers and looked away. "What is this information you have, Mr. Griffin?"

"I don't have it with me and I'm not absolutely sure what it is. But two men are dead because of it, one of whom is your Mr. Bascomb."

"Where is the information?"

"In a housedress."

He looked up sharply, a smile playing on his otherwise grim lips. "Where is the housedress?"

I shrugged. "How should I know? These guys took everything but my underwear when they booked me."

"I see," he said, nodding. "Then it's here at police headquarters?"

"Yeah," I said. "Get me out of here and I'll show you."

"I'm not authorized to negotiate your release," Madison said. "But perhaps if you told me more about this housedress and why you feel I should be interested I could make arrangements."

I thought it over. It was only a theory, after all, but so far I'd been right. What did I have to lose? "I believe the fifth button on the dress is important to you."

"Why the fifth?"

I told him about the nursery rhyme. "The only reason I can see for Simmons to leave off with 'doctor' is to point to the fifth button."

"You didn't look?"

"Hell, no," I said. "I'm in enough trouble as it is. I didn't want to be charged with tampering with Federal property." I waited for a response, but there was none. "I'm willing to bet there's a roll of microfilm in that button, possibly containing the names of some big shots in the drug business around the country. You'd know better than I what Bascomb and Simmons were after."

Madison nodded thoughtfully and drummed on his briefcase with tapered fingers. Then he stood up and called to the jailer. "I would like to post bail for Mr. Griffin," he said.

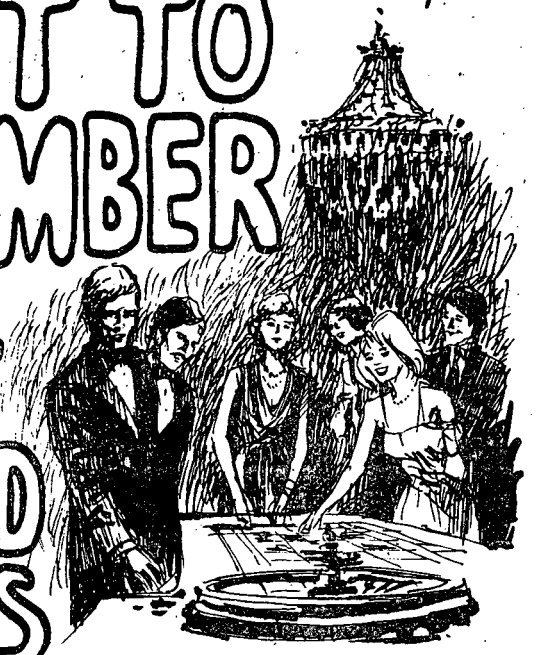
My hunch proved correct. I saw it in the papers the next morning. BIGGEST DRUG BUST OF THE CENTURY.

The FBI thanked me politely for my cooperation and even went so far as to get the charge of disturbing the peace dismissed. But I wasn't satisfied. I submitted an expense account covering cab fare and tips, lodging, the quarter for the TV set, and the cost of replacing one broken dresser drawer. It's been almost three weeks now and I've yet to be reimbursed. But when you're dealing with the government, these things take time.

After 40 years Duchamp deserved better than a curt dismissal . . .

NIGHT TO REMEMBER

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS



The bald-headed man in the dinner jacket was the only one playing. He stood in that strange angle formed where the round of the table housing the roulette wheel itself meets the straight of the numbered layout, highball glass clutched in one hand, watching as the croupier's assistant placed his bets for him. The assistant's fingers were long and nimble and he handled the chips with practiced dexterity. When he finished, he stepped smartly back and stood at semi-attention, waiting. The bald man

nodded. Without seeming to notice, the croupier flicked the ball out onto the steadily turning wheel.

It spun rapidly around the rim, then bounced along the row of cups housing the numbers and finally fell in.

"Vingt et neuf," the croupier intoned. *"Noir."* Twenty-nine. Black. The bald man had lost.

Dispassionately, the assistant raked the chips off the layout toward the house side, then looked up inquiringly. "Monsieur wishes to play again?"

The bald man took out his wallet. It was empty now and only a short while before it had held a seemingly endless supply of banknotes. He smiled ruefully. "If I could arrange credit–" he said.

"At the cashier's, M'sieu. Near the entrance." The croupier nodded to his assistant, who came around to lean a chair against the table where the bald man had been standing. "We will, of course, reserve your place until you return."

He continued to stand attentively until the man had moved off, then, signaling his assistant to return, began to arrange the chips the other had lost into neat stacks.

That broke the tension and the small crowd that had gathered to watch the action began to break up. I'd been standing near the front and now in the press I found myself facing a tall grey-haired man in impeccable evening dress with a long cadaverous face incongruously bisected by gold-rimmed pince-nez. He smiled faintly.

"He won't get it," he said.

"Pardon?"

"The credit. It will not be given." His English was practiced but undercut with heavy French intonations and resonances. At a guess I would have put him anywhere from his mid-fifties to his early seventies. "Those who have it," he went on, "do not ask if it can be given or where. Nor do they play roulette–except perhaps once, at the very start of the evening, to test the luck."

"You sound as if you know," I said. "Do you come here often?"

The grey-haired Frenchman smiled. "Not as often as I used to," he said. "I am Marcel Duchamp. Perhaps you have heard of me."

I shook my head. "No, I'm afraid not."

For a moment he looked actually affronted, but then the polite smile was back in place. "Ah," he said, "but then, of course, you are not a gambler." He cocked his head to one side and looked at me quizzically.

"But still you do watch. It interests you then at least a little?"

I smiled. "Let's say people interest me," I said. "I'm a writer."

"Ah," Duchamp said again, interest breaking out on his long face, "a writer. Like the Hemingway or the Faulkner perhaps?"

"Hardly that famous," I said.

Duchamp shrugged, a very Gallic movement of the shoulders. "Ah, but then perhaps someday. . . After all, who can predict when fame will strike? Or whom?" He smiled again. "If you have the time, let me give you a drink. I've never spoken to a writer, even a not-so-famous one. And I think you have never talked to a gambler–at least not one like Marcel Duchamp. We may both find it amusing and instructive."

I hesitated. This had all the earmarks of a classic come-on. Still, my wife would be down for dinner in half an hour at the most, and that, if nothing else, would keep me from getting too deeply involved. Besides, I admit it, I was intrigued. "All right," I said, "but let me buy."

Duchamp drew himself up. "I said I would *give* you a drink," he said. "Neither of us will pay."

The bar was set outside the entrance to the casino in the promenade that led to the hotel proper and across from the hall that served as a cabaret theater. There was a waitress, but the bartender himself came over to the table to serve us.

"M'sieu Duchamp," he said. "It's been too long since you were here. You shouldn't forget your friends."

Duchamp gave another example of his Gallic shrug. "One grows older," he said, "and then it's the friends who begin to forget."

"Not you, m'sieu. Just last week the croupiers were talking about you. There was a run on table four and someone said: Remember? And someone else said: Could it be?" The bartender smiled. "But, of course, it wasn't. Such a thing could never happen again."

"No," Duchamp said, "it couldn't." He ordered for both of us. When the drinks came he sat toying with his glass.

"I may have misled you," he said. "I said I was a gambler. But no matter. Whether I am now or not, for over forty years I was. But not like our bald friend out there. No, I stood on the other side of the table–a croupier: tall, elegant, unbending. Lord of the casino. And so might I still stand except–" He touched the rim of his pince-nez regretfully. "The eyes–they failed me.

"Oh, I realized what was happening. Who could not? But in my foolishness I thought no one would notice. Then one day Bergeron, the casino manager, called me into his office.

"He was seated behind his desk as usual but before I could approach he stopped me there by the door, holding up a card.

" 'What is it, Duchamp?' he said.

"I squinted. I craned my neck. But try as I might, the card remained a blur. Bergeron tossed it contemptuously onto his desk.

" 'Bah!' he said. 'Velez was right. You're blind as a bat.'

" 'Not blind, m'sieu,' I said. 'A small difficulty—'

"Bergeron shook his head. 'It won't do,' he said. 'The other night, Velez says, a player was sliding chips over onto winners after the call and you were straining too hard to read the wheel to notice.'

" 'Then he should have reported it,' I told him.

" 'To whom? To you? And what would you have done when you couldn't confirm it? No, he was right to come to me.' He shook his head again. 'I'm sorry, Duchamp, but I can't keep you on. Velez will take your place tonight.'

" 'M'sieu,' I pleaded, 'if you dismiss me like this, the word will spread that it was because I was caught stealing or cheating and I'll be ruined. At least let me stay till the end of the month as if I had given notice.'

"Bergeron hesitated. He's dead now. His heart, they say—but there was nothing wrong with it that day. 'You're ruined as a croupier no matter what you do,' he said, grumbling to make himself sound harder than he really was. 'But all right. You can work out your notice. But—' he added quickly '—on the ladies' table only. And Velez stays on as your eyes—because if there's the least bit of trouble—'

" 'There won't be, m'sieu,' I promised. The ladies' table was set slightly apart from the others and under brighter lights, to provide a place for tourists and other innocents to play at playing roulette. The minimum bet there was much less than that allowed at the other tables and generally was the largest placed.

"Under other circumstances I would have quit on the spot rather than accept such an insult. But I took it gladly and fled.

"Later that evening I sat alone in my room, brooding over my fate. I had savings, of course. I had known too well the inevitability of the odds ever to be a bettor. But the casino had been my life just the same. The wheel has no memory, though. In a few weeks I would be gone, and in

too short a time after that it would be as if I had never been. I swore to myself then and there that I would not allow that to happen. I deserved better after forty years. And I would have better.

"True to his word, Bergeron put it out that I had given notice and explained that my transfer to the ladies' table was solely to allow me more opportunity, because of the lesser pressure there, to instruct Velez in the fine points of the game. It was a subterfuge that fooled no one, least of all my assistant. Velez was a Spaniard. I have nothing against the Spanish, of course. They're fine people even if they're not French. But the young of all nations are arrogant. And young Spaniards—" Duchamp shrugged again, eloquently.

"In any case, I took to coming in earlier and earlier and even to setting up the table myself before any of the others had arrived. Velez dismissed it contemptuously as the futile attempt of a pathetic old man to curry favor and cling to a position he must inevitably lose to a younger and better man. But what I actually had in mind was something far different. And on the last night of my notice period I was ready.

"The evening began ordinarily enough. Play was desultory and I began to wonder if all my work had been for nothing after all. But then shortly after ten the first show at the cabaret theater let out and the tourists flocked over into the casino where the ladies' table and I were waiting.

"At first no one noticed what was happening. The bets were too scattered. But finally a young girl barely out of her teens–and newly married, from the freshness of her face and the attention she paid the small ring on her left hand–placed a ten-franc chip on red.

"I'm not sure how familiar you are with the rules of roulette, *monsieur l'auteur*, but you must know you may bet on a number, which is the riskier since the odds are highest against you; or on a color, which is the safer, since there are only two–red and black. If your number wins, you are paid thirty-five francs for every one you bet. On a winning color you merely double your money. But so it is also in life. The more you strive for, the more also you stand to lose. And whether it is wiser to play it safe or daringly must all too often be determined after the fact.

"But I digress. Be that as it may, it was on red now that the girl placed her chip.

" 'Why not black?' her husband said. He was a clean-cut boy, scarcely older than she. I liked them both, but I liked her even better when she shook her head.

" 'Oh, no,' she said. 'Black is such a dull color. Red is so much livelier. I *like* red.'

"I flicked the ball out. It spun, bounced, then dropped in. *'Dix-huit,'* I said. *'Rouge.'* The girl had won.

"Prudently, she picked up one of her ten-franc pieces but let the other lie. 'And now,' she said, laughing, 'I can't lose, because I have my bet back.'

"Her husband laughed too. I spun the ball. Again the girl won. And so in fact would she continue to do–as long as she left her bet where it was. Because what I had done, of course, over the past weeks was to carefully loosen the screws holding firm every other one of the wooden sides separating the numbered cups. Thus, the side would now give slightly when the ball hit against it–not enough to be noticed, but enough just the same–so that the ball's momentum magnified by the counter-movement of the wheel would send it skipping over into the next cup, making it–since red and black alternated around the wheel–virtually impossible for a black number to win.

"I stood as outwardly inperturbable as ever, but beneath the surface my whole soul was concentrated on willing the girl to let her bet ride.

"Whether by the force of my thought or her own inclination, she did–and by the seventh spin her small ten francs had grown by geometric proportion to a princely twelve hundred eighty. By then a small crowd had begun to gather around her.

" 'Impossible,' someone said, 'it can't go on.' There were calls for her to quit and others for her to ride her luck. The girl hesitated, then did the safe thing. She took back all but two hundred francs, which she left solidly on red. Then, clutching her husband's hand more tightly than ever, she leaned forward to watch breathlessly what would happen next.

"The crowd held its breath too as the ball spun, came to rest. *'Vingt et un,'* I said. *'Rouge.'*

"It was too much, and the excitement began to spill over to other tables as well. Tourists found themselves shouldered aside as the really heavy gamblers pressed forward to see this impossible thing for themselves. A fat man in a tuxedo, impatient not to be left out, dropped chips onto the table. Velez pushed them back.

" 'Ladies only,' he said.

"But the fat man was not to be denied. He thrust his chips into the hands of a woman next to him. 'You play. We'll split the winnings.'

"Overwhelmed, the woman dropped the whole stack onto the board. Velez was appalled.

" 'The size of the bet—' he began.

" 'There is only a minimum,' I put in loftily. 'There is no maximum.'

"That, of course, opened the floodgates. Bets poured in, and poor, overwhelmed Velez soon gave up trying to determine whether it was a man or a woman who placed them. And as the bets grew, so did the crowd. Play literally ceased everywhere except there at that one table. People too far back to see or hear passed their bets forward in relays and learned the results the same way.

"At some point as it went on, I became aware of Bergeron standing off to one side, frowning. He would have liked to close the table and end the madness, but he dared not. To do so would have been to invite a riot.

"But it was time to bring it to a close just the same, and in the clamor that followed the next winning call of red, I palmed the ball I had surreptitiously taped beneath the table before play began. This one was heavier and had a small magnet at its core. The polished brass of the rim wouldn't affect it, but the steel bracing beneath the cups would insure that where it fell it would stay.

"Even so red came up three times purely by chance before finally I could call: '*Trente et cinq*: *Noir*.'

"There was a sigh like a groan from the crowd. Reason had at last reasserted itself. The laws of chance had not suspended themselves after all. And Bergeron could now rush forward to close the table before the crowd could change its mind again.

" 'How many reds were there?' I said to Velez. 'Before the black?'

"He looked stunned. 'One hundred and five,' he said. 'Or perhaps one hundred six. I think the one before the girl started to play was red also. Or maybe more. I'm not sure. I'm not sure of anything any more.'

" 'No matter,' I said dismissively, and left. Bergeron gave me a hard look as I went by, but my gaze as I met his was serene.

"The boy and the girl were waiting for me just inside the entrance to the casino, the girl smiling shyly and the young man nervously holding out a packet of banknotes. 'They told us it is customary to tip the croupier when you win,' he said.

" 'So it is,' I agreed gravely. 'But all I will accept from you is a glass of wine.'

"I did it because I could see they were nice children–just the age a daughter or son of mine might have been if I had ever married and had children–and I didn't want their lives ruined. And so when we were seated over our wine, I said, 'You must think yourselves lucky now.'

"The young man grinned and squeezed his bride's hand. 'The real luck came a long time ago,' he said. 'When we met and fell in love.'

" 'Yes,' I said, 'and just as you will never find another girl as fine as your wife, or you, madame—' I almost said mademoiselle, she was so young— 'a man as good as your husband, so never will you have another streak of luck like tonight's. Take your money. Spend it wisely—or foolishly, if it pleases you. But don't try to repeat what happened tonight. It would only lead to sadness.' "

"Did they follow your advice?" I asked.

Duchamp shrugged. "Who can say? I never saw or heard of them around the casino again, so I like to think they did. It would be sad otherwise."

"And what about you?"

"Me? I too never gambled again. I became what you see–a man comfortable in his retirement, no longer in the game but still not forgotten either. Because, after all, who could forget Marcel Duchamp, the croupier who spun the ball the night red came up a hundred and five times in a row–more or less?" He smiled.

"But when they checked the wheel, the casino must have realized what you'd done. They certainly couldn't have let you get away with losing all that money for them."

Duchamp's smile broadened. "Ah, but did I?" he said. He took a coin from his pocket and held it up for me to see. "Tell me, my friend," he said, "if I were to toss this coin fifty times and each time it landed the head side was up, what would be the odds against my tossing heads a fifty-first time?"

"Oh, lord," I said, "I'd need a pencil and paper to figure that out."

Duchamp shook his head. "No, my friend, you would not. Because the odds are exactly what they were for the very first toss and each and every one in between–fifty-fifty in favor of either heads or tails. As I said, the wheel has no memory. Nor does the coin or the die or anything else that depends purely upon the laws of chance. It doesn't know what went before. But people do and as a result they tend to confuse the odds against the sequence with the odds against the event.

"And so, after the seventh spin that evening, everyone in the casino except that one young girl was betting on black, secure in the knowledge that it *had* to come up, and that each time it didn't the 'had to' became more imperative.

"The casino lost thousands–but it won millions. And would they willingly give that back?" He raised his glass.

"Your health, monsieur," he said. "And my night to remember."

It seemed like such an easy rip-off . . .

STOLEN GOODS

by RICHARD DEMING

It wasn't much of a twenty-fifth-birthday celebration. I was dead broke except for the rent money stashed in my room. Stan had a few bucks, but he had promised to take his mother out to dinner. All he was willing to blow for was a six-pack.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon, and we were just drifting around in Stan's station wagon, sipping beer. Stan had just turned off Lankershim Boulevard in North Hollywood onto a street called Archwood when he

suddenly pulled over to the curb and set his beer can on the floor between his feet.

I was slumped down with my knees against the dashboard. Figuring he had spotted a cop, I quickly set my beer on the floor too and sat up.

But it wasn't a cop that had caught his attention. It was a duplex house a little way down the block. A sign on the lawn in front of the farthest unit said FOR RENT and gave a realtor's address and telephone number. A U-Haul truck was backed into the driveway, and a man and a woman were just mounting the porch steps.

He was a burly, thick-shouldered man of about forty, wearing a short-sleeved sportshirt that exposed powerful forearms matted with black hair. She was a well built but rather substantial blonde of perhaps thirty-five in slacks and low-heeled shoes. Presumably they were the Stokeleys–a decorative redwood sign with that name printed on it hung just below the porch roof in front of the door. As we watched she preceded him through the open front door.

Then I saw what had attracted Stan's attention. A console television set stood on the grass at the bottom of the porch steps. Apparently the couple had carried it from the house and set it down instead of loading it onto the truck, then reentered the house for some reason.

"What do you think, Jerry?" Stan asked.

I looked at him. "About what?"

"Think we could rip it off before they come out again?"

"Are you nuts?" I inquired. "Suppose they caught our license number?"

"It's too late anyway," he said ruefully. "Here they come."

The man was backing through the front door, carrying one end of a sofa. The woman had the other end. They carried it down the steps and slid it onto the truck, then lifted the television set on after it. Apparently they had decided after they got the TV set outside that the sofa should go on first.

As the man raised and latched the truck tailgate, the woman went back up the steps to close and lock the front door. Through the barren windows we could see there was still some furniture inside.

I said, "They must not be moving a distance. It looks like they plan to make more than one trip."

We watched as the woman came back down the steps and both she and the man climbed into the truck cab, the man behind the wheel. After the truck had driven off, Stan examined the nearer unit of the duplex

thoughtfully. The front drapes were open and no one could be seen inside.

"It looks like their neighbors are out," he commented.

"So?"

Instead of answering he climbed out, walked up the sidewalk to the duplex, and rang the upstairs bell. After waiting a few moments he returned to the car.

"Nobody home," he said. "Do you think there's an alley behind the place?"

"Why don't you drive around and see?" I suggested.

There was an alley, and the backyard of the duplex was surrounded by a six-foot-high redwood fence that the neighbors couldn't see over.

Stan parked so that the rear of the station wagon was just beyond the gate. He opened the rear end before we went through the gate. I went up the back-porch steps first. I examined the neighbor's back door, and made a face when I saw it had one of those fancy deadbolt locks that don't work by spring action but have to be locked with a key.

The other one was a simple spring lock. It was unlikely anyone was inside or the woman wouldn't have locked the front door–but just to be safe I pounded on the door.

When no one answered I tried the knob. The door was locked but spring locks are no problem. It took me about fifteen seconds to push the bolt open by shoving a plastic credit card into the slit between the door and the jamb.

The door led into the kitchen. A quick glance around told us there was nothing of interest there. Off the kitchen was a dining room devoid of furniture. A pair of bedrooms off a central hallway were empty too. The only room still containing furniture was the front room, and it contained only three items–an overstuffed chair, a spinet, and a combination AM-FM radio, tape-and-record player.

The latter was a beaut. Hi-fi is my hobby, and I've checked out every stereo combo on the market. This one, I knew, retailed for about $1,500 without the speakers.

Glancing around, I noted spots in the opposite corners of the room at ceiling level where the wall paint was lighter than that surrounding it. Pointing out the spots, I said ruefully, "The speakers were there. They've already moved them."

"You can buy speakers anywhere," Stan said. "Is it a good set?"

"About fifteen hundred clams, as is."

Stan emitted a small whistle. "That means Spooky would lay out a hundred and fifty."

I had been thinking in terms of replacing the hi-fi set in my room, but that was only an idle dream. I needed the seventy-five bucks that would be my share a lot more than I needed a better hi-fi. I knew we would have to fence it. Sighing, I stooped to grab one end and told Stan to get the other end.

