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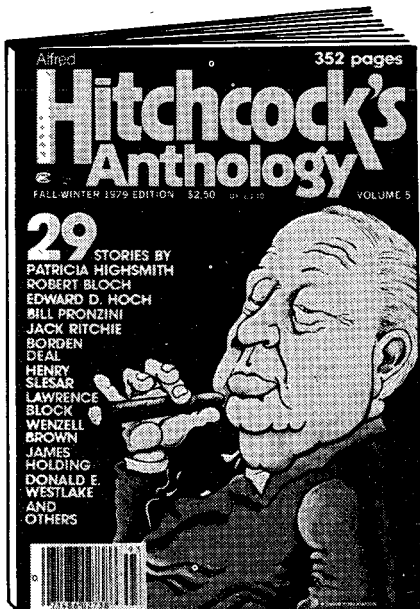


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ALFRED
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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEXT
 ISSUE
 ON SALE
 DEC. 6

SHORT STORIES

THE SLOW PUNCH by <i>Robert Twohy</i>	5
CODE OF HONOR by <i>Edward D. Hoch</i>	18
PROTECTED SPECIES by <i>MacLean O'Spelin</i>	27
TWO CHEERS FOR A HERO by <i>Allen Lang</i>	40
THE CALCULATOR by <i>Joe L. Hensley</i>	46
KILLING McCARTHY by <i>S.S. Rafferty</i>	57
NO GHOST TO BURY by <i>Stephen Wasylyk</i>	70
A CHRISTMAS IDEA by <i>Lee Somerville</i>	80
THE WRONG POCKET by <i>Jeffry Scott</i>	88
MY NAME IS LORENZO. GOODBYE. by <i>William Bankier</i>	99
DEAD ISSUE by <i>Harold Q. Masur</i>	107

MOVIES AND TELEVISION

CRIME ON SCREEN by <i>Peter Christian</i>	121
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December 1979



Dear Reader:

The holiday season is at hand, and I trust that your gift list includes plenty of subscriptions to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. I'd like to suggest that you sit around the blazing Yule log and read aloud from this month's issue.

Meet a couple of delightful characters who are lost in their dreams in "The Slow Punch" by Robert Twohy. Edward D. Hoch tells about an unusual family's "Code of Honor," and Allen Lang calls for "Two Cheers for a Hero." Something gets into "The Wrong Pocket" in Jeffry Scott's story, and S. S. Rafferty's characters try to get out of their dilemma by "Killing McCarthy." You'll read about a haunted town in Stephen Wasylyk's "No Ghost To Bury" and a terrifying kind of "Protected Species" in the story by MacLean O'Spelin.

You might get so wrapped up in this issue that the fire will die down and the presents go unopened. But you can rekindle the spirit with Lee Somerville's story, "A Christmas Idea."

Good reading and happy holidays.

Alfred Hitchcock

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Dave's manager advised him to give up boxing . . .

THE SLOW PUNCH

by
**ROBERT
TWOHY**



I got up and didn't feel woozy or anything. I looked around for the kid with the nostrils. He had to be getting arm-heavy. All he had done with that so-called dynamite left hook of his was knock me down five times. If his hook was so great, why didn't it keep me down? Guys I never heard of have cooled me a lot faster.

I looked around but didn't see him. Then I saw him, in his corner, his back to me—he had his robe on. His manager was patting him.

Gopher's voice came to me: "Come on, Dave, let's go."

I was kind of tugged around so I was turned the other way, and there were the ropes in front of me. I saw people out in the crowd, and they were talking and moving around—only a few were looking toward the ring. That meant the fight was over. "Ref stop it?"

"No." Gopher had hung my robe over my shoulders, and was sort of guiding me through the ropes. "You got knocked out."

"You sure of that?"

"Positive."

I said, as we went down the aisle, "That kid's not the comer they say he is."

"He's not too bad."

"I was just starting to get onto him. I could go another six."