It was heavier than I'd expected. We're both pretty sizeable guys. At six-feet-four but only 150 pounds, I was pretty strung out, but I was strong as an ox. And Stan, who was thirty-five pounds heavier than me, didn't have an ounce of fat on him. We had to set the cabinet down to rest twice en route to the back gate though. It must have weighed two hundred pounds.

We finally got it loaded into the back of the station wagon. Stan closed up the rear end as I was shutting the gate. He slid under the wheel and I climbed in the other side.

As we drove off, I lifted my beer can from the floor and took a slug from it. Stan lifted his too and drained it.

I said, "How about that spinet?"

Stan just looked at me without answering. It was a dumb question. The spinet would never have fit into the station wagon, even if we'd left the hi-fi behind.

We drove straight to the Jerry Ritter Service Station off San Fernando Road. The station bore my name because I owned it, and that's why I was broke. I not only couldn't make a living from it, I couldn't sell it. It had been closed and up for sale for six months. In the meantime I had squeezed a few dollars out of it by selling off as much of the equipment and as many of the tools as I could. I had also sold my car, and that income, supplemented by whatever Stan and I managed to rip off, was all that kept me going.

Stan and I used the closed station for temporary storage of our stolen goods. We never left anything there very long, though, because in that neighborhood there was too much danger of it being re-stolen. Despite the boards over the front windows and the protective wire mesh over ti. . smaller ones, there had been several attempted break-ins—none so far successful, probably because they'd been by kids instead of pros.

Stan backed the station wagon up to the service-garage door. We got

out and I went to get the key from where it hung on a hook up inside the mouth of the drainpipe, then he opened the back of the station wagon while I unlocked and raised the sliding metal door.

We carried the set over to the wall where the single live electrical outlet was. The utilities had been shut off since I closed the place, but I'd tapped one of the circuits of the office building next door to run a line to that outlet so we could test the appliances we ripped off.

When we had set it down, I said, "Let's run over and pick up my speakers so we can see how it plays."

Glancing at his wristwatch, Stan said, "I can run you over and back but I won't be able to stick around. I told Mom to be ready by five."

At twenty-four, Stan still lived with and sponged off his widowed mother, but in a lot of ways he was good to her–like never keeping her waiting, for instance.

"O.K., I can handle it alone," I told him.

My rooming house was on Cypress Avenue, only about four blocks from the service station. My room was on the second floor. I stuck an eight-track tape in my hip pocket and picked out an LP record. I unplugged my speakers and each of us started downstairs with one.

My landlady's behemoth figure was blocking the foot of the stairs. Her hands were on her hips–a storm signal.

Coming to a halt, I said politely, "Yes, Mrs. Sull?"

"Moving, Mr. Ritter?" she inquired.

"No."

She examined both speakers. "Perhaps you're planning to pawn those to pay your rent—which is due on Monday, in case you've forgotten."

I shook my head. "I haven't forgotten. I'll have it for you."

"Well, now, that *will* be a pleasant change," she said. "This time you won't be requesting a few days' grace?"

Since she had made it clear at the end of the previous month that grace would no longer be extended–and my room lock would be changed on the second of the month if my rent wasn't paid on the first–I took that as a rhetorical question. "You'll be paid on time," I assured her. "May we get by, please?"

She moved aside like the opening of a massive door. As we went by she said ominously, "Good afternoon, Mr. Turner."

Stan, who has always been terrified of the woman, muttered something inaudible.

As we loaded the speakers into the station wagon he asked me, "How old is Mrs. Sull?"

"I don't know. Not as old as she looks. Forty-five, maybe."

"That's not too old," he said. "I know how you could get her off your back about the rent permanently."

"How?"

"Marry her."

When I stopped laughing, I climbed into the car.

We got back to the station and Stan helped me unload the speakers. Then he looked at his watch again and said he had to go.

"O.K.," I told him. "You going to contact Spooky?"

"After dinner. That won't be too late, we should be home by seven. I'm just taking Mom to a Mexican-food joint."

"Give me a ring when you get home, huh?" I said.

"Sure."

He went out and pulled the sliding door closed behind him. A moment later I heard him drive off.

With the door closed the lighting in the service garage was kind of dim because the windows were dirty and the wire mesh over them further cut the light. But I could see well enough to operate. I attached the speakers, plugged in the set, and lifted off the lid. As it was set for AM radio, I left it there and switched it on.

When a few seconds passed with no sound I turned up the volume control and moved the tuning dial. Still nothing happened. I switched to FM and drew a blank. I had no more success when I switched to Phono and to Tape.

Unplugging the set, I pulled it away from the wall and plugged in the work lamp I kept there. Since the lamp worked I knew the trouble wasn't in the outlet.

The tool rack on the wall still contained a few tools–mainly screwdrivers and pliers. With a Phillips screwdriver I took out the dozen screws holding the back in place and lifted it off.

I meant to lean the back against the wall, but it slipped from my hands and fell flat on the floor when I saw what was in the cabinet.

There were no works in it.

Instead there was a dead body!

The corpse was of a man about fifty, with a gaunt face and red hair

peppered with grey. He was dressed in brown slacks and a blue sportshirt. He was rather skinny, and I guessed him to be about six feet tall, though his height was difficult to judge because of the way he was folded into his improvised coffin. The cabinet was only about four feet long by three high, and about the top eight inches was taken up by the turntable and the controls. The works of this particular model were set in a metal framework that could be removed for repair work simply by loosening four screws and unplugging two wires. Someone had done that, but the space left was only about four feet by a foot and a half by a little less than two and a half feet. The body was on its back with the knees crammed back against the chest and the feet jammed against the top so that the toes pointed straight forward.

The cause of death was apparent. There was a small, purple-ringed hole in the center of the forehead that looked as though it had been made by a very small-caliber slug, perhaps a twenty-two.

I screwed the back of the console on again and shoved the set against the wall. I left the speakers there–four blocks was too far to walk with one under each arm–but took my tape and record. I unplugged the work lamp, raised the sliding door enough to duck under it, locked up, and put the key back inside the drainpipe.

It was five-thirty when I got back to my room, which I managed to do without encountering Mrs. Sull. After replacing the tape and the LP record, I went downstairs to call Stan from the pay phone in the lower hall. There was no answer. Obviously he and his mother had already left.

Mrs. Sull called her rooms "light-housekeeping apartments," which meant they were equipped with small refrigerators, hot plates, and a few dishes and pans. I had some canned soup and a cold meat sandwich, then tried phoning Stan again. Still no answer. It was still only about six.

I couldn't face the prospect of sitting alone in my room for a full hour waiting for Stan to call, so after some soul searching I took five dollars of the rent money hidden beneath the newspaper liner in my shirt drawer and walked to the nearest liquor store. I decided that if worse came to worst I could always take Stan's advice and propose to Mrs. Sull—but there was no way I could survive the evening without a drink.

There was a cheap brand of bourbon on sale for $3.99 a fifth.

When I got back to the house I tried phoning Stan again before going upstairs but there was still no answer.

Up in my room I had a couple of jolts from the bottle, just enough to

settle my nerves. At seven I went downstairs to phone Stan. This time Mrs. Turner answered.

When I asked for Stan, she said, "He's out for the evening. Is this Jerry?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"I think he's headed for your place. We only got home about two minutes ago, and he went right out again."

"O.K.," I said. "Thanks."

It wasn't more than a five-minute drive from Stan's house to the rooming house, but it was forty-five minutes before he showed up. By then the bottle was half empty.

"Where the devil have you been?" I asked as I slid in next to him in the station wagon.

He gave me a curious look. "Are you bombed?"

"I had a few jolts," I confessed. "I needed them. Get going."

He shifted into drive. As he pulled away from the curb he said, "I've got something that'll cheer you up."

Dipping into his jacket pocket, he brought out some folded bills and passed them to me–three twenties, a ten, and a five.

"Your share of the hundred and a half," he said.

"Not from Spooky for the combo set?"

"Uh-huh."

"Since when does he pay off before delivery?"

"It's delivered. I went by the junk yard and happened to find Spooky there, so he followed me to the station in his pickup."

I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck. Spooky Lindeman had been known to break arms for being dealt bummers. Charging him a hundred and fifty dollars for a corpse was likely to put him in a mood to break necks.

"Oh, no!" I said. "We've got to get that set back!"

Stan gave me a look of surprise faintly tinged with alarm. "Doesn't it work?"

"It doesn't even have any guts."

Now he looked puzzled. "It didn't feel empty."

"It isn't. It has a corpse in it with a bullet through the head."

Stan drove right through a red light. Horns blared as cars coming from both directions took evasive action. He pulled over to the curb and stopped.

"Say that again," he requested.

I repeated what I had said and described the body.

Eventually he said, "You think that man and woman with the U-Haul killed him?" I nodded. "But why stuff him in a hi-fi cabinet? Why not in a trunk or something?"

"I've been working on that ever since I found him," I said. "I figure it wasn't a planned murder, but a spur-of-the-moment thing, and they'd already moved everything else they could put him in when it happened. They couldn't just carry him out to the truck in broad daylight, so they had the bright idea of taking the works out of the hi-fi and hiding him in it until they could decide how to dispose of him."

Stan nodded. "But what did they do with the guts?"

"Just loaded them onto the truck, I imagine."

"Then the insides are probably over at their new house, right?"

"I guess so."

Stan shifted into gear and pulled away from the curb.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To get those guts so we can stick them back in the set."

I disagreed. "The first problem is to get rid of that body. Spooky will kill us if he finds it in there."

"He'll kill us if he finds the cabinet empty," Stan said. "So there's no point in taking the body out until we have the works to put in."

He was right, but there was another factor. I said, "How are we going to get the guts when we don't know where those people moved to?"

"We're going to find out where."

He took the Hollywood Freeway to Lankershim Boulevard, drove north on Lankershim to Archwood, and parked in front of the duplex. By now it was a quarter after eight, but because of daylight saving time it was still light. Through the bare front windows of the unit with the FOR RENT sign in front of it, we could see that the front room was now empty.

A car was parked in the driveway belonging to the other unit, and we could see a man sitting in the front room reading a newspaper.

"You come with me for moral support," Stan said, "but let me do the talking. Your tongue is too thick."

We both got out and I followed him along the walk to the front porch. The redwood sign reading THE STOKELEYS was gone, but a card that remained beneath the doorbell read DON AND EVE STOKELEY. Stan rang the doorbell.

"What are you doing?" I said. "There's nobody here!"

"It's for the benefit of the neighbors," he explained. "Keep your knickers on."

He peered inside through the front window, shrugged, and crossed over to the door of the other unit. I followed him.

A plump, middle-aged woman answered Stan's ring. Beyond her we could see the man reading the paper. He was about the same age as the woman and equally plump.

Even if I hadn't been a little bombed I would have let Stan do the talking–he's a born con man. With his most charming smile he said, "Excuse me, ma'am. We're looking for the Stokeleys, but it looks like they've moved."

"Yes," the woman said, "just today."

Stan let a rueful expression form on his face. "My mother sent me over with twenty bucks she owes Mrs. Stokeley. Did they move out of town?"

"Oh, no, just over to Benedict Canyon Drive. They bought a home. Wait a minute and I'll get you the address."

She went away, leaving the door open. The man folded his paper, got up, and came over to the door.

"You fellows friends of the Stokeleys?" he asked.

"She's a friend of my mother," Stan said. "I barely know her–they became friends after I got married and moved away from home. I only met her once, as a matter of fact. She's a blonde, isn't she? Kind of big but good-looking?"

He nodded. "That's Eve."

"And he's a big heavy guy with hairy arms?"

He shook his head. "That's Bert Pinter, who works for Don. Don Stokeley is a painting contractor, you know. I guess he's doing pretty good. They bought a beautiful house. I'm not surprised you took Bert for Eve's husband–he was over there a lot. Matter of fact he was helping them move today. Don's kind of tall and skinny, has red hair, turning grey."

The woman came back carrving an address book and she read off an address on Benedict Canyon Drive.

Stan repeated it and thanked her.

Back in the car I said, "You're pretty smooth."

"I'm proud of you too," he said. "For keeping your mouth shut. Was it her husband they bumped off?"

"Yeah," I said. "Probably the old triangle. Maybe they killed poor Don because he caught them in a hot embrace."

The house on Benedict Canyon Drive was a one-story green stucco home with a front stoop that was merely a six-inch-thick concrete slab, so the front door was only that much above ground level. Benedict Canyon Drive is hilly and curvy, and the house was situated on a curve at the bottom of a hill.

There was no parking on the side of the street where the house was, so Stan drove past it, turned around in a driveway, and drove past it again to park on the other side. Because of the sharp curve, there was no parking immediately before the curve on that side either, so that he had to park on the crest of the hill a good fifty yards beyond the house.

Because of the way the road curved we had a perfect view of the house from that point. When we swiveled in our seats to look back at it, it occurred to me that Mrs. Stokeley would be wise to build a brick wall along the front. If a car ever missed that curve it would plough right through her front door.

The U-Haul truck was parked in the driveway running alongside the right side of the house. A Volkswagen was parked behind it. Beyond the house, at the far end of the driveway, was a garage with the door closed.

It was just beginning to get dark, and the lights in the house were on. With no drapes or curtains on the windows we could see the big blonde woman–Mrs. Stokeley– and Bert Pinter walking around inside. We were too far away to make out what they were doing, but I got an impression of restlessness.

Apparently Stan got the same impression because he said, "I imagine they're kind of worried about what happened to that corpse."

"They must be going nuts."

"You think maybe they stored those works in the garage?"

"If they didn't, we've got a problem," I said. "Because then we'll have to try the house and I doubt if those two plan to do any sleeping tonight."

Stan glanced up and down both sides of the street. Halfway down the hill on the other side two men were conversing on a lawn. A little farther down on our side a teenaged couple sat on some porch steps. That added up to a lot of witnesses. Stan said, "I guess we'd better wait until it's good and dark before we check out that garage."

"Uh-huh. But we'd better not wait here."

Nodding agreement, Stan pulled away. "About eleven, you think?"

I nodded. "We can come back then to check out the setup. If people are still up and around we'll just drive on by and try again at midnight. We've got all night."

"All weekend," Stan said. "Spooky won't be going down to the junkyard on Sunday."

"I'd as soon get it done tonight," I told him. "I'm not going to be able to sleep until this is taken care of."

Where Benedict Canyon Drive runs into Woodman Avenue, Stan kept on it to the Ventura Freeway and took an eastbound ramp onto it.

"What do you want to do until eleven?" he asked.

"We could kill some time by picking up my speakers and taking them home."

"O.K. Incidentally, Spooky said to offer you another fifty for those."

"Big deal," I said. "They cost me a hundred and twenty-five."

By the time we got to the service station it was quite dark. Stan parked facing the sliding door and left his headlights on. We both got out and I got the key from the drainpipe and unlocked the door. We each picked up a speaker and stowed it in the station wagon.

"We'd better pick up whatever tools we'll need to put the guts back into that cabinet," Stan said.

I went over to the rack on the wall and got a Phillips screwdriver, a small standard screwdriver, and a pair of pliers.

"Another thing," Stan said. "There's an eight-foot chain-link fence around the junkyard. Do you think you can pick the lock on the gate?"

"We'll climb over it," I said.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Carrying the guts to the set on the way in, and a corpse on the way out?"

While I was considering this, my gaze fell on the tow rope hanging from a hook in the corner.

"Problem solved," I announced.

I took the tow rope and put it and the tools on the floor of the middle seat of the station wagon. When I turned around Stan was still standing in the service garage, staring at something on the floor.

I went back to see what he was looking at. It was the wheeled creeper I used to use for sliding beneath cars.

"That would come in handy to move the body," he said.

The creeper was longer than most, because I'd built it myself to ac-

commodate my six-foot-four frame. It was about five feet long, and I'd nailed an old roller skate to each corner, so it had a total of sixteen wheels instead of the usual four. "Let's take it," I said, and stooped to grab one end.

It was a little after nine when we got the speakers back to my room. After plugging them in, I put on an Aretha Franklin tape and turned the volume low.

"You got any more of whatever it was you were drinking?" Stan asked.

"Sure, but I'm still a little bombed."

"Well, I'm not," he told me. "Don't be such a cheapskate."

I got out the bottle and made Stan a stiff highball, then decided to have a weak one myself.

I kept mixing them strong for Stan and weak for myself and by ten o'clock I had fully recovered my rosy glow and Stan had caught up with me. Half an hour later he blearily studied his watch and said, "Let's have a nightcap and split." There was only about a half inch of whisky left in the bottle. That finished it.

When we got back to Benedict Canyon Drive no one was outdoors and most of the houses were dark, but the green stucco was still ablaze with light.

Stan parked in the same spot as before. In case we had to take off in a hurry he opened the back of the station wagon, and in case there was a padlock on the garage he lifted out a tire iron.

At the bottom of the hill we saw Bert Pinter and Eve Stokeley talking in the living room of the green house. Her face was pale, her hair was sticking out in all directions as though she had been running her fingers through it, and she looked like a nervous wreck.

We turned silently into the driveway, past the Volkswagen and the U-Haul to the garage.

There was a padlock on the garage, but it was a cheap one. Stan gave it one muffled crack with the tire iron and it popped open.

The garage door was the kind that swings up overhead and is held there by tension springs. The springs groaned loudly when we raised it. We stood still, listening and looking toward the house for several seconds, but no one appeared to investigate.

The moon was bright enough so that we could see into the garage

without needing a flashlight. It was a double garage, one side occupied by a Ford sedan. I assumed that was the Stokeleys' car and that the Volkswagen in the driveway was Bert Pinter's.

Against the wall on the other side of the garage was a welcome sight–the metal framework containing the innards of the hi-fi combo.

We each took one end and carried it out, setting it down in the driveway. It wasn't particularly heavy, probably no more than forty pounds. Remembering how surprised I had been at the weight of the set when we ripped it off, I wondered now why I hadn't suspected something then.

Stan tried to lower the garage door carefully, but the springs groaned just as loudly as before. Apparently this time Pinter was in the kitchen and heard it, because as we picked up the metal framework and started past the U-Haul truck—me in front with my hands behind me—a floodlight over the garage door suddenly bathed us in a bright glare. A moment later we heard the back door open and a deep masculine voice called, "Who's out there?"

We ducked out around behind the truck and heard the garage door springs groan again as the door was raised. Then there was a startled exclamation.

"Let's split!" I whispered.

We took off with the framework at a loping run. We were across the street and a quarter of the way up the hill before the same voice roared from the entrance to the driveway, "Come back here, you thieves!"

All that did was increase our speed. He took out after us, but we had too much of a lead on him. He was only halfway up the hill when we heaved our prize onto the creeper in the back of the station wagon. Stan tossed the tire iron in after it, then scurried to the wheel. I slammed the lower part of the back door shut, leaving the upper part still raised, and ran to jump in next to him.

He had the engine started by the time I got in and took off without lights.

Spooky Lindeman's junkyard was on the edge of Old Chinatown, in a district where there was nothing but small businesses. They were all closed at this time of night, but the main gate to the junkyard faced a street on which there was occasional traffic even this late at night. There was a rear gate giving onto an alley. As we drove into the alley I said, "Pull over as close to the gate as you can get."

Cutting the lights, Stan parked within a foot of the gate. Within moments we had some company. Arab, the big German shepherd Spooky turns loose in the junkyard at night to devour burglars, came bounding over to the fence, showing his fangs and snarling.

Arab's defect as a night watchman is that he remembers daytime visitors to the junkyard or he loves being called by name. When Stan said, "Shut up, Arab," he instantly stopped snarling and began to wag his tail.

I got the tools from the car, put them in my pockets, and coiled the tow rope around my shoulder. Stan and I lifted the hi-fi innards and the creeper out onto the ground, closed the upper part of the rear door, and set both items back up onto the still-open lower half of the door. I climbed from there onto the car's roof and Stan handed the metal framework and the creeper up to me.

As I set the framework down, I noted with gratification that Bert Pinter had put the screws in a plastic sandwich bag and taped the bag to the frame.

The top of the junkyard gate extended only about three feet above the roof of the car. As Stan was climbing up to join me I tied one end of the tow rope to the gate's top bar and tossed the other end over inside the yard. Then I went over the fence and let myself down hand over hand.

The moment I reached the ground Arab put his oversized paws in the center of my chest and tried to lick my face. Pushing him away, I said, "Down, Arab!"

He got down but he continued to nudge my legs with his nose and wag his tail all the time Stan was handing me down the hi-fi innards and the creeper.

When Stan climbed down we set the metal framework on the creeper, picked up the creeper, and, carried it past the jumble of wrecked automobiles, piles of pipe, and other junk to the building in the center of the junkyard. There was no point in trying to roll the creeper, the ground was so full of embedded stones and potholes.

What Spooky called the "warehouse" was a large square building of cinder blocks that housed his office and a storeroom for items that had to be kept out of the weather. We set the creeper down in front of the office door.

Both Stan and I were fairly good with simple locks, but people as distrustful as Spooky Lindeman don't use simple locks. After examining the one on the office door we agreed there was no undetectable way we

were going to be able to get into the building. I picked up a large rock and bashed out the glass panel in the door.

I tossed the rock off into the night. Since nothing was going to be missing from the warehouse–at least, nothing Spooky was aware had been there–it was likely he'd be more puzzled than suspicious of the broken window. I hoped he'd attribute it to a sonic boom.

Reaching through the glassless upper panel, I opened the door and we carried the creeper and its cargo inside. Arab tried to follow us but Stan shooed him outside and closed the door.

Stan located the light switch for the office, then opened the door to the storeroom off the office, found that switch, and turned it on. We carried the creeper in there and set it down. The huge room was lined with shelves loaded with everything from storage batteries to car radios. On the floor were hundreds of appliances, from toasters to color TVs.

Because Stan had helped Spooky carry it in, he knew exactly where the hi-fi cabinet was. As soon as he pointed it out, I knelt behind it and removed the back.

For some moments after I had taken the back off, Stan regarded the interior of the cabinet in silence. He was looking slightly sick. "That's the first corpse I ever saw," he said finally.

"Me too," I told him. "Shall we pull him out of there?"

There was another period of silence before he said, "I can't touch him, Jerry."

"He's got to come out of there," I said.

"You'll have to do it alone," he said in the same low voice. "I'm sorry. I can't touch him."

"Well, at least you can help me carry the creeper over here," I said grumpily, and went over to where we had set it down.

We set the creeper down right behind the cabinet, lifted off the framework, and set it aside. I gripped the corpse by an arm and a leg and pulled.

He didn't budge. He was stuck.

I continued to pull, but after a time I gave up and looked around for Stan. He wasn't there. Then I saw him coming from a far corner of the room, carrying a four-foot crowbar.

"Try this," he said, handing it to me.

I inserted the end of the crowbar beneath Mr. Stokeley's neck and pushed it until it was wedged behind his left shoulder. When it was

firmly in place, I put my foot against the end of the cabinet and drew back on the handle of the crowbar.

There was a popping sound and Mr. Stokeley skidded across the creeper to land on his side several feet beyond it. His position remained unchanged. His knees were still jammed against his chest and his toes were still pointed straight forward.

After staring at the corpse for a moment, Stan took the crowbar from me and carried it back to where he had found it. By the time he got back I had removed the small bag containing the screws from the metal framework. Together we lifted the framework into place. I screwed the four screws home, plugged in the wires, and screwed on the back.

"It ought to work," I said. "Do you want to carry it into the office and try it?"

"No," Stan said in a definite tone. "I prefer to have faith. Let's get out of here."

Replacing my tools in my pockets, I said, "O.K., but I can't lift Mr. Stokeley all by myself. You'll have to help me get him on the creeper."

He shook his head. "I'm not touching him."

In a reasoning tone I said, "You're going to have to help me carry him after he's on the creeper even if I get him on there by myself."

"Then I'll only have to touch *it*, not *him*."

I gave in. Setting the creeper next to Mr. Stokeley's back, I rolled him over onto it. He was stiff as a colonel's spine. He lay on his side on the creeper, still folded into a cramped capital N.

I stooped to grasp the end of the creeper where the head lay. Reluctantly Stan took the other end.

After we carried it outside, we set the creeper down while I closed and relocked the office door. Arab took a sniff of the dead man, tucked his tail between his legs, and slunk off.

Back at the gate I tied the tow rope around Mr. Stokeley before climbing up on top of the station wagon. I hauled him up then lowered him to the ground on the other side of the automobile. Stan handed up the creeper. I set it down, climbed down onto the rear door, lifted it from the roof, and jumped down to the ground. After untying the corpse and rolling it back onto the creeper, I tossed the rope back over the top of the gate to Stan. He pulled himself up over the gate, untied the rope, and came down. Together we loaded the laden creeper into the back of the station wagon.

What we should have done next, of course, was simply to dump the body in an alley. But you don't do your best thinking on cheap bourbon, and we were both still stoned enough to have it fixed in our minds that tidying things up required everything being returned to its proper place. In the frame of mind we were in it seemed logical that we should return the contents we had just removed from the hi-fi to the place where we had obtained its present contents.

It was around midnight when we again parked on the crest of Benedict Canyon Drive. The green stucco house at the bottom of the hill was still ablaze with lights, but the only other lights along the street were here and there behind drawn drapes. There was no sign of life outdoors.

We both got out and walked to the rear of the station wagon. When a glow of headlights appeared beyond the crest of the hill I paused on the sidewalk instead of continuing my journey to the back of the vehicle, but Stan had already stepped behind it and raised the upper part of the rear door and lowered the bottom.

When the creeper started to roll out, Stan held out a hand to stop it. Then his hand touched the corpse's head and he emitted a gasp and jumped out of the way.

The creeper rolled all the way out, dropped to the street, and started down the hill. It had a ten-foot lead before I could react and start after it.

The squeal of sixteen unoiled roller-skate wheels was gratingly loud from the moment the creeper began to roll, but as the thing picked up speed it grew progressively louder.

By the time it was halfway down the hill the neighborhood was resounding with an unearthly squeal as penetrating as the scream of a fire siren.

I was conscious of the glare of headlights behind me as the car that had been coming up the other side of the hill topped the crest and started down this side.

But I neither glanced over my shoulder nor took any evasive action. I was too intent on catching the speeding creeper.

I was overmatched. It accelerated so rapidly that it reached the curb at the bottom of the hill when I was only halfway down, jumped the curb without even slowing down, and headed along the walk toward the front door of the green stucco house.

No one in the neighborhood could have avoided hearing the piercing

squeal of those wheels. It was therefore not surprising that Bert Pinter jerked open the front door to see what was going on.

At that very moment the creeper crashed into the six-inch-high concrete stoop where it came to an instant halt—but the law of inertia caused the body to continue on at the same speed. Still on its side and cramped into the shape of a capital N it shot headfirst at the man in the doorway. Instinctively he leaped aside.

Through the open doorway I could see Mr. Stokeley skid across the front-room and disappear into the central hallway, where he was met by a feminine scream.

By then I had reached the bottom of the hill and was racing up the walk.

As I scooped up the creeper and spun back to race away again, an authoritative voice called, "Hold it right there, mister!"

A black-and-white sedan with a rotating red light on top of it had pulled over to the curb in front of the house. Two uniformed cops were getting out.

I zoomed past the front of the car before either of them was all the way out. I had a ten-yard lead before the one who had emerged on the driver's side started to lumber after me.

I had enough of a glimpse of him as I shot by to see he was middle-aged and overweight, so I really wasn't terribly worried about being brought down by a flying tackle. I could tell I was steadily increasing my initial lead by the distance of his voice behind me as he periodically yelled, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

I took the chance that he wouldn't. There was no way he could know at that point what crime, if any, had been committed, and cops aren't supposed to shoot people on suspicion, even when they refuse the order to halt.

Stan was already in the car and had the engine going. I threw in the creeper, dived in on top of it, and grabbed the back of the center seat to keep from rolling out again.

Stan took off like a rocket.

I looked back to see the pursuing cop coming to a halt halfway up the hill. The other one was pounding on the door of the green stucco house.

I pulled the lower section of the back door closed, reached up to click the upper section into place, then climbed over into the center seat and on into the front seat.

Stan switched on his headlights.

"Do you think we ought to pick up another bottle before we go back to your room?" he asked.

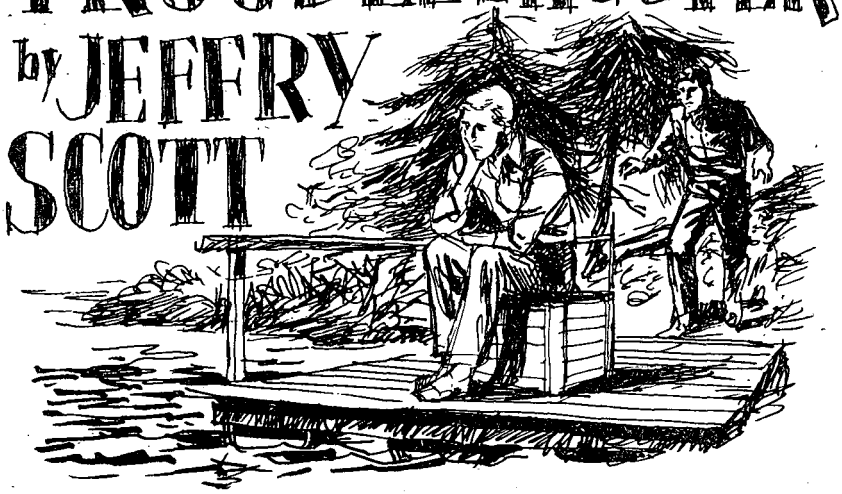
"Definitely," I said. "That race up the hill sobered me up."

I could tell that Stan hadn't even started to sober up, though, when he said, "Let's get a quart instead of a fifth. If Mrs. Sull is still awake, we could invite her in for a drink."

Butcher was hired to kill an old friend . . .

THE TROUBLESHOOTER

by JEFFRY SCOTT



My heart kept up its nice steady beat and my palms were dry. Why not?

I'm just a businessman in a field said to be expanding at a compound rate of fifteen per cent yearly with a turnover of around forty billion dollars in 1978, putting it right up there alongside the U.S. steel industry. I ought to be proud.

Then again, maybe not, since we're talking about the crime industry. Manny always used to say that we keep law-enforcement personnel,

private security firms, and the insurance combines in a boom situation–no unemployment there–but I couldn't buy that.

Still, I've never been worth a damn at feeling ashamed or getting scared. So I kept on strolling–if you can be said to stroll through red Arkansas mud on a hillside–watching Manny Presley's back get closer.

When people ask what I do, they get the truth. "I'm a troubleshooter, self-employed. A consultant." True as hell; somebody makes trouble, I get paid. Sure, it's an old joke.

Manny was sitting on the dock, a floating affair of timber turned grey by rain and sun. He almost matched it with his washed-out levis, pale-blue shirt; the sort of non-tan picked up in nightclubs or prisons, and pepper-and-salt hair. From what I could make out, he could have doubled for Rodin's statue of The Thinker. Take the trouble and you can get a fine education behind bars.

A little wave of fondness hit me. We went a long way back, Manny and me. Same neighborhood, much the same career–if that's the word–even the same woman for a while. We were like brothers.

And we were about to become Cain and Abel–but I needed the money. That, and answers. Money mainly, because the track hadn't been kind to me, but the riddle needed to be solved as well.

Questions. "Always with the questions," Joe Lobsters spat at me when I took the contract. "What difference does it make? I want Manny Presley offed. Since when did you need reasons, Butcher?" That's my name, by the way. Life has its funny side. Not to mention death—

Then he slipped some bills into my top pocket. Not enough to choke an ox, but sufficient to give it respiratory trouble. "There'll be more later," Joe Lobsters promised. "After I been to the funeral." He slobbered over that part, had to get to those little pools of moisture at the corners of his mouth with a blinding white linen handkerchief. Joe Lobsters wanted poor little Manny wasted so bad he could taste it.

It's an indulgence, but I want to know why I'm killing a fellow human being. Especially when he's a close friend of mine. I'll do it–Uncle Sam took me as an apprentice in the killing trade way back in 1951 and I never found any good reason to change my line of work–but I like to know why.

Joe Lobsters wouldn't tell me, so I asked around. It didn't take too long to get the drift. Manny took a little fall in 1977 and spent some time in the same cell with Wetfish Harrison. It was a well known fact that Wetfish was Joe Lobsters' bagman.

Wetfish must have opened his mouth too much–and Manny always had been a good listener. Manny came out of the slammer in early 1979 to find his wife on welfare, their youngster ill and needing costly medication and surgical treatment. Just two weeks after Manny hit the street, Wetfish Harrison was knifed to death in one of those prison exercise-yard hits.

So there it was, dot to dot, draw the lines. Wetfish had known where Joe Lobsters' bodies were buried. Manny, his bunkie, wanted big money fast. I'm not that long on wisdom but I stay alive, and rule one is simple–never try to blackmail people like Joe Lobsters.

The funny thing was that picking up Manny's trail was too easy. I'd hardly wiped Joe Lobsters' sweat off my hand when these calls kept turning up–ring a certain number. At all my places–bars, restaurants, the track–the message was the same.

The woman who answered my call sounded old and beat. "I don't know what this means," she said, "but if you're Butcher, you can find Mr. P. at–" And she gave me an address in Arkansas that turned out to be at the back end of nowhere, a vacation shack at the wrong end of a cat's-cradle of dirt roads, maybe a hundred miles from Hot Springs.

I'd parked the rental car around a bend at the top of the hill. The final hundred yards or so, I stopped watching the path and kept my eyes on Manny. He'd never been a violent man, but we're all animals when push comes to shove. And he wouldn't be here if he didn't know there was a contract out on him. Manny Presley was a city man.

He spoke without turning around. "Hello, Butch. I'm going to die."

That stopped me. I figured he'd seen me reflected in the lake, mirror-still and not even rippling where it met the landing stage. But I also figured that Manny was less of a realist than I am. For him to know at once that I'd come to off him–

Then I had to laugh. Face it, he'd said a hilarious thing under the circumstances. Some things are so true they hit you right on the funny bone. "You ain't lying, Manny."

He craned around. He still had the same kind of bewildered, innocent face, like a baby with a lot of mileage on him. "I am, Butch," he insisted. He sounded irritable, like I was slow on the uptake.

"I know, Manny." I showed him the piece. It was the hunting season and there wasn't another shack in sight, so I didn't even bother to screw the silencer into place. That little .22 is good for close work—makes no more noise than a stick breaking.

Manny Presley sighed and shook his head. "You think Wetfish would tell his mother the time of day? I don't know so much as Joe Lobsters' home phone number, Butch. All I did was do time with Wetfish."

He was giving me acid indigestion, trying that foolishness. Joe Lobsters had paid me to off him, and guilt or innocence didn't come into it. Justice is for straight society, and they get it wrong eight times out of ten. With a hit, the bottom line–the only one–is money.

Manny sighed again but the sigh turned into a whimper and he clutched his gut. Eventually he sat back, his round face polished with sweat. I saw that his hair was a shade darker, soaked, for the same reason.

"You don't understand," he told me. "The doc gave me three months at best. My wife and the kid, they're hurtin' *now*. So I went to Joe Lobsters and told him to give me a quarter of a million dollars or I'd go to the Feds."

I blinked, staying well clear of him, the .22 lined on his chest.

"My insurance pays off double if I don't die of natural causes," Manny gasped. "Anything but suicide. Shaking down Joe Lobsters is suicide—but not like they mean. The pain's terrible, Butch. In the head, quick."

He scrambled up, grunting with effort, and stumbled back a couple of steps. "My body's got to be found. Don't let me fall in the water!"

It was the hardest hit I ever made. They never ask for it. They never bend their heads and put their hands together like in church.

It struck me as I stuck my arm out. The woman who'd passed that message had been Manny's wife. He knew Joe Lobsters always used me for heavy action. He knew that I wouldn't get cute and hide his body so well that he'd be missing for years while the insurance company stalled.

Manny knew a lot, and that was part of what made it a hard hit. It didn't sit well, him pulling my strings.

Then there were the noises, the gunshot and the impact noise blending, and the soft sound of Manny hitting the planks.

Tramping back to the car, I stripped the .22 and flung the bits to either side of the track. Driving toward Hot Springs with the radio playing that country garbage they're so strong on down there I began thinking straight.

Manny had been a buddy, after all. Resentment wasn't called for. He was doing the best he could for his family. After a few miles I began feeling good.

It isn't every day of the week that a businessman can be efficient as ever, keep faith with his client, and still carry out a genuine act of charity.

As Uncle Roderick approached his 100th year, he acquired a new hobby . . .

TYPED FOR MURDER

by Nedra Tyre

Clearly, Uncle Roderick had no intention of dying.

And he was as rich as he was old.

During his 70's he had had various illnesses from which he emerged hale and chipper. In his 80's he had had a slight stroke and a mild heart attack, which only added to his resilience. In his 94th year he had been gravely ill with pneumonia and had had nurses around the clock and specialists from as far away as Zurich, Switzerland. Yet he had survived.

So when he approached his 100th birthday, we gave up hope–though I'm afraid that's not a delicate way to put it, as we truly loved Uncle Roderick. Not only did he appear indestructible, but he acquired a new hobby: He began to write his memoirs. In order to do this, he taught himself to type. He was not one to dispose of his money conspicuously, and so he bought a secondhand typewriter and had Uncle Cliff get him a dog-eared typing manual at Smith's Used Book Shop.

Now, though Uncle Roderick was in the best of health, he was virtually bedridden. He had his meals in bed and spent his entire time there, except for an occasional circuit of his room and a walk twice a day down the upstairs hall. Precisely at 10 in the morning and at 4 in the afternoon he had what he called his constitutional. With a cane in his right hand and his nurse, Miss Bessie, on his left, he made his laborious journey, and if you had seen him teetering and tottering and swaying and trembling, you would have sworn that he wasn't long for this world. But all of our family knew better than that. Brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces and great-nephews and great-nieces had fallen along the way, abandoning in death their hope (there's that indelicate word again) that they would inherit their share of a very large fortune. For hadn't Uncle Roderick stressed that it was to be divided equally—or had he said equitably?—among his survivors?

Uncle Roderick had never married. He liked women well enough, but he despised fortune hunters or greed of any kind and he was convinced that the women who had swarmed around him were not so much nubile as avaricious. Besides, he insisted to us, he wanted every penny of his money to go to his relatives. "In my day," he said modestly, "I've contributed my share to charity. I want everything that's left to go to you all."

He didn't so much demand our loyalty as inspire it, and we were devoted to him. We really were. He insisted that we live with him. Though the house was a large one (built in 1840 in the Greek Revival style), it wasn't quite large enough for us all; that is, until death thinned out the family somewhat. Uncle Charles, before he died of a stroke at 73, slept on a sofa in the library. Aunt Emma had a pallet in the butler's pantry and kept her clothes in the broom closet until Aunt Susanne died. Then Aunt Emma moved into one of the servants' rooms. Not that there were any servants. We did all the work both inside the house and on the very extensive grounds and gardens, and each of us had a specialty—though

we could all more or less exchange duties in case of indisposition or death, and we willingly pitched in if anyone got behind in his appointed task.

Uncle Roderick was sweet to us. He fed us and housed us, but we didn't have any money. There was no way to get any either, because when any one of us looked for employment in Waynesville, people thought we were joking. Uncle Lewis, who was the most enterprising one among us and a fine gardener (visitors came from everywhere to admire his box and camellias), did his best to get work cutting grass or transplanting, but people thought he just wanted to help out in a neighborly fashion and wouldn't pay him a cent. Aunt Jenny was a wonderful cook and tried to sell sandwiches and cake by the slice on the school grounds, but the officials said she was interfering with the Federal lunch program.

Way back in the thirties, long before I was born, Aunt Hattie had once gotten up nerve enough to ask Uncle Roderick for a small allowance for everyone, and it had hurt his feelings so much that no one ever had gall enough to mention money again. "What on earth do you need money for?" Uncle Roderick had asked, and there were tears in his eyes. "You live here. You eat here. We share this beautiful house. What do you want with money? What do you need it for?"

I defied Uncle Roderick briefly. As he was to do later, I taught myself to type and then asked his attorney to give me a job. I thought that he, of all people, must know that we didn't have any actual cash, but he too considered it a big leg-pull. Though he indulged me, I soon learned that he paid me exactly half what he paid his other typists. No matter, I'll never forget the joy on payday of going home and distributing my money among my aunts and uncles.

Two months were all I could manage. "Now, baby," Uncle Roderick said, "I like to have the whole family home all the time. I want everybody within calling distance. There's no sense in you giving in to this whim of wanting to work. I need you here."

My relatives were all sorry for me and sympathized and said they'd miss my money, too, but there was nothing to do except what Uncle Roderick suggested. I had to resign from my job.

Finally, something had to be done (we were threadbare and down-at-heel and famished for small luxuries like chocolate bars and chewing gum) and Uncle Lewis did it, though very discreetly and not very often. Our backs were to the wall and we just had to have cash. So on those desperate

occasions, Uncle Lewis would sneak something from a closet or a cabinet or a sideboard–what he took had to be portable, concealable, and disposable–and he would tuck it circumspectly into a paper bag or his pocket, hitch a ride on a milk truck to Lexington, and sell the article or *objet d'art* to an auction house or an antique shop. One of the proprietors of a shop once mentioned a frantic need for some Hepplewhite chairs and sent a pickup truck for four of them. Poor, darling, naive Uncle Lewis sold the whole set of four for one-tenth of the amount the dealer got for just one of the chairs. (All the same, the money saw us through two hard winters.) Afterward, we had to drag in chairs from the kitchen in order to have enough chairs to sit on during our meals.

No one ever wondered (though someone should have) what would happen if Uncle Roderick ever found out that the silver supply was being slowly diminished and the walls and cupboards were getting a little bare. I guess we thought that Uncle Roderick was no threat to us, since he was upstairs in his stronghold typing his memoirs and venturing no farther than the upstairs hall for his constitutional. He hadn't been downstairs since V-J Day when he stumbled over the Aubusson rug in the front parlor and broke his hip. Well, the antique dealer had become desperate for an Aubusson rug and was sending a truck for it on Friday.

Half an hour after the truck had driven off, Miss Bessie, the nurse, leaned over the banister and shouted: "Your uncle wants you, Joan."

I ran up the stairs and hurried over to Uncle Roderick and kissed him. Yellow second-sheets were strewn like a patchwork quilt across his bed. The ramshackle typewriter was pulled up close on a table that straddled the bed. "Baby," Uncle Roderick said, "where is the damned 'a' on this typewriter? I've been using it all day, but it disappeared suddenly."

I showed him where the "a" was.

"Thanks, dove. That's might sweet of you and mighty stupid of me."

"Uncle Roderick, I could do your typing. I'd be delighted to type for you, precious. Why not let me?"

"It's just like you, darling, to want to be accommodating, but I'm going to master this typewriter if it's the last thing I do. But if you want to when I've finished the memoirs, you can type a neat manuscript and have it bound. I'd love to have you do that for me, dear."

"All right, precious," I said and kissed him good-by. We were an affectionate and sweet-talking family.

I was at the head of the stairs when he called after me: "Listen, baby,

the next time you come up, will you please bring me that little Meissen tea set on the sideboard?"

"I'll get it right this minute, darling."

"You're a sweet one," he said when I came back with the set and placed it on a table in the bay window.