"You went three—actually, two and a half. Not counting the twenty-eight seconds after you were counted out."

A little guy jumped out of his aisle seat and stood in front of me, glaring at my stomach, which was about where his head came to. He yelled in a big voice, "You stink!"

I asked him, "How much did you lose?"

"That's none of your business and you stink!" And he bit me in the stomach.

I was really surprised. That's one thing that had never happened to me before—being bit in the stomach after a fight.

I started to tell him I didn't appreciate it, but he skipped away down the aisle. I walked on, rubbing his wet toothmarks off and thinking how a lot of small guys with big tempers come to the fights.

We got to the dressing room and Sheets, the middleweight who had got knocked out in the prelim before mine, was sitting on the bench, half dressed. He asked, "How long did you last?"

"Into the third."

"You're getting better." I knew he was remembering the last time we had been on the same card. That time I was knocked out in the first. He grinned at me. There was a gap in his grin that hadn't been there before his fight. I mentioned it.

"Yeah." He kept grinning. "That tooth was giving me hell all week. I was really dreading going to the dentist."

"The Buzzard did a nice job." The Buzzard was the guy he had fought.

"Uh-huh. Knocked out my mouthpiece and then, quick and clean,

boom! The tooth was out and I didn't feel a thing. That Buzzard knows his stuff. Better than the dentist anytime."

Sheets is a good-natured guy. It's good to talk to him. He's not always snarling or in the dumps, like a lot of boxers who get knocked out a lot. He told me once, "If I ever fall down an elevator shaft, on the way down I'll try to find the humor in it."

I went in and showered. It felt good. Except when I soaped my right jaw. But I've hurt a lot worse after a fight.

"So long, Flat Man," Sheets called in to me. "See you next time we get knocked out together." He gave his rich laugh.

"Yeah. I'm glad about your tooth." I heard him chuckling his way out.

I came out, toweling off. Gopher was sitting on the bench, sucking a toothpick. He looked at me with his sad upside-down eyes.

I got my clothes out of the combination locker. That's a good thing about that auditorium—they give you good strong lockers, you don't have to worry about your stuff. "Something bothering you, Gopher?"

He was quiet a minute, watching me dress. He said finally, "You're strong and you got guts, but you're the slowest guy that ever stepped into a ring. Outside you move fine, but in the ring it's like you're lifting weights. Your footwork's O.K., your legs are good, but you got no upper-body speed. You start a punch and it's sending something from Seattle to New York by way of New Orleans. Your arms are a symphony in slow motion. I can't manage you any more—I find I got a conscience after all."

I went to the locker and got on my jacket, and got my things from the locker shelf and put them in various pockets and where they belonged. I got my bag and put my robe and the rest of my ring gear in it. "You sound like Lelah."

"Lelah's right and she's been right from the beginning. I pretended she wasn't 'cause I had my own dream—I'd be a big-time manager and Cosell'd interview me in a TV special. But you don't know a damn thing about professional fighting and neither do I, and after eight disasters—"

"They weren't all disasters. I won two of them."

"Two wins, a draw, five losses by KO—we got to stop dreaming, Dave. I'm fifty-five and you're over thirty—"

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Whatever. I'm going back to the janitorial profession full time and my advice to you is to forget you're a fighter 'cause you're not, you're just too damned slow. Get your mind back on what you know and are good

at, and face the reality—there's about ten decent heavyweights in the world, and none of them is ever going to be you."

He got up, came over, stuck out his hand. "So long, Dave. You're a good kid, though you're pretty old to keep on being one—and I admire your spirit. It'll get your brains knocked out, but you'll enjoy every minute of it."

"So long, Gopher."

He gave me a tip of his hand and left, and that was O.K. You have to have a licensed manager to fight in our state, in all the states, I suppose—but I'd get another one. I'm 6'2" and 195 and built according, and I'm impressive in gym workouts on the heavy bag, and somebody'd get interested, I had no doubt of it. And like Sheets said, I was improving.