Things went on in their accustomed fashion for another week. Uncle Roderick kept to his writing as methodically as Flaubert or Trollope until Saturday morning, when Miss Bessie called down that Uncle Roderick wanted me. I ran upstairs and Uncle Roderick and I kissed and I called him precious and he called me dove and then he said, "Darling, whenever it's convenient, please bring the vermeil tray up here. The one with the pierced gallery. No need to hurry. I won't begin to write about it until tomorrow."

No need to hurry, he had said. I didn't sleep at all that night. I kept thinking over and over: *the Meissen tea set last week, the vermeil tray with pierced gallery today, heaven only knows what he'll ask for tomorrow*. Thank goodness Uncle Lewis hadn't been prodigal and had disposed of only the barest minimum to keep us going.

"Darling," I said to Uncle Roderick the next morning after I had set the vermeil tray on his bed where his frail hand had indicated. "I somehow never thought of you as being interested in things. People are your concern, and yet here you are writing about a tea set and a tray. I can't understand it at all."

"Well, precious," Uncle Roderick said, "that's not very discerning of you. This vermeil tray is going to evoke our family reunion in May, 1898. By looking at it and remembering how it was piled with fried chicken, I can recall the entire day."

"Honey, you mean you've just reached 1898 in your memoirs?"

"Oh, sugarfoot, I'm skipping around. I'm putting things down as they occur to me. I don't really know where I am. All I know is that there's no end in sight."

There really was no end in sight for us.

At lunchtime I had to tell my aunts and uncles what we were in for. Sharing the problem only seemed to make the situation worse, for after that they all hung around the foot of the stairs waiting for my summons from Uncle Roderick. And when it came, they all pawed about to see if the object he had requested was still in our possession. More than once the game seemed up and Uncle Lewis would wail, "I think I sold that

in 1959." But Aunt Jenny or Aunt Laura would somehow ferret it out, and our torment would end until Uncle Roderick's next request.

I might have been climbing up to the guillotine for all of us when Uncle Roderick called for me again and I stumbled up the stairs.

"What do you want this time, Uncle Roderick?" I asked.

"Uncle Roderick what, precious?" he said looking hurt.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Joan, baby, that's the first time in your life you haven't called me dear or darling or honey or precious. Don't you love your old uncle any more?"

"Precious lamb, I am sorry. So sorry. But please, please hurry and tell me what you want."

"All I want is a kind word from my little sweetheart and for you to sit and let me look at your pretty face for a while. I'm working too hard on my memoirs."

Life grew more hazardous every day. Our appetities were dulled. No one slept any more. We only gathered in corners to whisper desperately and to ask what we would do when Uncle Roderick told me to bring him something that was no longer in the house.

One day at lunch, as we looked at our untouched plates piled high with Aunt Jenny's delectable cooking, Uncle Jonathan, who really didn't have a dishonest bone in his body, said: "If Uncle Roderick asks for something that's been sold, we'll have to pretend we've never heard of it. Tell him we don't know what he's talking about."

Aunt Jenny said: "We can't do that. That wouldn't do any good. He'd catch us out in a minute. He'd only insist on being brought downstairs to see for himself. Then he'd find out the whole truth."

Aunt Laura cried: "It's such an abuse of his hospitality. Here we've been his guests time out of mind and we've sold the things he loves. We're thieves—common thieves."

"Now, now, it isn't as bad as that," Uncle Percy said. "In a way, the things are ours. Uncle Roderick is leaving everything to us. We've just anticipated our inheritance a little, and I must remind you all that we had to have the money. We haven't been extravagant. We've squeezed every penny."

"There's no way to justify it," Uncle Lewis said. "No way at all. It's all my fault and I'll take the blame. I'm the one who thought it up and did the selling. We can't live in this suspense any longer. I'll tell Uncle Roderick what's happened."

For years there must have been intimations that Miss Bessie, the nurse, was fond of Uncle Lewis, but with her outburst now, it was obvious that she loved him. "No, Lewis darling, you can't. In a way, I know Mr. Worthington better than any of you do. I'm with him almost all the time, except for meals. There's no telling what he would do if he finds out. No telling at all. And if he discovers that Lewis did the actual selling, I'm sure he'll disown him. But it's not only Lewis I'm thinking about. You've all been so patient and devoted and you're all involved in this. He'll think you've all been disloyal."

Miss Bessie was thinking of us all, but especially of Uncle Lewis. She put our predicament so nicely, so gently, while we could think only of our selfishness and dishonesty.

Just then Uncle Roderick's voice pierced our mutterings and mumblings and frenzied connivings. "Joan, baby, come up here. I want to ask a favor."

I detached myself from my panic-stricken relatives and Miss Bessie and ascended the stairs. As soon as we had kissed and called each other darling, Uncle Roderick asked for the Hepplewhite chairs.

All eight of them.

And there were only four left.

Our doom had arrived; our reckoning was nigh.

I had to brazen it out. "Yes, precious," I said and I rushed back downstairs as if I might return in a moment with every single chair.

When I told the paralyzed family, there were conferences and suggestions and counter-suggestions.

"The trouble with the Worthington family is that we aren't good liars," Uncle Jonathan said.

"Only thieves," Aunt Jenny commented tartly.

I had to act, because Uncle Roderick was waiting. I took two of the chairs to him. I was overzealous and called Uncle Roderick precious and dearest in one breath, too egregious even for our ever-loving family. "Darling," I went on, "Aunt Jenny needs me to help clear away lunch. You don't mind waiting a little while for the other chairs, do you?"

"Of course not, my dove."

That saw us through more desperate conferences until mid-afternoon, when I took the third chair up.

"Darling Uncle Roderick," I said. "It's getting crowded in here. Do you actually want all the other chairs?"

"Yes, baby, I do. I can't write about that dinner party celebrating my first million unless I have every chair in front of me."

Uncle Roderick's nap gave us a slight respite and then at 4:30 I took up the fourth chair.

That's all there was. There wasn't any more.

My aunts and uncles decided that I had done as much as I could and that it was someone else's turn. Aunt Louise volunteered and bravely mounted the stairs. Maybe all women want to be actresses, maybe all women have to be actresses, but Aunt Louise had the looks and voice for one and perhaps could have followed that profession with brilliant success if she hadn't been born with such great expectations of inheriting part of Uncle Roderick's fortune.

"Now Uncle Roderick, precious, what's all this about the Hepplewhite chairs?" Her voice was at once vibrant and cajoling. It was untinged by the despair she and all of us waiting at the foot of the stairs felt. "You have four already, and I must say it's a little inconvenient for us to bring the others up right at dinner time."

Something in Uncle Roderick's demeanor made her change her tactics. "All right, darling. All right, if you insist. But I'm not about to let you see what a poor housekeeper I am. I'll wax and polish the others and bring them up the first thing tomorrow morning. Joan shouldn't have brought those others up here without polishing them."

And so Aunt Louise won us a reprieve until morning.

It wasn't a joyous reprieve. We couldn't eat our dinner and there was nothing to talk about that night. Neither scheming nor subterfuge could save us. We must meet our fate the next morning.

We went to bed early, but the house was a restless place. There was much walking about and opening and closing of doors, and for half an hour there was the rattling of Uncle Roderick's typewriter. It sounded brisk and efficient and reminded us all, not that we needed a reminder, that it and the memoirs were the instruments of our downfall.

Somehow or other we would have to account for the missing Hepplewhite chairs the next morning.

But the next morning Uncle Roderick was dead. He had died like a baby. He had burrowed into his pillows and had smothered himself.

And we were all as rich as precious, darling Uncle Roderick had intimated. Nothing is so pleasant as possessing money when you know the actual value of it. For a family of eight that had gotten through two long

winters on the proceeds from four chairs, it was fantastic to have so much money. But we didn't want to live together any longer, though we were very fond of each other and never lost the close family feeling of which Uncle Roderick was so proud. None of us wanted any of the furniture or other items in the house because they reminded us of how we had been tormented by wondering what Uncle Roderick would ask for next. Avid antique dealers and curators of museums came and carried off everything except the four Hepplewhite chairs. Uncle Lewis and Uncle Jonathan tore them up with their bare hands and burned them.

As soon as we had suitably mourned Uncle Roderick, there was a wedding: Uncle Lewis married Miss Bessie, the nurse. We were all happy yet sad that they had had to wait so many years. Both were in their late 60's, but they had been forced to postpone their marriage as Uncle Lewis had had no way to support Miss Bessie until Uncle Roderick died. "Better late than never," Aunt Jenny said philosophically, and she meant not only Uncle Lewis's wedding but Uncle Roderick's money.

Yet, whatever our ages, we were all fortunate. Each of us had a tremendous respect for money and we had so much money to respect.

Above all I wanted to do something for Uncle Roderick, chiefly because I loved him but also because he had been so generous and had died so conveniently. Bless his precious heart.

Then I remembered his memoirs and I decided to do what he had suggest one day. He had asked me to make a neat copy and have it bound.

It turned out to be a real labor of love, as his typing was atrocious and the content stupefyingly dull. That is, until I got to the last sentence of the last page. I couldn't decipher any of that page except for the final line, which had no typographical error whatever. It said simply: *Nobody would have the nerve to do it but the wren.*

That must have meant that Uncle Roderick had known about us. But who was the wren? Uncle Lewis had done the actual selling. How could wren apply to him? Wren sounded more like a woman. Uncle Roderick called me dove, not wren. Maybe he meant Aunt Jenny because Jenny and wren somehow go together. Well, obviously Uncle Roderick wasn't as smart as he might have been, no matter how many millions he had acquired, because he hadn't suspected Uncle Lewis as the culprit.

I was especially grateful that Uncle Roderick hadn't had any suspicion about Uncle Lewis, as grief came to him so quickly after his marriage. Miss Bessie died two months later, and tragically. She was struck down

by an automobile. Because of the family's wealth and prominence, there was a large photograph and a long article on the front page of the Waynesville *Inquirer*. The headline read: MRS. LEWIS WORTHINGTON, R.N., TRAFFIC VICTIM.

I tried to comfort Uncle Lewis by telling him that she had been happy and had died quickly, but he wouldn't be comforted. "I don't think she was happy," he said. "She loved me, but she wasn't happy. Maybe she didn't deliberately run in front of that automobile, but she was confused and didn't care whether she lived or died."

I saved the article about Miss Bessie and one morning when I opened a desk drawer to look for something Miss Bessie smiled up at me from beneath the headline (MRS. LEWIS WORTHINGTON, R.N., TRAFFIC VICTIM). Then I saw at once that she was the wren to whom Uncle Roderick referred in the final sentence of his memoirs.

R.N.–wren.

Perhaps that's what Uncle Roderick had called her, though I hadn't ever heard him, for he had pet names for everyone. In his last remark Uncle Roderick had said she was the only one with nerve enough to do it. Surely that couldn't mean he thought Miss Bessie was guilty of disposing of his possessions. He knew quite well that she was constantly at his side, hour after hour, day by day, year after year.

Then he must have meant something else—that Miss Bessie ("the wren") was the only one with nerve enough to carry out a certain action.

I had to find out what Uncle Roderick had typed on that final night of his life. It didn't prove to be difficult once I set my mind to it. I soon discovered that in his excitement Uncle Roderick had placed his left hand one key too far to the right, so that the first sentence read: *Somryhinh dytsnhr id hoinh on hrtr* instead of *Something strange is going on here*. He had continued in that manner. However, there must have been a pause before he wrote the last sentence, for he had corrected his position by then. It took only a little ingenuity to transpose the entire passage. My shaking fingers typed and my astonished eyes read the following:

> Something strange is going on here. I love them all dearly and have shared everything with them. But I feel they all want me dead. There's an atmosphere of murder in this house. I don't know what I've done to displease them and I'm not the type to be murdered. Yet this afternoon right after my nap, when the

wren took my pulse and then removed a freshly cleaned dressing robe from its plastic wrapper, I saw her look at the wrapping and then at me and I remembered reading about babies and young children being smothered to death accidentally by those wrappers.

My body is certainly not what it once was, but I've been proud of my clear mind. I must be losing it, though, to think that any of these devoted people would want to kill me. They all love me and I love them. Bessie is fond of me–she's at my beck and call day and night–and she has been even more attentive and kind than any of them and she's the only one who has nothing to gain from me. I ought to have remembered her in my will, but I wanted my family to have everything. Still, I feel that she's the only one who would murder me.

Nobody would have the nerve to do it but the wren.

Later, I had the memoirs bound except for the last page. I tore that up because it was irrelevant. After all, memoirs are recollections and that page was no remembrance. A man can't remember his own murder.

As dear Uncle Roderick said, we all loved him and were attentive and devoted to him–especially Miss Bessie.

The robbery occurred when Ganson was working overtime . . .

PERFECT SOLUTION

CARROLL MAYERS

I was unconscious for some eight minutes. When I came to and tried to regain my feet, my vision blurred and the floor tilted. I clutched a filing cabinet, drawing deep breaths, till I finally managed to lurch to my desk and the phone.

Sergeant Ackerman was heavy-set and balding. His associate was a lean stripling named Locke. Patently they were mentor and rookie; the

younger man's deference to his superior was immediate, while still suggesting a chafing for individuality.

Ackerman regarded me sharply. "You O.K., sir? I can get an ambulance here on the double."

I'd suffered a nasty swipe on the left temple. I fingered it gently and winced. "I'm all right," I said. "Just a bit shaken up."

The sergeant looked at my swelling bruise. "I can appreciate that." His gaze swept the office. "This is the Assurance Savings and Loan?"

"That's correct," I said. "I'm Lloyd Ganson, the manager." I sagged a bit in my desk chair.

Ackerman again expressed concern. "You sure you're O.K., Mr. Ganson? I'd like a statement, but—"

I managed a small smile. "I'll make it, Sergeant."

"If you say so." He shot a brief look at his associate and instructed him to make a note of the time–5:45. Then to me he said, "Go ahead, sir."

At his superior's words, Locke had produced a notebook and ballpoint pen. I made a hesitant gesture. "I'd like to call my wife first and let her know what's happened."

"Of course." Ackerman pushed the phone across the desk and I dialed home. After two rings Gloria answered.

"Honey," I said, "don't get upset, but I've stayed on a bit and there's been some trouble."

"Trouble?"

"I've been held up. Two men knocked me out. The police are here now."

"Lloyd! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "I just wanted to let you know I'll be late."

"Lloyd, I'm coming down!"

"There's no need. I'm perfectly all right. As soon as I give the officers a statement, I'll come right home."

"You're sure you're not hurt?"

"I'm fine, honey," I repeated. "Don't worry."

Gloria was still agitated; her concern echoed sharply over the wire. But finally, after my continued reassurances, she calmed down.

When I hung up the sergeant said to me, "All right, sir. If you're certain you're up to it, let's go ahead with your statement."

"I'm up to it," I said, "not that there's much I can give you. There were two of them. They must've come in the back way, from the parking

lot. I didn't hear them. I was working here at my desk and the first thing I knew they were standing beside me."

"Can you give descriptions?"

I shook my head. "They were both wearing dark-blue ski masks."

"Any unusual body characteristics?"

"None that I noticed," I said. "Though I'd estimate both were relatively young, say in their early twenties. Their movements were quick–athletic."

"What about their voices? Did they speak to you at all?"

I touched my temple again. "One of them. He said just two words–'Stand up.' Then the other one slugged me–with a sap, I guess."

Ackerman pursed his lips. "And they grabbed how much, sir?"

"I'd figure about fifty thousand," I said. "I haven't had time to check fully."

The sergeant eyed the open safe. "They slugged you immediately, so they must've seen there was no need to force you to open the safe. It was already unlocked."

"Right," I said. "Besides our everyday working capital, we keep confidential ledgers and account books in there. I'd stayed on this evening after everyone had left to review several delinquent accounts."

"Do you do that frequently?"

"Stay overtime?"

"Yes."

"No," I said. "Very seldom."

"Then they got a lucky break when they moved in tonight," Ackerman suggested. "Likely they'd already checked you out–personnel and such."

"So where do we go from here, Sergeant?" I asked him.

He sighed. "How long would you say you'd been working before the hoods showed?"

I blinked; a dull headache was setting in. "Fifteen or twenty minutes."

He checked his watch and stood. "It's now 6:05. They've already had a big jump getting clear of this vicinity. I wouldn't be too optimistic."

"Well–we're insured," I said. "Just keep me posted, will you?"

"The Lieutenant will see to that, sir," Ackerman said. He turned to Locke. "Did you get everything?"

The younger man's jawline firmed but he flipped his notebook shut without elaboration. "Yes, sir."

A moment later they left. Still a bit shaky, I delayed long enough to douse my face with cold water in the washroom and take two aspirin.

Then I locked up the office and headed home.

Gloria is a honey blonde with laughing hazel eyes. She greeted me with a broad smile. "So how did it go?"

I said, "As far as I could judge, O.K."

She clapped her hands. "I told you! I told you we could do it!"

Despite the aspirin, my skull was splitting now. "You could've hit me a little easier."

Gloria said, "But I couldn't, honey. We both agreed we couldn't take any chances of arousing suspicion." She touched my temple gingerly. "I'm sorry. But it does look authentic."

I couldn't fault her. "I know," I said. "But we're not out of the woods yet. This isn't the first time a stunt like this has been tried."

She was instantly serious. "You said you thought everything went all right."

"I still do," I said. "But for the next several months we've got to maintain a low profile."

"Several months!"

"Exactly. Like I said, I think we pulled it off, touted the cops onto a couple of phantom hoods. And the way your concern echoed over the phone rang true. But the police aren't stupid–if we suddenly start living beyond our apparent means we'll be asking for trouble."

Gloria protested. "But I need some new clothes. And I want to have some excitement. Now." She indicated the cowhide briefcase on the coffee table. "I've already counted the money; it's fifty-four thousand. Surely we can spend some of it—"

"Some of it, yes," I assented. "A couple of hundred, no more."

She was manifestly unhappy. "We can't have any fun with only a couple of hundred!"

"We've got to play it like that," I said. "We were lucky. The police sergeant they sent to the office was more concerned with lording it over his assistant than with investigating the robbery. But he may still develop some suspicion. He could have his lieutenant obtain a search warrant for here." I was emphatic. "I'm not risking that. First thing tomorrow I'm stashing the rest of the money in our safety-deposit box."

Gloria pouted.

I stood up, weaving at the threnody in my head. Gloria steadied me as I moved to the bedroom. She helped me undress and, as I stretched

out, I caught her hand. "Believe me, honey," I said, "It's the best way. Our time will come."

She bit her lip, still reluctant. "I suppose so."

In the morning I gave Gloria two hundred dollars from the briefcase and left home with the rest. But I didn't stop by the bank; I went to Janice Kean's apartment.

Right about here I'd better expound a bit. I'd been married to Gloria for three years, but after the first six months I'd realized the union had been a mistake. Gloria was totally self-centered and pleasure-oriented. Life to her meant only fun and games. The concept of financial restraint was totally foreign to her. We were constantly in debt. I came to understand our relationship never would be otherwise.

I'd met Janice in a midtown cocktail lounge. From the very first we'd proven compatible and I was seeing her regularly in less than two weeks. Within a month I'd known she was the girl with whom I wanted to share the rest of my life.

Ironically, it was Gloria who suggested the fake holdup at the office. An acute money crisis sparked her thinking. Initially, I'd played down the idea, but then as I came to appreciate my untenable position fully, I realized a clean break–with Janice and all the money I might glean–would be the perfect solution. And Janice had agreed.

So today was the day. I'd contrived to accumulate extra clothing and travel essentials at Janice's apartment. Our bags were packed, and we had reservations on a one P.M. flight—plus over fifty thousand dollars. Not a fortune, but sufficient to start a new existence together in Brazil.

Janice greeted me with a warm embrace. "Everything according to plan, darling?"

I patted the briefcase. "Fifty thousand right here."

"That's wonderful." Janice was a natural redhead with a freckled, tilted nose. As she spoke she took the briefcase and laid it on an end table. "Have we got time for a cup of coffee?"

I checked my watch. "Just about." We'd thought it best that I go to the office as usual that morning. That way my routine would seem normal and I would simply appear to be late returning from lunch. Janice would meet me at the airport with our luggage and the money.

"Fine," she said and started toward the stove.

The apartment buzzer sounded and she frowned. "Who could that be at this hour?" She went to the hall door.

The caller was the rookie officer, Locke. Recognizing his voice, I hurried toward the bedroom. But I wasn't fast enough. Locke sidled past Janice and blocked my way.

"Good morning, sir," he said, his smooth features mirroring no surprise.

My mind raced. What had brought him–and how should I play it?

"I just stopped by the super's office after following you here," Locke went on equably. "He recognized your description and told me you've been a frequent visitor of Miss Kean's."

I shot a quick look at Janice. I didn't like it, but there was no other way to go.

"So I've been seeing the young lady," I said shortly. "What do you mean you followed me here?"

"Just that," he told me. "Although at first I had no idea where you might head. When I tailed you from your house, I just wanted to see where you *would* go. Truthfully, I figured on a bank."

My mind was a maelstrom now. I licked my lips. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Locke demurred. "I'm talking about the money from that phony holdup you staged yesterday." As he spoke, he picked up the briefcase from the end table, thumbed the catch, and dumped the contents onto the floor. "This money."

I could only stare at him, and Janice too was transfixed. Locke started repacking the briefcase. "I'm not sure of the exact script," he said. "Maybe your wife was in on your ploy–maybe not. From the way you held the phone when you called her to let us catch some of her apparent reaction, I'd guess yes." He paused, watching both Janice and me. "Whatever, your coming here this morning with the money suggests a skipout phase your wife doesn't suspect."

He eyed me directly. "You really overplayed it, Mr. Ganson, when you phoned your wife from the office last night. You said you wanted to let her know you'd be late getting home. But if you'd truly decided to work overtime–which you also said you seldom did–you would've called her earlier in the afternoon to tell her, or at least at the normal quitting time."

He stowed the last of the money into the briefcase. "I got to thinking about that. When I finally decided it didn't add up, I thought I'd check you out this morning before logging in."

Janice began to tremble. I swore softly–I'd never expected trouble from this rookie cop. I moved to put one arm around Janice.

"I'm sorry, dear," I said. "I blew it." And to Locke: "Miss Kean wasn't involved, Officer. Does she have to be charged?"

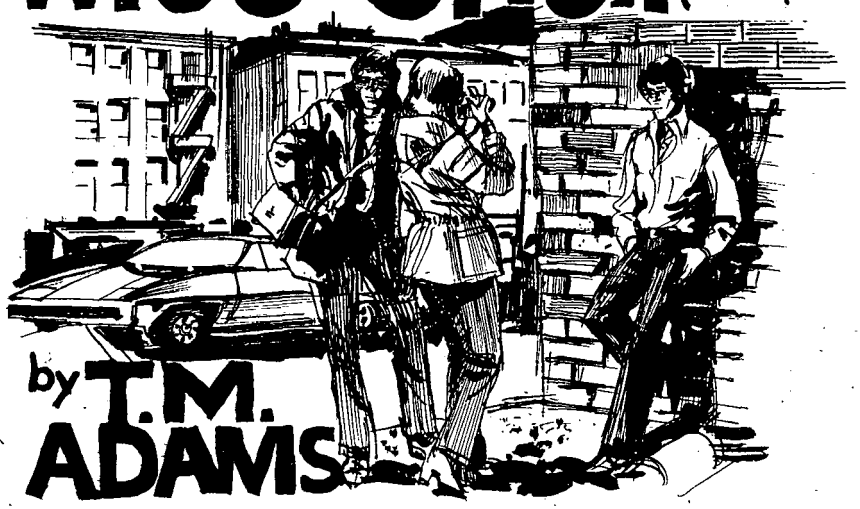
He shook his head. "That's not for me to say, sir." He hefted the briefcase. "Shall we go?"

So, except for one final development, that did it. Janice was acquitted. No charges were ever made against Gloria. I'm still on ice and likely to remain here for a number of years.

That final aspect concerns Rookie Police Officer Locke. It could be the young man regretted his choice of career, resented having to serve under a martinet like Ackerman, and had a sudden inspiration to achieve his own perfect solution. In any event, after taking Janice and me in, he and that fifty-four thousand simply disappeared. The last I heard the cops were still looking for both.

They wanted some arresting shots for their ad layout . . .

MUG SHOT



by T.M. ADAMS

"No, that one's no good," the woman was saying. "The face."

"Definitely wrong," the man agreed as Tony approached them. They stood leaning against an expensive-looking sports car, the man occasionally shifting the weight of the camera and equipment cases hanging from his neck and shoulders. There were few pedestrians on this narrow city side street; the couple seemed to be surveying each of them critically. "What about this one?" the woman said, nodding in Tony's direction.

Tony slowed his pace. He didn't know what this was about, but there might be money in it. Tony's last unemployment check was in his hip pocket; he'd been headed uphill, toward the banking district, to cash it. He wasn't really broke yet, but he wouldn't pass up an opportunity to hustle either. Let them look me over, he thought, confident of his twenty-dollar haircut and his forty-dollar silk shirt; everybody admires class, for sure.

"You know, love," the man said to his companion, "he's sort of– What do you think?"

She nodded. "Definitely," she said. "He's a type. He's definitely a type." Tony stopped before them, giving them his version of the Travolta smile. They both wore standard jeans and workboots; their green parkas were down-filled jobs, more expensive than they looked, but it took the discreet flash of their jewelry to establish their income bracket–everything matching in flat white gold, even the frames of their tinted glasses. Tony added that up with the camera cases the man was carrying and assayed the couple as Magazine Money, High Grade. He tried to make his smile more photogenic.

"What do you say, man?" the photographer asked. "Would you like to make two hundred and fifty dollars for fifteen minutes' work?"

Tony gave a little start. Two hundred and fifty was exactly what he'd been thinking he could get from a fence for a set of those camera lenses–just idle speculation. "Are you kidding me?" he asked.

"Couldn't possibly pay you less," the photographer said. "That's industry scale for an ad set, and fifteen minutes is all we've got. Judy and I have an appointment uptown at three o'clock. Our model hasn't shown up, so it's do it now or write it off. What do you say?"

"Two hundred and fifty for taking my picture? Sure," he said. Anybody who'd pay that much when twenty would do the job could be worked for more.

The woman called Judy said, "Super. Let me call off Brian." She reached into the window of the sports car and pulled out a CB microphone. "We've found him, love," she said. "Come on back." There was no answering squawk, but she returned the mike to its place. "That was for Brian," she explained to Tony. "Max's assistant. He's been jogging all through this area looking for a face like yours."

"Hell of a runner," said the photographer, who presumably was Max. "I bought a little battery-operated CB monitor for him, and now I use

him all the time to scout out location sites on foot."

"I guess a guy like you needs a bunch of assistants," Tony said speculatively.

Max smiled and nodded. "They come and they go," he said. "Now let's get this set taken while we've still got time."

"Just tell me how you want me," Tony said. He wanted to make good at this. Go with the cash flow–that was his motto.

"First of all," Max said, pushing Tony up against the nearest building, "I want you standing in front of this patch of red brick." He removed a small device from one of his carrying cases and held it at various distances from Tony, looking thoughtfully at the dial on its face. "You know anything about photography?" he asked.

"Not really."

"Just as well," Max said. "What I'm looking at here is a light meter. I want to get the right exposure. Judy–you want to brief him?"

"This is a cigarette ad," Judy said. "Oh, yeah—do you smoke?"

"Sure."

"O.K., here," she said, producing an open cigarette carton from within the car. "Light up one of these and keep the pack."

While Tony tore open the pack Max said, "Always ask to keep everything you model, man. That's where half the bread is."

Tony nodded. There might be an angle there.

Meanwhile, Judy had indicated his pose, adding, "See if you can keep the lit end up at an angle. What we're trying for isn't a laid-back sort of thing. Try to look a little fierce."

"I can dig it," Tony said. Wasn't that his style?

"Super. Now turn more sideways, like you're walking up toward the corner. What we want is a background of a grungy urban sprawl, a sort of mean-streets look, and against that–this one guy who's out of place."

"Uh, how's that?" Tony asked, trying to pantomime walking.

"Keep that lit end up," Judy cautioned. "That's better. See, this is going to be just one more picture in a magazine full of pictures so it's got to have something that causes the reader to stop and notice the client's brand name, something *arresting*."

"Good word," Max commented, busy assembling a camera from various components.

"In this case," Judy informed Tony, "that something is you. In sharp contrast to this red-brick city scene we observe this outdoorsy macho

kind of guy moving up the street with some heavy purpose in mind, a sort of don't-mess-with-me-woman look."

"Hey, know what you mean," Tony said, posing–and hoping he could remember her words on the next morning he felt that, despite all the money he spent on his appearance, he was a totally average-looking dude.

"Super," Judy said. "But I wonder . . . "

"Try the sweater," Max said, still absorbed in his camera.

"That's it," she said, producing from the back seat of the car a heavy white fisherman's sweater. "Put this on."

"This is great material," Tony said. He didn't resent covering up his shirt; the sweater was classier. "British import?"

"You know your clothes, don't you?" Max said. "I like your style, man. You get to keep the sweater, of course."

"No joke?" Tony said. "Man, nobody's ever going to believe this!"

"That right?" Max murmured distractedly.

"Yeah," Tony said. "Nobody ever believes anything I say, you know?" That didn't sound very good. He added, lamely, "I guess most people think I'm–like–a dreamer."

"That's what we're all about today, isn't it?" Judy said, cryptically but encouragingly. "Dreams, fantasy–illusion versus reality."

Max interrupted testily, "He's still not outdoorsy enough."

"How about the cap–sort of a sailor-on-leave look?" Judy asked. Max just grunted.

She pulled out a woolen cap of a similar knit to the sweater and Tony put it on gingerly, trying to reduce the damage to his blow-dried hair.

"You can keep that too," Judy said, watching him. "It folds down into a ski mask for winter."

"I can dig it," he said, doggedly trying to keep the lit end of the cigarette up and beginning to feel like a jerk.

"Tell you what, love," Judy said. "Don't stare up the street. Stand like you used to be walking up the street but our camera caught your eye and now you've turned to look at us. Remember: surly, don't-mess-with-me."

Tony felt more comfortable the new way, and this seemed to make Judy more comfortable too. Max, on the other hand, had lost his earlier joviality. As he began to take pictures–snap-snap-snap, very rapidly–he looked increasingly anxious and grim. Occasionally he'd break off and glance at his watch.

"It's no good," he announced suddenly, glaring at Tony as if with

personal dislike. "He doesn't look right. He's wrong."

"O.K., O.K., now," Judy said placatingly. "We'll try something else on him. How about this?" She produced a small backpack from within the car and handed it to Tony. "Put this on too, love."

"Does it go with the hat?" Tony asked.

"Would you just put it on and let us worry about that?" Max snapped. Judy interposed herself and, her back to Max, silently mouthed the words, "Humor him."

All Tony wanted to do was stay on their good side so he put on the backpack, feeling foolish. Sailors on leave had duffel bags, not backpacks; he'd seen enough cigarette ads to know that. He was glad the street was empty of onlookers now.

Snap-snap-snap. In the distance he heard kids shouting, car horns blaring, sirens starting up–noises like the city itself, hated but taken for granted. He looked at Max and Judy with the required surly expression. What did all this remind him of? The two of them in their uniform outfits, anonymous behind tinted glasses; the way they chivvied him around, made him take orders, kept him anxious to please with their good-guy/bad-guy routine? It was like the time L.A. highway cops pulled him in, even to the expression on his face when they'd taken the mug shots . . .

But where did that thought lead him? There was nothing on him in this town, not really, and if they tried to lure him into something that would be Entrapment. Besides, undercover cops wouldn't just pick him off the street at random. No, he'd just got lucky, that was all–and even he had trouble believing it. He could already see his few friends–usually scornful of his tales of epic dope deals and big-time ripoffs–having to suffer his nonchalance about his classy new job: "Yeah, it's not bad bread, but it's a lot of hassle too. Your back gets stiff from standing in one place, you know?" Fantastic. Instead of getting paranoid, he should be trying to line up a regular job with these people.

"That's more like it, isn't it?" Judy was saying.

"Yeah," Max said, straightening up. "Now, here's the eye catcher, the arresting bit. He's going to look as though he's been hiking through the city. Get the image?"

"I can d— Super," Tony said.

"O.K.," Max said. "I want you to jog in place for a minute, to get your face flushed–you're coming out too pale against that red brick. Judy, give us some glycerine to look like sweat; I want the look of real exertion."

While Tony jogged in place, Judy reached into the car again and produced a kid's toy, a black squirt gun in the shape of a .45 automatic. It was dripping what appeared to be water. Tony jogged on, lifting his knees high, anxious to give Max exactly what he wanted. Max was a very businesslike dude, that was clear. Tony could see he was worried about the time, but that didn't mean things were going badly. And this Judy was on Tony's side, there was no doubt about that. She'd be coming on to him if Max weren't around.

"All right, good—stop," Max said. "Hit him with the glycerine, love."

"This is just to look like sweat," Judy explained, raising the squirt gun. "It feels like water and it's harmless if it gets in your eyes." She squirted him in the face, on the hair beneath his cap, and—surprising him—under his arms. "Here's a fresh cigarette," she said. "Take your pose."

And that seemed to do it. Thirty seconds of fast picture-snapping later, Max said, "It's a wrap. Definitely satisfactory. Just hold it a minute longer and I'll take a few backups on another roll just in case."

"Take your time," Tony said, the cigarette rock-steady between his teeth. Now he felt so professional he wished there *were* spectators.

He heard a slapping sound in the distance, sneakers hitting pavement. "That must be Brian coming back," Max said without looking up from his camera. "That boy sure can run."

Tony knew better than to turn his head until Max had packed up his camera and turned away to the car.

He stretched his back. "Will that two hundred and fifty be a check, or what?" He turned to Judy and saw this new guy, Brian, a totally average-looking dude in a white fisherman's sweater like Tony's. He looked like he'd been running hard all right. He was mopping his face with another of those wool caps and leaning over the car, panting. Noting that Brian was wearing a backpack too, Tony decided that Max must have originally planned to shoot the set with Brian unless he could find someone with more style. It was a good thing Tony had come along, he told himself–there was no comparison.

Max was behind the steering wheel of the car and Brian was opening the door on his side. Tony cleared his throat and repeated his question about the money.

"Brian's got it," Judy said breathlessly. They really seemed desperate to make their appointment uptown. She handed Tony the black squirt

gun. "Hold this a second, will you?" she said, and with both hands now free she fumbled at the flap of Brian's bulging backpack. She removed something and, after following Brian into the car, reached out the window to Tony. "Here's your money," she said, handing him a stack of crisp new bills with a paper band around them. "Good luck!" The car pulled out into the street, heading downhill.

"Hey!" Tony said, jogging along beside them. Weren't they going to take his phone number? "Hey, you forgot your squirt gun!"

"Keep it!" Judy cried as they pulled away.

"What magazine am I going to be in?" Tony yelled, still trying to keep up. "I want to get a copy!"

"Oh, you'll get the picture, all right," she said, as they turned the corner and left him behind, *"framed!"*

He puffed to a halt at the fire hydrant on the corner, looking after them. A funny thing; their shiny new sports car had a thick coat of mud all over the license plate. It spoiled the image. When the car disappeared from view, he looked for the first time at his money, and whistled. This was no stack of fives–they were all fifties, and the bank wrapper was still on them!

Above the familiar sound of sirens, which had been growing steadily louder, there was a sudden explosion of footsteps, and two men in uniforms hurtled into Tony from behind. "Watch it!" he yelled, but they pulled him to his feet and threw him against the side of a building–another patch of red brick, he thought, dazed–and held him there. Tony looked uncomprehendingly back and forth between them.

"He sure can run," gasped the first one, a policeman. "He isn't even breathing all that hard."

The second man wore the uniform of a bank guard. He was nearly doubled over, panting, as he frisked Tony and said, "It's him all right. Here's the ski mask, folded up in the cap, and here's the gun—a squirt gun! I wish we'd shot it out! O.K., kid, where's he rest of the money?"

"He put it in the backpack," the cop said. "By the way, kid, you have the right to remain silent—"

Tony recovered his voice and half his wits. "You guys think I robbed some bank, is that it?"

"Pathetic," the bank guard said. "No use talking to him. He'll want his lawyer. He's the type, you can see that."

"Definitely the type," the cop agreed.

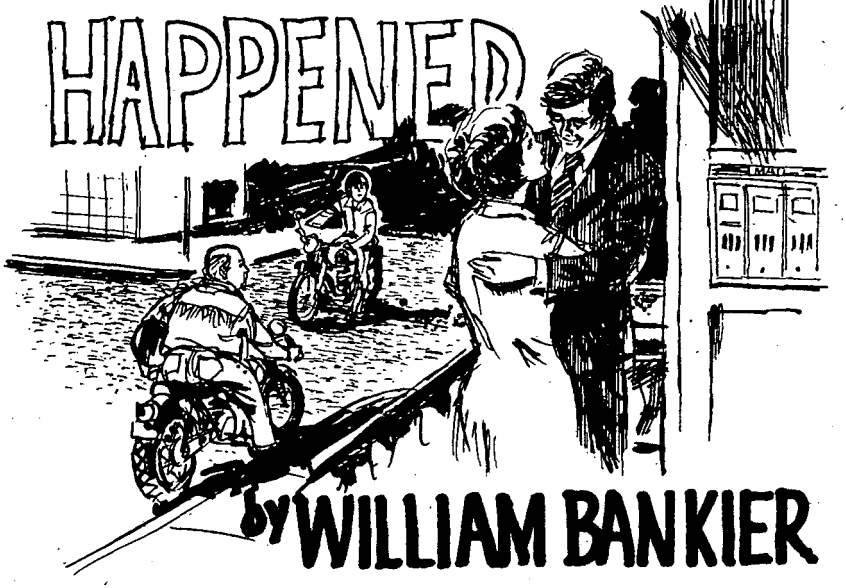
Tony laughed, a little wildly. "Oh, wow, you're never going to believe this . . . " he began.

A few curious pedestrians drifted by. They saw a young man being arrested, his dress outlandish, his face very pale against the red-brick wall. As the policeman read him his rights, he kept repeating, with increasing conviction, the words, "You're never going to believe this." Because of the stump of cigarette still clenched between his teeth, his words were almost unintelligible.

Not a pretty picture.

Hazel was Joe's laugh machine . . .

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED



by WILLIAM BANKIER

In the early days of marriage when Cliff was still a baby and before the comedy career blossomed, Joe Marki had a standard retort he used whenever his wife came up with a funny line. "The Baron tells the jokes," he would say, and Hazel would respond with the hearty, heady laugh that served as a beacon signaling the whereabouts of Joe and Hazel Marki.

On other occasions he would say, "Show me where it says Maria Ouspenskaya gets a laugh." This never failed to break Hazel up because she

was indeed a short woman of Russian descent, though half a century younger than the diminutive actress.

Joe Marki was a funny man in those days. Some people said he was not all *that* funny, that he owed his success to a couple of fortunate circumstances. One was the aforementioned laugh of Hazel, which created and sustained an atmosphere of hilarity wherever Joe was doing his stuff; the other was the comedy-writing talent of Stevie Ledyard. Ledyard attached himself to the Marki bandwagon in the early days, and throughout the next decade and a half he supplied a good deal of the original material performed by the rotund comic in his Montreal nightclub appearances and later on his weekly radio shows.

It was a successful career by Canadian standards but the Marki family life was not entirely happy. One reason was that Joe suffered from bouts of depression. These were brief at first and occurred not more often than once a year. When the gloom came down, Hazel would send her husband to a doctor who would prescribe a capsule to counterbalance the drag on Joe's spirits and eventually he would resume the slightly manic behavior his associates had come to think of as his normal state.

Another reason for discontent in the Marki household was Hazel's feeling that she was wasting her time. She knew that the job of raising a son was important, but she couldn't help remembering her maiden years when, as Hazel Runcorn, she had taught a class of seven-year-olds at a Côte St. Luc primary school where she had influenced not just one but twenty-five growing children.

As for her relationship with Joe, there wasn't a whole lot in it. She knew she served as, and was seen to be, his laugh machine. This made sense. The comedian's ego required constant feeding and if she kept his confidence at a peak level it was security for the family–money in the bank. Besides, Hazel came from a family where she was younger sister to a pair of brothers who, she recognized early on, were clan idols. Rather than compete with them, she decided, unconsciously perhaps, the safer course was to worship and adore them. So Hazel Runcorn learned at an early age to laugh loud and long whenever a man opened his mouth in mirth.

Thank goodness now for Stevie Ledyard. The writer had entered the Marki orbit years before, cast into space following the explosion of a dying advertising agency. Joe soon recognized that Stevie could create gag lines

and he took on the handsome younger man as paid contributor and an adopted member of the family. In both capacities, Ledyard spent many a summer afternoon and evening in a deck chair on the back lawn outside the Marki cottage at Ste. Rose twenty miles north of Montreal, drinking gin and tonic with Hazel while Joe stood guard over a sizzling barbecue of steaks, coal-baked potatoes, and corn on the cob.

Later, when Joe was on the telephone to his producer in the city, Hazel and Stevie would wander down the slope to a spot where the house lights could be seen fragmented by a copse of birch trees. His arm would slip around her waist, feeling the cool flesh under her loose blouse, and their lips would touch and break, touch and break. "No, Stevie. Mmmmmmm. No–no . . ."

Later still, a screen-door slam would be heard followed by Joe Marki's inquiring call from the porch–sounding like one of the neighborhood kids left with no companions. "Haze? Stevie?"

Stevie would walk along the base of the slope and come trudging up alone from the flat ground where the fish pond was located. "Hey, man," he would say, "those fingerlings are growing. We'd better eat them before they eat us."

"Have you seen Hazel?"

"She said she was going to get something from the car." The car park was in the other direction. Ledyard and Joe would go inside and the writer would switch on the television to catch the late news. A few minutes later, Hazel would appear with something like a zippered flight bag, complaining about a mosquito bite on her neck.

These juvenile dalliances were the stuff of long ago. These days, Cliff was nineteen, temporarily retired from college after his freshman year, and enjoying an extended sabbatical in Europe. Hazel spent a couple of afternoons a week in Stevie Ledyard's apartment downtown on Lincoln Avenue. Here, after making love, they would discuss Joe Marki with idle satisfaction, as if he were a mediocre movie they had just seen on a press pass.

"He's getting worse."

"You should see him around the house," Hazel agreed. "He never raises a smile from one day to the next."

"It isn't doing his career any good. They don't want him in the clubs any more. It gets through on stage–the gloom and the doom."

"I know. What's the matter with him, Stevie?"

"Male menopause, I expect."

"I'll male menopause you–!"

"Cut it out, that hurts!"

Then, later: "Seriously, if he keeps on this way, he's going to be hard up for work."

"Which means I'll be hard up too. There aren't any other English-speaking comics to write for in Montreal."

"Well, I don't know what to suggest. He's been to the doctor, he's taking his medication. It doesn't seem to help any more."

"Maybe he needs electro-shock therapy. You and I could administer it with a lamp when he's in the bathtub."

"*Stevie! Sometimes you aren't very funny.*" But the hearty, heady laugh rang out.

"It wasn't meant as a joke."

Just when all seemed blackest, a lucky break occurred which turned around the Marki professional fortunes. A CBC radio producer who knew Joe from the old days and had not caught his act recently came through with a proposal for a half-hour radio series to be aired three evenings a week under the title "Laugh Time." Meetings were held with Ledyard and Hazel in attendance and contracts were signed. Money worries, for the foreseeable future, vanished.

"Laugh Time" began quietly but grew into a medium-sized success. Buoyed up temporarily by the long-term contract, Joe Marki soon slipped back into the subdued mood that was becoming his habitual condition. "What is it?" Hazel asked him. "You should be on top of the world, Joe. These are the good years."

"I know."

"I can only hold your hand so much. I have my own happiness to think about."

"Maybe I'm getting old," Joe said. "Or maybe telling jokes isn't important any more. It seems like such a waste of time. But what else can I do?" The round face produced a clown smile. "Anyway, I don't want to drag you down, or Stevie either. Be happy."

Hazel's alarm system gave her a mild jolt. Was he hinting that he knew what was going on? Feeling nervous, she curtailed her visits to Ledyard's apartment to one afternoon a week–but she stayed for supper.

Stevie Ledyard was the first to notice the transition in behavior between comic and wife. He marked it from the moment one afternoon at the Ste. Rose cottage when Joe said, "I'm sorry. I can't help acting morose." And Hazel said, "You aren't any more ose than some people. Less ose than others."

Stevie laughed and made a note of the line for use in a future script. Joe Marki made no effort to remind anybody that it was the Baron who told the jokes. Times had truly changed. But for the better?

It was Stevie's idea to write Hazel into a script. He said it would help him to have a fresh minor character–and, besides, it would mean another talent fee coming in to help offset a recent rise in the price of gin. He invented a bossy lady named Mrs. Shaft who came on as a nosy neighbor and had an argument with Joe about his dandelions putting seeds on her lawn. Hazel read the lines well and the producer told them to keep the character in.

As week followed week and Hazel became accustomed to the studio environment, she began to take over where Joe had long since left off. At one time, he had kept fellow performers in stitches. He never walked behind the sound-effects console without gradually bending his knees, giving the impression he was descending a flight of stairs. Now Hazel did this, and she did it well. She performed Joe's funny walk with her shoes on the sides of her feet, drank coffee "no hands" with the plastic cup held between her teeth, said things like "Here's looking up your old address" when having a drink with friends, and even told people the money she earned was going to help a needy family of which she was the head.

Throughout this metamorphosis, Joe Marki hovered on the periphery of the action with a quarter smile on his face. He read his lines well enough and did his usual professional job, but the spark was missing. So nobody complained, least of all Joe, as week by week Stevie Ledyard fattened up the role of Mrs. Shaft and gave fewer punchlines to Marki until finally the time arrived when the two characters were of equal weight and the balance tipped Hazel's way. With no fanfare, and with no official change in title, the format evolved into the Hazel Marki Show. The Baroness was now telling the jokes.

The first person to comment was Cliff Marki, home from his extended holiday in Europe. When Cliff went away he had a wise-cracking, under-

employed father and a tense mother poisoning their home with her neuroses. He returned to find Mum playing the part of Milton Berle while Dad, poor Dad, was on his way to becoming a basket case.

"What's going on here?" Cliff wanted to know. He had added twenty pounds to his gangling frame and was unnerving his mother by looking and acting like a person. "It used to be Joe Marki. Now the act is all you. What happened?"

"Your father's been down lately," Hazel explained. "Stevie and I made some adjustments to compensate. It's better this way."

"It doesn't seem better for Dad."

"Joe's happier the way it is."

Cliff sat on the edge of the bathtub the next morning and watched his father shave. Years ago the shaving ritual had been fun; Joe used to make sandpaper noises when he scraped at his beard and Cliff remembered that when his father applied underarm deodorant the sound of a tinkling bell came magically from somewhere in his throat. These rituals would lay little Cliff out on the tile floor. Now the procedure was silent and sad.

"Are you happy, Dad?"

"Hell, no. Who's happy?"

"I am. I've had two great years in Europe. I can't wait to start developing my idea for an educational series on the great museums."

"Good for you."

"They've stolen the show from you, Dad. I heard the last one—it was all the Mrs. Shaft bit."

"It's a clever character Stevie has written for Hazel. If it gets laughs, it's good for the show."

"Is that all you want?"

"I don't know what I want these days." Marki rinsed his face and rose to the towel with red cheeks and streaming eyes. "All I know is I don't know."

Three weeks later, Cliff Marki had occasion to climb aboard his motorcycle and drive down the highway to Montreal, where he had to see a man about making color slides of the hundreds of photographs he'd taken in England and France and Spain. At the end of the afternoon, on the way back out of town, he happened to drive along Lincoln Avenue. Waiting at a traffic light, he glanced across at an apartment building and

saw his mother and Stevie Ledyard in the doorway.

They kissed at length, then Hazel Marki walked away and Ledyard went back inside.

That night Cliff got his mother alone. "Is this for Dad's benefit too?" he asked. "Your affair with Ledyard?"

"I don't know what you mean."

He told her what he had seen in terms that convinced her there was no sense pretending she and Ledyard were not lovers.

"Joe knows nothing about it," she said. "Anyway, I don't think he'd care. He doesn't care about anything any more."

"That's bullshit," Cliff said. "I talked to him the other day. He cares a lot. He's just confused, going through a change. He needs attention and understanding. He *doesn't* need to be thrown aside."

"Obviously we see things differently. I know you've always loved your father. But I love Stevie and he loves me. We've got a perfectly good and natural thing going here. And nobody will get hurt as long as you don't rock the boat."

"Dad is being hurt every day. You've robbed him of his program. You've stolen all his gags and routines. I saw you hogging the scene at the last rehearsal. And now you and Ledyard are even taking away his self-respect."

"Have it your way," Hazel said brightly. "Anyway, there's nothing you can do about it. If you tell Joe you'll only embarrass him, because if he says anything I'll move out of here and go live with Stevie. We've got the show running fine now. We don't need a failed and faded Joe Marki."

For a few days, Cliff Marki went into a shell. Then he came out of it and Hazel, for one, was relieved.

At breakfast on a Wednesday the boy said, "I know it's short notice, Dad, but there's a neighborhood charity carnival going on this Saturday at the shopping center. I said I'd take part in it and I'd like to rope you guys into it."

Joe managed a pale smile at the sound of his son's enthusiasm. "What do you have in mind, Cliff?"

"Remember the magician act you used to do, Dad–with me under the sheet holding a cabbage on my head and you as the great Swami sticking knives into the cabbage?"

"You were the right height then, son. You're too tall now."

"No, I want to be the Swami. I found your old turban and tried it on. I look great." He turned to grin at his mother. "Would you be my assistant, Mum? You're the ideal height."

"I don't know . . ."

"After, you and Dad could do some gags. It would be a good promotion for the radio series. Come on—it's for charity."

The crowd at the shopping center was enthralled to see the famous Markis in person. The rest of the entertainment had been mediocre, so when Cliff appeared on the open plaza, splendid in turban and robe with a sheet over his arm and four knives in his sash, he was given great applause.

"I, the great Swami Reeva, am now about to perform the most breath-taking magic trick ever seen. This trick has made me the greatest magician in the country . . . I'm still not very good in the city." From the crowd, he heard his father laugh at the hoary material. It was the first encouraging sound out of the old man in weeks and it gave Cliff the resolve to press on.

"And now my assistant Pootwaddle will join me in this courageous endeavor."

Cliff spread the sheet and held it up to mask Hazel as she scurried on with a large cabbage concealed under her robe. As she took her place behind the sheet, she set the cabbage on top of her head and balanced it at the sides with both hands. Cliff lowered the sheet and it dropped over the short, round-headed figure.

This was a visual effect that never failed. Crowd reaction ranged from shrieking terror to giggling hysteria as Swami Reeva flourished the first knife, chose his spot carefully and drove the sharp blade through the sheet and into the head beneath. *Chunk!* Another knife. *Chunk!* A third. *Chunk!*

The plaza was in turmoil.

Cliff chose the target for the final blade with great care. His flourish was more dramatic than before. His left hand gripped the round shape beneath the sheet and the knife plunged in and down toward the back. But just then the cabbage slipped forward. To the audience it looked as if there had been a decapitation. They gasped, and the figure slumped beneath the sheet.

Cliff's face went white. He tore off the turban and knelt over the body

of his mother with the knife thrust into the back of her neck.

"Get a doctor, somebody!" he screamed. "There's been a terrible accident!"

It took six months for things to come back to normal. Joe Marki's friends rallied round as they had not done for years, and he had to endure the drop-in visits and the lunches and the weekend invitations until finally their consciences had been served and they could leave him alone.

Young Cliff handled his guilt and remorse in the best way possible–he buried himself in his work. One day he approached his father and said, "I've got this idea for a series of educational radio broadcasts, Dad. On the subject of Europe's great museums–the British, the V&A, the Louvre, the Prado. Here's the pilot script."

They went over it together and Joe was surprised at the serious quality of his son's effort. There was room for an occasional improvement, and he was able to make a few suggestions based on his radio experience. He was also able to make an appointment for Cliff to see the woman in charge of educational programs at the CBC in Montreal. Joe had known her for years. She was keen on the idea and said that as soon as they could show her six scripts she would find a slot in the schedule.

On the way out of the Radio-Canada building that day, sharing a new enthusiasm, they ran into a worried Stevie Ledyard. No, there was no new comedy series planned to replace the cancelled "Laugh Time."

"It's the Marki name they want, Joe," Ledyard said. "Won't you reconsider your retirement? If you come back it could be just like old times."

"No thanks, Stevie," Joe said. "Tell you the truth, I'm feeling better than old times."

The museum series began and did well from the start. But when it really took off was when Joe–who accepted Cliff's invitation to narrate the series–began to insert a bit of humor. Nothing outrageous, just a few gentle and appropriate lines to brighten up the text. It gave the programs a unique tone and audience reaction was very positive. The series was extended and a followup was planned. The original shows were packaged and sold to networks in other countries. It meant nothing but prestige and money to the Markis, *père et fils*.

Throughout all this time and the years that followed, Joe Marki only once brought up the subject of the knife accident. It was one evening

when they had finished a broadcast and were relaxing over seafood in a roadhouse halfway up the highway to Ste. Rose.

"Tell me, son," Joe said. "I did that cabbage stunt dozens of times with you and with other people under the sheet. I never missed once. How did it happen?"

"I don't know, Dad," Cliff said, concentrating on a stubborn lobster claw. "It was just one of those funny things."

Their beer glasses were empty. Joe raised his in the air. "Waiter!" he said.

Leo was a mine of information . . .

THE GUN COLLECTOR

by L. F. JAMES

" 'I thumbed the safety off my Smith & Wesson service revolver and started slowly up the stairs—' "

"He *what?*"

" 'I thumbed the safety off my Smith & Wesson service—' "

"Hold it. Hold it right there," said Leo Browne. "All wrong, boy."

I sighed and put the manuscript down on the coffee table between us. Leo sat back in his rocker with a gleeful expression on his face and

straightened his bathrobe around his legs. He looked at me—at least that's the way it seemed, though Leo has been totally blind for a good six years now, ever since his auto accident. The dark glasses he wears hide his eyes and the scars. I figure he's so good at seeming to look right at you because he had his sight for some fifty years before he lost it.

"No, Larry," he said.

I stood up and stretched. "O.K., Leo Browne," I said. "What's wrong?"

"That's Browne-with-an-e, boy," he reminded me. It's his favorite chant.

"Brown with or without an e, you all look alike to me," I responded. He's black, of course.

Leo chuckled at my familiar answer. We've been neighbors for about five years, and good friends from the beginning. When Leo found out I write mystery stories he was tickled, almost as tickled as I was to find out he has the biggest and most valuable antique pistol and revolver collection in the state—and one of the finest in the nation. And he's a gold mine of information on firearms. That's what brings me regularly to his place. I read him my stories and he checks me on accuracy and realism where guns are concerned. He's a great source of plot material as well—his anecdotes have all gone into my notebooks.

I try to help him around the house as much as I can. I worry about him living alone, but he claims he's fine, lived in that house with his wife half his life and he isn't going to move out just because she's dead and he's sightless.

I leaned against the mantel and looked at him. "All right. Don't keep me in suspense."

Leo laughed again. "I don't know how you'd earn a living if it wasn't for me. In fact, I'm surprised you earn a living even *with* me. The safety on the revolver! That's one of the oldest mistakes mystery writers make. Not worthy of you, boy."

I glanced down at my manuscript again. "You're telling me there's no safety on a Smith & Wesson revolver?"

"Or on just about any other revolver, for that matter. Never has been. A revolver doesn't really need one."

"But I read about safeties on revolvers all the time. Why don't they need one?"

"Because it takes a strong pull on the trigger to fire one double-action—it would be pretty hard to shoot it accidentally. And if you're firing

single-action, cocking the hammer back is hard to do unintentionally."

"Let's have a drink," I muttered and walked over to the bar in the corner. I don't mind it so much when Leo catches me in some obscure technical or historical detail, but it's embarrassing when it's something I could have researched easily myself. I set out two glasses and reached for the bottle of Scotch.

Well, I thought, I should have asked Leo in the first place. You couldn't beat him on the subject of firearms. I looked around at his collection. He had acquired most of it before he lost his sight, and he still remembered every detail of every piece. He'd take a gun out and, feeling it lovingly, explain its construction and operation to me. It wasn't all nineteenth-century stuff, either. His collection ranged from pre-Civil War to post-World War II.

He'd been written up recently in a national magazine. I'd been there during the interview and picture-taking, and though the reporter had made a real fuss over Leo's being blind he hadn't mentioned it in the story. Maybe he'd feared, as I sometimes did, for Leo's safety, living alone with all these valuable old weapons.

I had the ice and the Scotch in the glasses and called over my shoulder, "Water or soda, Leo?" He didn't answer, so I turned around. "Water or—"

Leo motioned abruptly for me to keep quiet. I could see he was listening intently to something and then I heard it too—footsteps in the hall that led from the back of the house to the living room.

Two more seconds and a man appeared in the doorway. He spotted me across the room and brought a small black automatic up with a click. He didn't see Leo, sitting over to the side in his low rocker.

"You're the gun collector," he said. "I want them. Load them into my car outside."

I stood frozen for a moment, looking at the barrel of his pistol.

Leo cleared his throat. "*I'm* the collector."

The intruder spun around to look at him. Leo had removed two tiny revolvers from his bathrobe pockets, cocked the hammers, and held one in each fist, pointed our way. He seemed to look right at the intruder. "Better drop your pistol," he said. "I can get a shot out of one of these cocked revolvers a lot quicker than you can shoot an autoloader double-action. And if the gun in one hand misses, the other one will surely get you."

There was a moment of hesitation, and then the burglar put his gun down on the mantel. "Pick it up, Larry," Leo said. I did so, gingerly. "And I hate to say this," he continued, "but you'd better knock our visitor on the back of the head with it. That'll keep him quiet till the police get here."

I hesitated, but Leo was right. I mean, here we had a blind man holding a felon at bay with two antique revolvers. There was no sense pushing things too far.

I knocked the guy out and went to the phone and called the cops. Then I sat down across from Leo and sighed. He had let the hammers down on the revolvers. They were Lady Smith .22-caliber seven-shot revolvers, made by Smith & Wesson around the turn of the century—two of the most valuable pieces in Leo's collection. He shook his head and clucked his tongue.

"Imagine trying to rob a gun collector. What some people use for brains."

I looked at him. He was fondling the guns. "They don't make them like this any more. It's too bad. They say Smith & Wesson stopped production on these because the board of directors found they were very popular among ladies of easy virtue. As if stopping their production did anything to deter crime—or prostitution for that matter."

He returned the guns to his bathrobe pockets. I regained my wits enough to say, "Leo, how did you know he was holding an automatic?"

He had probably been waiting for me to ask that, because a grin spread quickly across his face.

"I heard him click the thumb safety off," he answered. "So it couldn't have been a revolver." He likes to rub things in sometimes.

That reminded me of something else. "That business about being able to fire your cocked revolver faster than he could shoot his automatic—what was that all about?"

His face became serious. "Well, theoretically it's probably true that a cocked revolver can be fired a split second faster than an autoloader which hasn't yet been fired since loading, and whose hammer isn't cocked manually—and most people don't think of cocking an auto's hammer back for the first shot. I certainly didn't hear our friend here cock his. But if he had decided to try to shoot me anyway—"

I shuddered. "So you psyched him out? Is that what you're saying?"

"If you like. But, mystery writer" he chided, "if that line about the

cocked revolver in 'The Whosis Kid' was good enough for Hammett it's good enough for me."

I decided not to answer him. Besides, the police were pulling up noisily outside and there was one thing more I wanted to say.

"You know, Leo, I hesitate to ask this, but—being blind and all——suppose you had shot *me* by mistake?"

"Glory be!" He laughed, patting his bathrobe pockets. "These things aren't loaded! Who in blazes would sell a blind man ammunition?"

When I got home, I put that into my notebook too.

AN IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS

On August 27, 1979 the mailing house responsible for shipping subscriber copies of AHMM unfortunately experienced a fire which gutted the facility as well as destroying literally thousands of subscriber copies earmarked for mailing.

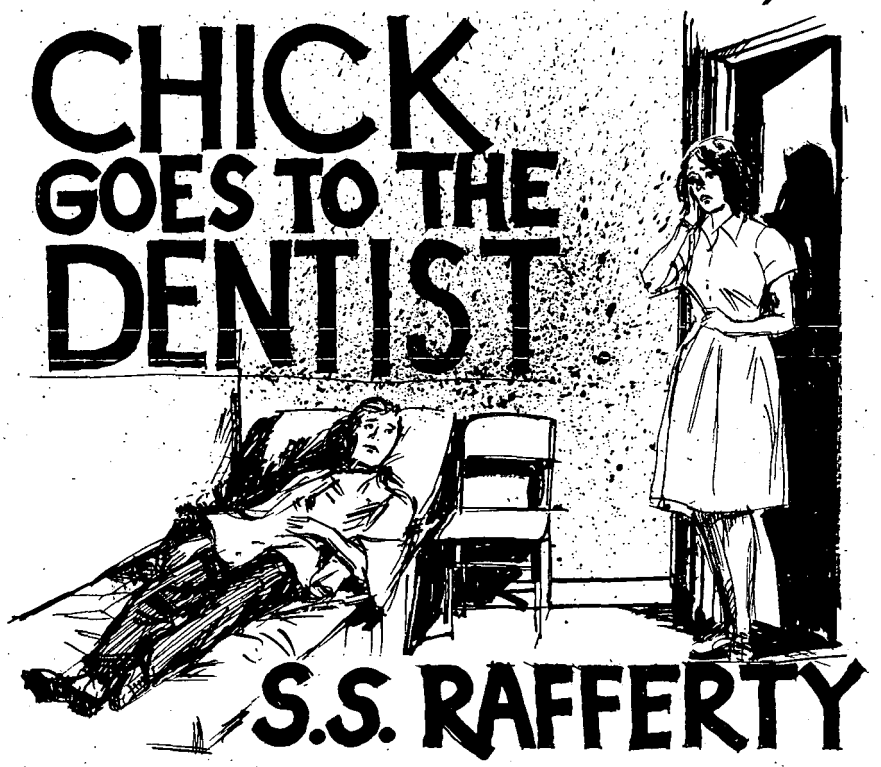
Among the destroyed copies were small amounts of July, August, September and October 1979 issues which cannot be replaced. Subscribers who will miss these issues will have their subscriptions extended accordingly.

A very small number of the missing issues is available from the New York office for any subscriber who collects complete sets.

Joel Davis, Publisher

Open wide, please . . .

CHICK GOES TO THE DENTIST



S.S. RAFFERTY

For years now, I've rarely had to eat on weekends. In fact, I usually can't after the Friday-night dinners at Barry and Sylvia Kantrowitz's apartment. Barry was my agent during my road days as a stand-up comic, and I used to welcome coming back to New York and feasting on Sylvia's schav, boiled beef with horseradish, potato latkes, or whatever. It was O.K. in those days because I was starving, but now that I own my own nightclub with a head chef and five under-cooks, these Friday feasts are a bit

ridiculous. But as in all families, adopted or blood, some things start out as a habit and suddenly they become a ritual and, before you know it, you have an unbreakable sacrament on your hands.

"Eat!" she's commanding as usual. "What's the matter, the latkes aren't crisp enough?"

"Terrific–honest, Sylvia."

"You're chewing funny. Barry, Chick's chewing funny."

"He's a comedian, isn't he?"

"He's chewing on one side of his mouth."

Forgive her, folks, she confuses me with the child she never had. I'm not supposed to talk at the table, like not if I want dessert and to listen to the Lone Ranger on radio *circa* 1934.

"Lots of people chew on one side," Barry observes.

"Ten years he's chewed on both sides–why now only one?"

"Sylvia," I said, kissing dessert and the masked man goodbye, "I've got a mild toothache, that's all."

"Mild! How can you have a *mild* toothache? An ache is an ache. Barry, call that Durdeman right now and give him a piece of your mind. Eight thousand dollars and Chick gets toothaches!"

"Durdeman is dead five years already," Barry says casually.

I should have kept my mouth shut. Back when I was starting out playing the Catskills, Sylvia (my real manager) decided I had lousy teeth and had Dr. Durdeman give me a cap job. It took me two years to pay it off.

"I have a dentist, Sylvia, but he's on vacation. It's no big deal. He'll be back next Wednesday."

"Five days of pain you don't need," she says, getting up from the kitchen table and heading for the wall phone in the pantry. She dials a phone the way Patton attacked Europe.

"Beverly? Aunt Sylvia. Darling, you've got to come over immediately. It's an emergency. What? Ha! I should be so lucky. It's a dental emergency. Chick Kelly has an awful pain. Beverly, I *know* he should see a dentist, but his dentist is on vacation, the bum, so you come over. A date! Don't you people take an oath or something?"

Barry is giving me a hunched-shoulders, what-are-you-going-to-do? look.

"That's better. Twenty minutes is fine, darling."

She hangs up, goes to the refrigerator, takes out a bowl, and goes to the stove. "No more chewing for you, Mr. Grin-and-Bear-It, soup in five

minutes. Beverly thought you had a heart attack, Barry."

"Just what I need, a dental hygienist she'd call."

Now you're saying to yourself that Sylvia may be overreacting, but at least she's trying to help. Nuts, pal, she's playing *shadchan*–matchmaker. For years she's been trying to get me to marry "a nice decent girl." I looked at Barry and hunched my shoulders too.

I'll say this–the nice decent girl category has certainly improved over the years. Beverly Gold had creamy hazel eyes, long brown hair, and–well, let's go all the way–*zaftig, muy, très zaftig*.

"Feel better?" she asked across the table. I had taken her back to the club for the ten o'clock show to make up for the date she had broken. When she showed up at Sylvia's, she'd had a bottle of patent-medicine drops that she sloshed on my tooth—or gums.

"Much, but the vodka works better."

"You be at the office at eight tomorrow morning. Saturdays are our busiest days, but I called Miss Hawkins at home. She's our office manager and the real power around there. The booking desk would just put you on standby. I want Dr. Raskin to take care of you. Not that Dr. Dearborn and Dr. Kominsky are slouches, but Miss Hawkins can adjust Raskin's schedule any way she likes."

I was looking at the business card she had given me: Dearborn, Kominsky & Raskin. "Office managers, booking desks—it sounds like General Motors."

She smiled beautifully. No caps. "We specialize in oral surgery, and it's a very large practice."

"I'm sorry about your date."

"Don't be. I'm not–he was getting too serious. Besides, I've heard about you for years and always wanted to meet you."

"Oh?"

"My father thinks you're a terrible man–the wives and the scandals and all. When I was a little girl I had a picture of you hidden in my bureau drawer."

Inside I'm hurting, and it isn't the tooth. All the oil of cloves in the world wouldn't numb the wound in my ego. I had just been told that I was too old for her. Who needs a father-image crush?

If you want to get out of the world for a while, I recommend sodium

pentothal. The nurse sticks a needle in your arm, starts the juice flowing, and off you go. No thoughts, no dreams, just suspended time. Maybe it's like being dead.

When I came to and stood up I was very wobbly, and the nurse ("Hi, I'm Amy!") had to help me to one of the small recovery rooms, where she made me lie on a couch built into the wall like a ship's bunk.

"Did anyone accompany you here, sir?" she asked.

"No, I'm a big boy."

"Well, the doctors usually insist that someone accompany a patient undergoing sodium pentothal. You'd better wait at least a half hour before you leave."

As she's giving me the lecture, I'm suddenly aware that I have a piece of gauze in my mouth where the molar was earlier. Dr. Raskin had looked at the X rays and given me the option, via a nurse, of waiting for Dr. Berman to get back from vacation or having the tooth out then and there.

"But Dr. Berman will probably just send you right back to us for the extraction," she added. "He refers most of his molar surgery to us. Practically everybody does."

And she wasn't just idly bragging. This wasn't a dentist's office, it was an assembly line that took up an entire floor of a classy skyscraper on Fifty-third Street. You could get lost just walking around the joint. Even at eight A.M. the waiting room had been jammed—mostly with teenagers. "Wisdom teeth," one cute little redhead told me with a twinkle in her eye. "Now I'll have an excuse for failing my math test." Everybody's a comedian at seventeen.

I looked up from my berth and saw a fatherly bespectacled face in the doorway of the recovery room. It was Dr. Raskin. I'd only seen him once earlier, a moment before the sodium pentothal blanked me out.

"Are you feeling all right, Mr. Killy?"

"Fine," I said. "But the name is Kelly, as in Gene and Grace."

He looked bewildered for a moment and then smiled. "Yes, of course. Well, as I assumed from the X rays, that molar had to come out sooner or later, and better now before it gave you real trouble. Lie back, take it easy, and the wooziness will wear off."

I checked my watch—eight-thirty. Tossing out the time it had taken for the X rays and diagnosis, the actual operation had taken maybe seven minutes. At two hundred dollars a pop, this was some business. I leaned back, trying to compute the income of these guys. Maybe a dozen re-

covery cubicles, a gang of surgical rooms—fifteen minutes a patient, say, put the take at eight hundred an hour less overhead. Why hadn't I gone to dental school?

"Oh, there you are," a voice said from the doorway.

"Here I be, Beverly. You look nice and crisp in white."

"I thought you were in Room Six. How do you feel?"

I started to tell her but a nurse came in, whispered something in her ear, and poof!—they were gone like two jumpy rabbits, and suddenly there was a lot of activity in the hallway—nurses rushing back and forth and someone wheeling an oxygen tank. A man in a white coat hurried down the corridor with a grim look on his face and took the receiver from a wall set across from my room. "Victoria, Dr. Dearborn. 911 . . . cardiac. I'm sure he's dead, but Kominsky's working on him. Just call, please, Vicky. Yes, Kelly. Chick Kelly . . ."

What a rotten way to go. One lousy tooth and here I am, dead and doomed to haunt the scene where it happened. I've read about people who were pronounced legally dead and came back to tell how they were hovering around, looking at their own bodies. Well, if I'm coming back I hope Dr. Kominsky knows his business, even though I can't see him at the moment. And believe you me, Sylvia Kantrowitz isn't getting off the hook so easily. She's in for one hell of a haunting for getting me into this. The only consolation I've got is that I'm stiffing Dearborn, Kominsky & Raskin out of two hundred bucks–or did they stiff me? Really *stiff* me?

But death isn't that much of a drag, because Bev is back, looking like she's just died herself.

"Welcome to heaven," I told her. "I never figured it would be fitted out like a dentist's office. Or–" I stopped "–don't tell me this is–"

She looked numb. "Please don't try to be funny," she said. She sat in the chair next to the berth and went limp.

I shook my head to get rid of the fuzziness. "I think I've been on a dream trip. I thought I died–honest, Bev–and you look like you've seen a ghost or two."

You'd think El Dopo could have seen it coming. I've known a few women, and the one thing they all have in common is the build-up to tears–the introspective look, the shaking, and then the flood.

I sat up, swung my feet to the floor, and took her by the shoulders. "What's the matter, Bev?"

"The patient went out . . . cardiac arrest." She was so shook she wasn't

capable of making sentences. "Wrong room. They . . . thought it was you . . . I gave . . . injection. Oh, Chick, Chick!"

This I do know about women. When they are hurting like this it's time to play Papa Bear, and I did. I got her on her feet, put my arms around her, tucked her head into the curve of my shoulder, and held on. Everybody has a few roller coasters in their lives, and this seemed to be her first.

"Miss Gold!"

Bev pulled back from me. "I'm sorry, Dr. Raskin. I'll be all right. It's just . . ."

Raskin was giving me a puzzled look.

"I'm a friend of the family," I explained. "What happened?"

"A patient has expired. It looks like anesthetic death. Unfortunate, but it happens. Rarely, but it happens. Beverly, I think you ought to pull yourself together, dear. Why don't you take a sedative and lie down in my office?"

"She said something about having given the injection," I said.

"For God's sake, Beverly, you are not in any way responsible!" Over his shoulder, Raskin called, "Stella! Beverly is a little distraught. Would you take her to my office?"

When she had gone, he shook his head. "It's a million-to-one chance that anyone would go out on sodium pen. This is the first time it's happened in my career."

"The guy must have had a bad heart."

"He could have, but that's not the point. Each human system reacts to drugs in a different way—and even to the tomato and the cucumber. How are *you* feeling, Mr. Killy?"

"Fine. It's *Kelly*, remember?"

More puzzlement from his face, and this time he reached outside the room and plucked a card out of a wall rack. "I thought you were just groggy when I looked in on you earlier. Your record says Charles Killy."

"My first name is Charles, but the surname is spelled K-E-L-L-Y."

"It must have been an administrative error. It's quite a coincidence, though. The man who died was listed as Charles Kelly. Well, no matter."

"Will Beverly be all right? Shall I wait and take her home?"

"She'll be all right. She's upset because she administered the sodium pentothal. That's psychologically natural but unfounded. Dr. Kominsky supervised the procedure, she only carried out his orders. We'll reassure

her–she'll be all right. Well, Mr. Kelly, give my regards to Bill Berman. Is he still playing the clarinet?"

"Not in the office, but if he'd practice more he could chuck the teeth business and play any club he wanted to."

"We all have something we'd rather do. Mine is sailing. Now just go to your left and down the hall to the control desk. They'll take care of you."

I did, and was told to go into a small office where I found a veddy British, veddy brusque dame in a white lab coat. "Mr. Killy," she said as I plunked down in a seat next to her desk. I decided not to correct her because it was obvious that mouths, not names, were the important thing in this factory. Her desk plate read Victoria Hawkins, and I was tempted to call her Miss Hawker.

"Here are some gauze pads," she went on. "And I am going to give you a prescription for penicillin–" she wrote on a form "–it's to be taken until all the pills are used to insure against infection. You aren't allergic to penicillin, are you? Good. The second prescription is for pain, but to be used *only* if you have pain. The charge is two hundred dollars."

They sure weren't shy about asking for bucks. They even had a Master Charge sticker on the wall. Next you'll be able to charge your own funeral. "Bill me," I said as I got up, figuring they might bill Mr. Killy.

The funny thing is, I'm not sensitive about my name. Back in the early days when Barry was booking me into the ethnic Catskill resorts, I had a lot of names. If I played an Italian hotel I was Chick D'Amato. At the Jewish places I was Chick Cohen. And every time I meet a Hungarian I get the Chick Vicor hello. The only place in the mountains where I could be Chick Kelly was at the Emerald Isle Hotel, and it was the one place I always bombed.

Back at the club that evening Sylvia phoned for "all, and I mean *all*, the details of what happened at the dentist."

I told her, and added that I thought Bev was taking it too hard.

"I know that, you know that, but *she* doesn't know that. My brother talked with Dr. Raskin and he assured him it was an unavoidable accident and Bev couldn't possibly be sued for malpractice."

If she sounds like a lawyer, folks, she isn't, but she thinks she is–that's along with being a doctor, psychiatrist, matchmaker, kvetch, and you-name-it.

"I'll give her a call after the ten o'clock show and try to cheer her up."

"Chick, darling, you don't call a decent girl at that hour–and, besides, my brother doesn't like you."

"What the hell did I ever do to him? I've never even met him."

"He doesn't like your reputation. Don't worry, he'll come around, you'll see."

"See what? Sylvia, cut it out, will you? She's a lovely girl, but she's a kid."

"A kid! What are you, Methuselah already? And let me tell you, Mr. Alimony, a nice quiet girl would do you some good. All those bums you go around with make me sick. Suppose you got cancer or something, heaven forbid! Who would take care of you?"

"That's very romantic, Sylvia."

"Don't be a smart mouth. Tell Barry to bring home milk."

I came off the two o'clock show feeling lousy. My jaw was aching and, having been up since seven, I was tired and grumpy. The last thing I needed was Donald Jaffee's ugly puss showing up.

"Hello, Lieutenant. Goodbye, Lieutenant," I said, starting back to the office to change. He was right on my tail.

Once in the office I ignored him and started to climb out of the tux. Jack McCarthy came in with a VTNL, sensed something was up, and said, "Want me to stick around, Champ?"

He knows about witnesses.

"This is private, McCarthy," Jaffee growled from the Eames chair.

I told Jack Mac it was O.K. and he left. I sat at the desk. I took out the pain-killer pills and held up the bottle to show him the label.

"Maybe you've been transferred from homicide to narc, so for the record this is a controlled substance. There's a prescription on record at Mayfair Drugs down the block."

"Taking it with vodka isn't very smart."

"I've already got a mother. I'd really love to play verbal stickball with you, Lieutenant, but I'm done in. So if you're not carrying D.A. paper, you'll have to excuse me."

I've never seen him smile before. I mean a nice smile, not that sardonic shark's grin he can give you. Even with his bald dome the smile made him almost good-looking.

"You poor bastard, you *are* in bad shape, and I can't blame you. That's

why I'm here. I've talked with the Inspector, and we'll give you a twenty-four-hour bodyguard, just for old times' sake."

It was the second time that day I was feeling groggy, but this wasn't from sodium pentathol.

"We know Tommy Bricks hates your guts, but he's not that sophisticated."

"Whoa! What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Kelly, you're not stupid. You damn near got killed this morning, and you know as well as I do it won't stop there. Just tell me what broad has got it in for you this week and we'll have a little talk with her."

Lights were going on in my mind. "If you're trying to make a case about a guy named Killy taking the train, you'd better check with the morgue, Lieutenant. He died of an anesthetic death."

"Yeah, that's what it was supposed to look like," he said, taking a notebook from his pocket. "But the M.E.'s people are very thorough, especially since that curare case over in New Jersey. They also have a lot of sophisticated equipment like spectrophotometers." He started to read from the paper: "Sufficient traces of succinylcholine–"

"I'm still working on spectrophotometer."

"It's a machine that can identify trace elements. Succinylcholine is a muscle relaxant, like curare. A good enough dose of it relaxes *all* the muscles, including the most important one–the heart. Unless you were looking for a drug, you'd think the guy went out on a reaction to the sodium pentothal. We interviewed everyone on the Dearborn, Kominsky & Raskin staff and came up with the fact that your record card was outside Killy's recovery-room door."

"Brilliant. It didn't occur to you that someone wanted to do Killy in?"

"Killy is a Boston stockbroker who's in town for a few days. No one knew he was going to be there this morning except a vice president at Morgan Guaranty. Raskin is his dentist, and when Killy complained of a toothache at a meeting the banker made an emergency appointment for him. No doubt about it, Kelly, you missed a seat on the train by the skin of your teeth–so to speak."

"Puns make lousy humor, Lieutenant. This is nuts. No one wants to kill me. Besides, how could someone just walk into that place, stick a needle in this poor Killy, and walk out again without being noticed?"

"Try Grand Central Station to test your theory. The dentists have a

policy of encouraging patients undergoing anesthesia to bring a companion. According to the receptionist, there are usually more friends than patients roaming around, and it's a big place. No way out of it, Kelly–you were the target."

I was going to challenge him with the fact that no one knew I was going to be at Dearborn, Kominsky & Raskin and then I remembered that during the show the night before I'd worked in some schtick about getting up at dawn only to be put to sleep again just to have a tooth pulled. At least 130 people knew I was going to the dentist. I could hear Sylvia saying, "See, Mr. Mouth, see?"

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant. Knocking someone off with this drug–"

"Succinylcholine."

"Whatever. You said yourself it's a pretty sophisticated deal. Wouldn't the killer have to know something about medicine, or at least drugs?" I started to bite my tongue. Mr. Mouth was possibly about to bring poor Bev into the picture. Besides, Jaffee was being ironic with the bodyguard routine. It was too fishy, especially with a shark around.

"Hell, Kelly, the average street kid knows more about drugs than most medical students. We've checked out the office staff and they're clean at the moment–except for Beverly Gold. She knows you and made the appointment for you."

So that was it. This shark took a long time circling, but he's moving in now.

"She's Barry's niece. I met her for the first time last night."

"Knowing you, that ought to be enough time for a woman to build up a hate for you. Take it easy–she's out of it. Even if the cards were mixed up, she'd know what you look like. No matter how you shake it, you were a stranger to the killer and that spells a contract hit."

"Who was Killy, anyway, besides being a broker?"

"I've sent Coogan up to Boston on the shuttle to check that end, but from what the bankers tell us he was a proper Bostonian financial type and clean as a whistle. The poor slob is dead because someone goofed up some record cards." He got to his feet. "I take it from your attitude that you don't want protection. It's your funeral, Kelly."

So the pain in the neck left and the pain in my jaw was dulling, but there was a sharp pain in my brain. Who would want to kill me? Certainly not my three well-alimonied exes. As for other women, Miss Jeepers Jordan was doing a road show in Chicago and Tish Loman would have

simply shot me herself. Even though I don't trust Jaffee, I couldn't fault his logic. An out-of-towner making an unexpected emergency appointment certainly looked clean. I could only come up with three possibles. Maybe you can do better. Be my guest.

One–the target was Killy, after all, and the killer knew exactly what he looked like.

Two–Dearborn, Kominsky & Raskin had a psychopathic killer on their staff.

Three–tag, I'm it.

Two was farfetched and Three I didn't want to face, so I concentrated on One. I was doing scenarios like international-banking schemes and other dumb ideas. Then I was too tired to think any more–so beat that all a hit man would have to do was blow on me, and over I'd go.

The bedside clock read two when I woke up, only I didn't know what day it was and the only way I could find out was to get up and go to the hall door of the apartment where the newspapers are plopped each morning. When I opened the door and looked down I could see from the size of the edition that it was Sunday.

"Hello, Champ," a voice said from out of nowhere. I looked to the side of the doorway, and there was Jack Mac sitting in a chair. "I thought you'd sleep later than this."

"What in hell are you doing sitting outside my door? Why didn't you ring the bell?"

The fact that he's still wearing a tux gives me a fast clue. Of course he had listened outside the office door when Jaffee was laying the hit trip on me. And of course Jack Mac, all five-foot-two of him (and I think I'm overestimating by an inch or two) would take it on himself to play bodyguard. There are times when he drives me up a wall with his adoration, but this really touched me.

"Come on in, O sentry of the night. I'll get dressed and we'll go out for breakfast."

He grabs the papers before I can bend over for them, walks into the apartment, and picks up the phone. "How's your mouth, Champ?" I had forgotten about the extraction, so I guessed it was O.K., and nodded. "Swell," he says, dialing. "Hello, Ling–Jack Mac. Yeah, he's up. Steak and eggs, and tell Guido not to forget the mayo." He turned back to me. "Ling wants to know if you want some action on the Viking game."

I told him to take the morning line for two hundred bucks. I rarely watch football, but heaven forbid I should deprive my bookie's wife of a Florida vacation.

"It'll be here in twenty minutes, Champ. Mario's bringing it over in his limo."

"Jack Mac, if you've been out in the hall all night you must be bushed. Go on home."

"I'm fine, Champ–I just took the late duty."

"The late duty?"

"Yeah, we split it up into two hours on, four off. Ling, Guido, Barry, Cuz, Manuel, and myself. Mario Puccini's been ferrying us back and forth to the club so we can grab a nap. Hit the shower, Champ. I'll set up the card table in front of the TV. What's the matter? You've got a funny look on your face."

"Nothing," I said, and headed for the bathroom. I would be an ingrate not to appreciate my entire staff–Ling, my maitre d'; Guido, the chef; Cuz, the night barman; and even Manuel, the salad man–spending a night guarding me, but damn it, I was irritated. I took a long look at myself in the medicine-cabinet mirror. Nope, I didn't look like an eight-year-old–so why was everyone treating me like one?

And the protective custody didn't stop there. When Mario arrived with the chow, they all came with him, including Sylvia. While I ate steak and eggs ("Chew on one side"–guess who?) they all sat around making a list of people who might want to have me killed. This is not good for the digestion, but I continued to chew (on one side, of course).

By the time the football game was over (goodbye, two hundred bucks) they had boiled my enemies list down to twenty-five names, two of whom I couldn't even remember. I took Barry aside for a moment and asked him for Bev's phone number and used the bedroom extension.

"Mr. Kelly," a man's voice said with a lot of sternness in it after I told him who I was, "I would prefer that you didn't talk to my daughter."

"Mr. Gold, she's a grown woman, and I don't really care what you *prefer*."

"I know about you, Kelly." The voice got a little more gritty. "My sister Sylvia might think your escapades are cute and funny, but I think you're immoral, and we want nothing to do with you. Goodbye."

First a list of executioners and now moral pronouncements. What's next, a leper's bell?

I herded them all out of there around eight o'clock and got them off the guard-duty kick with the proviso that I'd lock the door and let no one in.

At nine-fifteen I broke my promise.

Haggard was the only way to describe her unless you've got a better word–and, if you do, you're probably a shrink. The pupils of her hazel eyes were constricted down to pinpoints and her skin was sallow. It wasn't from a lack of makeup, because Friday night and Saturday she hadn't worn any and I assumed she didn't ever use it. But she could have used it now.

"Can I have a drink, Chick?" Bev asked, taking a seat on the sofa.

"I thought you didn't drink. O.K., O.K., you sure could use it."

She took a long, unladylike pull on the Scotch. "Chick, I'm scared."

"You're making too much of it. If you're worried about a lawsuit, forget it. Raskin said so himself."

She started to shake and it wasn't from the Scotch. I sat down next to her and put my arm around her. "Easy, baby, easy."

Her hazel eyes teared up and then she blurted it out. "Chick, I knew Charles Killy before he showed up at the office yesterday. It was stupid, stupid, stupid!"

I took hold of her clenched fist and stopped her from pounding her thighs.

"I knew him in Boston when I was at school there two years ago. It was a pick-up thing–one night. When I saw his name on the patient list, I switched my assignment from your extraction to his with one of the other girls. I wanted to see if he'd recognize me, and he didn't."

"What are you trying to tell me, Bev?"

"I didn't kill him, Chick–but I'm the only one in that office who had any connection to him, and if the police put it together . . . oh, I'm such a slut."

"A one-night stand does not a slut make, my dear."

Then she did something strange and unexpected–she turned and kissed me. It wasn't one of those thank-you pecks–it was a three-o'clock-in-the-morning heaven-can't-wait job. She was like a fourteenth-century town tossing a wild orgy before the Black Plague hit. There wasn't any emotion in it–just fear letting the inhibitions go to hell.

I gently pulled away from her and got up and poured her another

drink–which she didn't need now, but I had to clear the atmosphere somehow. When I put the glass back on the coffee table she had a look on her face like a cornered animal.

"A one-night stand!" She laughed. "Oh, Mr. Chick Kelly, if you only knew how many. Oh, God, how many!"

I was getting a bit panicky. The kid was falling apart. I stood her up and put my arms around her Papa Bear style again. She spilled it all up in spades, diamonds, clubs, and busted hearts.

An hour later, I was back on the sofa, sitting opposite Hugo Miller, my personal M.D., who normally is pseudo-caustic with me, but now he was concerned.

"This girl's got a lot of problems, Chick. She thinks she's immoral, but she's really sick. She'll sleep for several hours. You're sure she had only two drinks?"

"More like one and a half–three fingers, tops. I'm not playing Psychology 101, but could this have something to do with her relationship with her father?"

"From what you've told me, probably, but that's out of my province–and *yours*. Stern, puritanical parents raising nymphomaniacal daughters is not a sound equation."

"It's a crazy thing, though. She's a beautiful girl who could attract any man."

"Many nymphomaniacs are, Chick. But you've got a bigger problem here. My doctor-patient privilege of confidentiality is being stretched. This girl may be a killer."

"Not according to the cops, Doc."

"Only because they lack information that we are withholding. She is clinically unstable. She knew and might have hated this Killy. Oral surgeons would have succinylcholine around, and she'd know how to use it. She could have used the same puncture wound she used in the sodium-pentathol injection. The boys at the morgue must be getting very sharp–or business is slow."

"A police lieutenant named Jaffee says they have a machine, a spectro-something."

"Spectrophotometer? But it only finds what you're specifically looking for–and of all the possible chemical combinations why would they look for one particular drug? Especially one that metabolizes so rapidly the

chances of finding it at all are slim. I'll have to ask Mort Gardiner next time I see him."

"Is he with the M.E.'s office?" He nodded, and I pointed to the phone. "Why don't you ask him now?"

"Just as you thought," he said, replacing the receiver three minutes later, "they were put onto succinylcholine by an anonymous phone call."

So much for a policeman's veracity. "Well, that puts a different light on it then," I said with relief.

"How so? One of the nurses–or even one of the surgeons–might have seen her getting the drug."

"Wouldn't they just tell the cops about it then and there?"

"I thought comedians were supposed to be students of human nature. No one wants to cast the first stone. Miss Gold might even have called them herself. When you're filled with guilt you do odd things." He stood. "She should sleep through the night. I'll be back in the morning. Do you need anything for your mouth?"

"No, I have pills."

After he left I called Sylvia, and she said she'd be right over. It was time for more penicillin, and I had a vodka chaser to help the stuff along. I knew Doc Miller was probably right, but I didn't want to accept it. He was also right about comedians being students of human nature–but not philosophically, as he thought. We see the oddball things in life, listen to the incredible things people say, and shape them into bits of business. O.K., so maybe you saw it back there at the dentist's office, but as Sylvia would say–don't be a smart mouth.

Funny, wasn't it? When Bev was upset in the recovery room after Killy died, why did Raskin suggest she go to his office to lie down when there was a berth right there in the room? Hell, there were private rooms with berths all over the place. If you think I'm reaching, I am–but don't sell it short, pal. Here's a kid with a sexual problem, a father problem maybe, and Dr. Raskin is a nice fatherly substitute. Maybe the Boston broker was too. When Bev came on to me a while ago, don't think I was being staunchly uprighteous. I just had a lot on my mind. Other times, other places, and I'd have taken advantage of her to beat all hell. Now if Jaffee was so in love with anonymous phone calls, he was going to get another one–but not before I checked something.

"Dearborn, Kominsky and Raskin," a woman said after five rings.

"Is this the answering service?"

"Yes."

"Lady, I'm not a patient, I'm Mrs. Raskin's dressmaker, and I've misplaced their home phone number."

"Is this some kind of joke? Mrs. Raskin's been dead for over a year. Who is this?"

"Sorry, wrong Dr. Raskin."

O.K., so now you're saying, there goes another bright idea down the tubes–and for a while I thought so too. No Mrs. Raskin, no love triangle and possible frame job.

But I couldn't shake the hunch about something going on between Raskin and Bev. His reaction to her being in my arms wasn't social shock–it was jealousy; and I was working overtime at selling myself the idea. Some women can't keep their mouths shut about past peccadillos, and this could be a guy in his sixties in love with a kid.

I had a head full of maybes until I looked at the labels of my prescription bottle–then I had a factor, or at least the tail of one.

The night pharmacist at the Mayfair Drugstore sounded irritated, but he agreed to look it up. "Yes, the prescription's made out to Charles K-E-L-L-Y. Is anything wrong?"

"No, pal, everything seems to be all *right.*" I hung up. Now it was Jaffee's turn.

"Never mind who I am–just pass this along to Lieutenant Donald Jaffee of Homicide. Tell him the answer to the Killy case may be found in the death of Dr. Raskin's wife last year."

When the doorbell buzzed ten minutes later I expected to find Sylvia, but I got Jaffee–a very angry Jaffee indeed. His dogrobber, Sergeant Coogan, was with him. "What the hell are you trying to pull off, Kelly?" he snarled, pushing past me. "Anonymous phone calls! You clown, your phone's been tapped for twenty-four hours. Now what's this nonsense about Raskin's wife?"

It took me close to twenty-five minutes to put it all together for him, leaving out Bev's knowing Killy. And even then he said it was all conjecture.

"So where does that leave you, Lieutenant? Do you follow me around for months waiting for a mythical killer to strike and let the real nut get away with murder? All you have to do is ask him."

Three days later, on Wednesday, we were ready. On my orders, Bev hadn't gone to work on Monday or Tuesday, but she was there on Wednesday. Of course a few lies had to be told, and Bev knew she had to take some heat, but she agreed to go through with the engagement announcement.

My own dentist, Bill Berman, was helpful in setting up two "patients" on referral to DK&R, so we had two undercover cops in the place. I got in faking a dry socket. Jaffee was working in the open, clearing up details on the Killy case.

Dr. Raskin called the entire staff into his office at five o'clock and left the door ajar.

Jaffee and I stood outside listening.

"I am pleased, very pleased, to announce that Beverly Gold and I have become engaged and will be married next month. I know you will all wish us well. I might add that the unfortunate accident that occurred last Saturday had its brighter side, since that crisis is what brought us closer and convinced this beautiful young lady to say yes to an old codger like me."

They were all laughing and offering congratulations. Jaffee looked at me. "You may have dreamed up a dud, Kelly."

"Give it ten minutes."

I should have had more faith in my thesis and said five. Victoria Hawkins stormed out of Raskin's office and hurried down the hall. A few seconds later Bev–on cue–followed her. Hawkins had gone into a small supply room and when Bev entered we heard her say, "Miss Hawkins–aren't you going to wish me good luck?"

A scream brought us on the run.

"Drop that hypodermic, Miss Hawkins, it's all over," Jaffee commanded while the office staff gathered outside the room.

Man, she was one cool customer.

She stood there, quite superior, with an I-don't-know-what-you're-talking-about look on her face.

"What in heaven's name is going on here?" she asked. "I was merely getting back to work when this–this little ninny came in and screamed."

Jaffee took the hypo from her. "Succinylcholine, Miss Hawkins?"

"She was going to use it on herself," Bev said softly.

"Well, I certainly don't have to ask permission—"

"To take your own life, no," I jumped in with both feet, "but the law

has something to say about other people's–like a poor slob named Killy."

"I never saw or heard of the man until he was found dead," she said coolly. "You're *rilly* making some absurd accusations, Mr. *Killy*."

"Yeah, that was the whole point of confusion–that high English accent of yours."

"Cantabrigian."

"Have it your way, babe, but words like 'Kelly' and 'really' come out 'Killy' and 'rilly' when *you* say them."

"And proper pronunciation makes *me* responsible for the man's death? Ridiculous!"

"For that man's death and not mine, yes. My appointment was made through you. You knew I would be Raskin's patient but, more important, that I had a connection to Beverly Gold and that she would be giving me sodium pentathol. If I died it would cause suspicion of her, maybe even a malpractice suit. But Beverly is a very ethical person and didn't feel she should administer the injection to a friend, so she switched to the Killy guy. You found out she had switched patients but you carried out your plan anyway. The victim didn't matter. You just wanted her fired from this office.

"But when Dr. Raskin had only compassion for her, you called the M.E. anonymously and told him to look for succinylcholine, which you knew he'd find. If malpractice wouldn't get Bev out of here a suspicion of murder would. If you hadn't written that prescription of mine out to Kelly I would have been as confused as everyone else. Any professional man who allows an assistant to sign his prescription forms has to be dependent on her."

"Lieutenant Jaffee," she said with a smirk, "is this man speaking for your department? If he is, I'm terribly surprised, because any competent lawyer could refute every charge he's made. Of course I have an accent, of course I knew he was Chick Killy, and, as for signing Dr. Raskin's prescriptions–well, it became necessary when his late wife fell ill and he was so preoccupied." She looked at Raskin. "You were the one who suggested it, Robert, if you recall." She turned back to Jaffee. "So if that's all Mr. Killy has to say–"

"Not yet, Miss Hypo," I told her. "Let's talk about Nancy Metcalf Raskin 'falling ill.' According to her husband you were quite helpful, both here and at her bedside. The M.E.–your old phone buddy–would like to talk to you about your being the only one with her the evening her

heart stopped and why the post-exhumation autopsy of her remains shows traces of succinylcholine." That was the biggest whopper of all–the M.E. had said *maybe*. But it was enough to push her over the edge.

"You tramp!" she screamed at Bev. "I had you investigated. Yes, Bob–your little darling is a tramp. You old fool–can't you see I was trying to protect you? You deserve each other! You're both disgusting!"

So much for Wednesday. On Thursday around six in the evening, Beverly Gold was at the club, sitting on the office couch looking like she had a headache.

"Chick, what am I going to do? He's serious. He really wants to marry me."

"You could do worse. He's a nice, gentle, mature guy."

"But suppose–you know?"

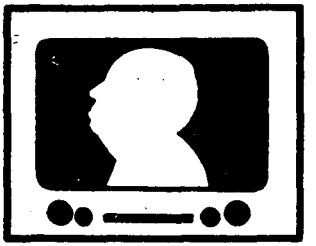
"Bev, with my track record I'm not qualified to speak on appetites. Maybe a shrink or, better, your aunt can help. For all her kvetching, she's one woman who knows who she is."

Friday I'm talking to the woman who knows who she is–*really* knows. "What do you mean you're not coming tonight? Did I cause your toothache? Suddenly my cooking stinks? I don't want her to marry this old man!"

"He's only about sixty, Sylvia. It would be a good match. She respects older men."

"So who are you, Jackie Cooper?"

I let her go on. What's the use of arguing? Of course, she sent the food down to the club with Barry anyway, and I made sure I brushed my teeth afterward.



CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

The huge birthday cake illustrated on the display at London's National Film Theatre was many-tiered with "80" iced on one side—and from its base seeped a widening puddle of blood. The eightieth birthday was Alfred Hitchcock's, and in celebration the famed NFT cinema nestled under the south bank of Waterloo Bridge recently screened a month of the Master's British films from *The Pleasure Garden* in 1925 to *Jamaica Inn* in 1939—works which gathered around him the growing fame that enabled him to begin the international successes of his American period. Rarely seen, these pre-war gems show the beginnings of the Hitchcock style: tensions and terrors lurking beneath an ordered British façade.

In the early films Hitch was groping for his genre and we see some non-mysteries as well, tales of prizefighters and farmers' wives mingling with his first clear crime drama, *The Lodger* (1926), about a community terrorized by a killer in its dark streets. This is not exactly the Marie Belloc Lowndes book, as the tormented lodger turns out not to be the Ripper-type murderer even though he is nearly torn apart by the mob suspecting him of the crimes—the first example of the director's frequent radical surgery on the novels he has brought to the screen.

Blackmail (1929), England's first talkie, gives us a favorite: the heroine with a secret. She is forced to conceal the fact she has killed a man in self-defense from her detective boy friend, who is investigating the man's death. *Murder* (1930) concerns death in the theater, with Herbert Marshall as a distinguished thespian who, to clear an actress's name, tracks

down the real culprit. It is a whodunit, not Hitch's favorite thriller form, but its shadowy development and weird ending illustrate how in his films the aberrant and strange can coexist nicely with ordinary life.

Number Seventeen (1932) is a romp which begins in an abandoned, creaky old house and finishes with a wild, joyous train chase — a detective and a girl pursuing a gang of thieves. Hitchcock opened up the rather static stageplay on which this film was based; he was getting progressively more sure of himself. *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), which pulls an ordinary family into an assassination plot scheduled during a concert at Albert Hall, is the first of his achievements to attract international attention. *Secret Agent* (1936), developed from Somerset Maugham's Ashenden spy stories, was a surprisingly early attempt to discredit espionage as a glamour profession. (Although John Gielgud as Ashenden does get assignments against such interesting backdrops as a chocolate factory in Switzerland — a mission on which he manages to kill a guileless tourist by mistake.)

Sabotage (1936) — which in turn is based on the Joseph Conrad book called *Secret Agent* — is a dark, oppressive film about anarchists and bombs, quite different from the sprightly film which follows, *Young and Innocent* (1937), the Josephine Tey story (*A Shilling for Candles*) of a plucky young woman who helps her boy friend escape the police and trap a killer — a blinking man whom nobody believes exists. Nearly all of Hitch's most familiar plotting and dazzling visual styles are clearly caught in this lovely melodrama, with Nova Pilbeam a most endearing heroine — and, true to Hitchcock form, young, cool, and patrician. *Jamaica Inn* (1939), which more than anything is a Daphne du Maurier Gothic melodrama full of cutthroats and shipwreckers, closes out the NFT retrospective, for it is the director's last British work before emigrating to Hollywood and *Rebecca* — which, though it looks almost ponderously English, was totally filmed on American soil.

Alas, Hitchcock's two most important British films of that period, the two which had the greatest impact on his career — *The Thirty-nine Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) — were withdrawn from the tribute, since both have been remade this year. And it would have been interesting to show those few motion pictures Hitchcock returned to England to film. *Stage Fright* (1950) brings to the screen Selwyn Jepson's delightful Eve Gill — Jane Wyman — and her smuggler father, Alastair Sim, outfoxing the treacherous and possibly murderous theatrical star Marlene

Dietrich, who on stage is allowed to sing throatily "I'm the laziest girl in town." The film was not a commercial success, but when Hitch came back to London for *Frenzy* in 1972, it was a triumph. His early British thrillers have returned in triumph as well, thanks to the National Film Theatre, showing us the beginnings and cornerstones of art to come.

A youthful, enthusiastic Peter Fonda told COS at a gathering at the Museum of Modern Art honoring the twenty-fifth anniversary of American-International Pictures: "I'm crazy about mystery stories; read them all the time. My friends and I are wild about games like 'Clue' and 'Murder.' Once we played a game of 'Murder' for two and a half years — starting in New York, continuing it in London, and then finishing it on the West Coast. I was one of the early victims, but I had to see the game through; afterwards I swore I'd never play 'Murder' again." What about his screen plans? "I want to play an engineer in Europe whose young daughter is kidnapped because people mistakenly believe I know the whereabouts of some diamonds. Right now the film's called *Pursuit*. I'm trying to get American-International to produce it." It's certainly the studio to aim for. Quickly made but often potent melodrama has been an AIP standard for a quarter of a century.

In 1954 a lawyer, Sam Arkoff, and the late exhibitor Jim Nicholson borrowed three thousand dollars to form that motion picture distributing company — almost in defiance of reason, as television seemed to be spelling doom for movie theaters. But the team felt sure that the sort of "B" film television was drying up was still needed — if they could make inexpensive, exploitive, mass-appeal features. Of course the product was melodrama, never pretending at art, moving swiftly in and out of movie houses and drive-ins. But some of AIP's more than 500 films thus far have been feisty, innovative, even memorable. Among those creative talents contributing to AIP's success across the years (and generally at the beginnings of their own careers) have been Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Jack Nicholson, Brian De Palma, John Milius, Robert De Niro, Sidney J. Furie, Bruce Dern, and Larry Cohen — all of whom have done solid work in the mystery form. But the foremost early contributor was the wizard writer-director-producer-genius Roger Corman.

Corman, with boundless energy and enthusiasm, would generate themes for AIP and assemble talented young filmmakers, giving them a turf on which to "prove themselves." Producer Jon Davison, now helming

Airplane for Paramount, recently reminisced with COS that he got his first job with Corman (at Corman's invitation) by paying his own way to Hollywood and working for nothing. Not only did Corman (who now heads his own company) initiate schools of action and science-fiction quickies, he brought Edgar Allan Poe to the attention of a generation of young moviegoers with a glossy color production, *House of Usher* ("Do you mean to say that you've buried alive your own *sister?!*"). The success of this 1960 film spurred AIP to further rich adaptations of Poe stories — and even essays and poems — all starring Vincent Price and giving new strength to that actor's career. While the films expanded Poe's tales, they were truer to his spirit than the screen had been before.

AIP also renewed the vitality of the gangster biography. Charles Bronson was *Machine Gun Kelly* (1958), Warren Oates was extraordinarily right as *Dillinger* (1973), and Shelley Winters as Ma Barker led her sons (one of them Robert De Niro) on a crime rampage in *Bloody Mama* (1970). Guns blazed too in many lesser crime films. But some of the best mood mysteries were released by AIP as well. Curtis Harrington's somber *Night Tide* (1962) is almost mystical in its unfolding. Coppola's *Dementia 13* (1963) as an essay in multiple murder more closely resembles *Psycho* than his later *The Godfather*. Brian De Palma's eerie *Sisters* (1973), with Margot Kidder in twin roles, is among his very best films.

Horror has always been an AIP staple. Early "B" efforts about werewolves and monsters — generally *teenage* werewolves and monsters — have expanded to include even Sax Rohmer (the melodramatic 1967 *Million Eyes of Su-Muru* adapts Rohmer's attempt at a female villain on the scale of Fu Manchu), H. G. Wells (the monstrous rats nibbling at *The Food of the Gods*), as well as the arch, surprisingly intelligent *Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971), in which Vincent Price exacts Biblical vengeance upon the doctors who have killed his wife.

Currently American-International continues on a schedule more costly than its original low budgets but it is still as heavily involved in the genre. The Dracula spoof, *Love at First Bite*, may be low burlesque but it is as true to basic Bram Stoker as is the limp Langella remake. You may not believe a moment of the supposedly factual *Amityville Horror*, but it is the ultimate possessed-house film. We hope the studio never will become too slick to forget its pulp origins. Twenty-five years have certainly not slowed down AIP's vitality: it was the first U.S. company to sell films to the People's Republic of China.

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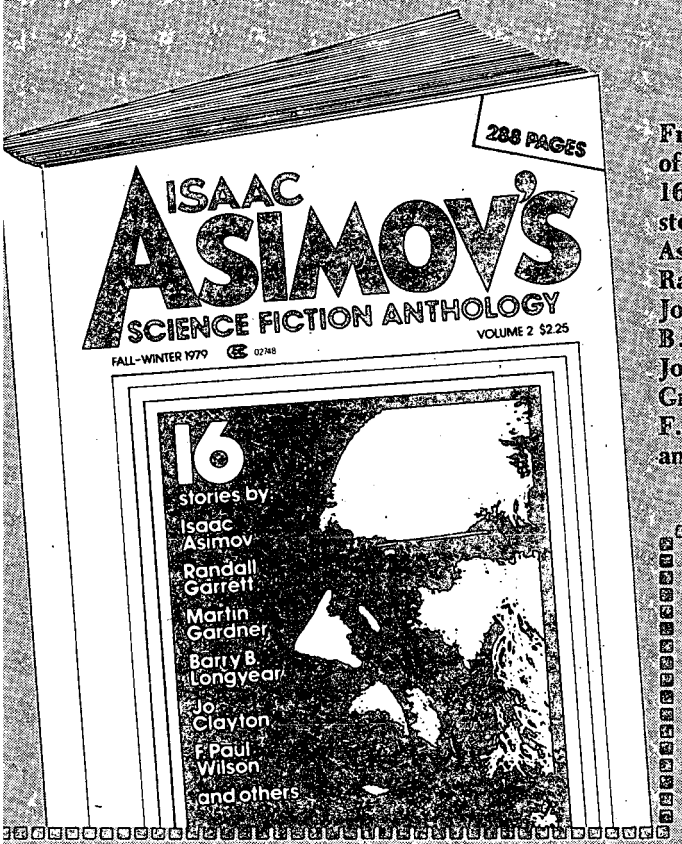

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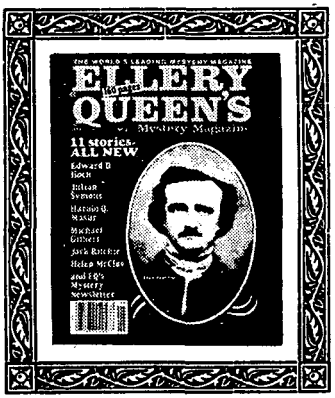

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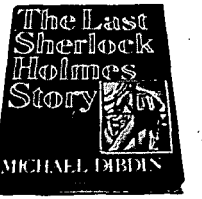

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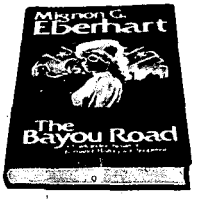

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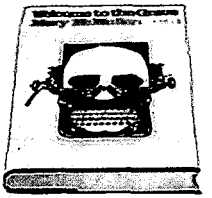

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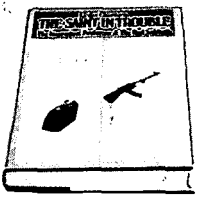

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