I left the dressing room and stood a minute watching the two guys in the ring, who were mosquito-weights or something tiny like that—they whipped around and shot zingers at each other and I guess it was interesting in you go about ninety rounds. I walked toward the exit and nobody paid any attention now. Dressed, I don't look as big as I look in the ring, and I move in a normal way, not like I move in the ring, heavy-shouldered, knees bent, head tucked low except when I'm being knocked over backwards. Dressed, I'm just a guy in a neat jacket and slacks, carrying a squarish cloth bag that might hold business suits and stuff. I don't have a fighter's face and I don't act like a fighter—whatever fighters act like.

I walked out of the auditorium and a couple of cabs were in front and I got in the front one and told the guy to take me to the Pink Pickle on Seventeenth Avenue.

He said, driving fast up the boulevard, "Any good fights tonight?"

"Some of them were pretty good."

"You see a lot of real clowns in the prelims." A drunk was starting across the street. He didn't notice the cab and the driver, mouthing away with his head half turned like they do, didn't notice him. I started to yell, but we swept past the drunk with four inches to spare, and neither he or the driver knew it. "Some of 'em—I don't know how they get licensed. People who love blood must license 'em."

He raced for a yellow light, missed it, settled for sailing through on the red, and kept on mouthing. "I saw a klutz about three months ago, strong guy, good build, and he'd wind up a punch and the other guy'd belt him in the chops about nine times and still have plenty of time to

duck. That poor klutz must've caught a hundred punches. He took more punches in two minutes than a guy needs in a lifetime." He let out a donkey bray of laughter.

"Yeah," I said. Some guys don't care anything about facts. It hadn't been anything like a hundred punches. Twenty, at the outside. And the official time was 2:43 of the first.

He started across an intersection just after the yellow and this time he shouldn't have. He whammed down on the brake, we skidded and almost fishtailed into a highballing van, the motor killing with us right in the middle of things, still spinning, ending up broadside to everyone roaring by, everyone giving a desperate jerk on the wheel and missing us by two inches. The driver cursed them all and ground away on the starter, flooding the motor that was already flooded enough. I opened the door and tossed a five-dollar bill at him. He snarled, "Where you going?"

"I thought I might take a little walk."

"Bailing out, huh? Leaving me alone here in this mess."

"You're doing fine. Just keep on flooding it."

I had to stand there by the cab a minute, him grinding away on the starter and cursing me along with everybody else; then I saw a break in the traffic surge and took a chance, running for my life, taking to the air the last ten feet, just making it, a bumper clipping my hind heel and throwing me off so I landed on my hands and knees, but on the sidewalk, more or less safe if no one came up after me.

I checked to be sure I hadn't lost any of my possessions—I hadn't. I stood and rubbed my hands on my knees for awhile and I seemed to be all right. In the street cars were still managing to dodge the cab, but that couldn't last forever. He may have radioed for help but his radio was probably out to lunch along with everything else.

I picked up my bag and walked on and when I saw a phone booth I got out a dime and called the nearest police station and told them how things were at the intersection. Then I walked a few more blocks and there was the awning of the Pink Pickle, with a pink pickle grinning at you as it leaped from a cocktail glass. I pushed open the door and went in.

It's a dump, but a pleasant enough place. It's big and wide, with a long bar that a line of neighborhood drinkers is always propped against. Near the door is a pinball machine and beyond it a shuffleboard, then a pool table, then scattered around a few dinky tables with chairs, and at the

end a tacky-looking bandstand with a piano and some chairs for the musicians—if you can call Rufe and the Ripsnorts musicians—and a microphone for Lelah, who is the lead singer and the woman I love.

The bar was crowded as usual. The Ripsnorts were whanging away and Lelah was filling up space in a fine way behind the microphone, singing in her small pretty voice about loving a guy though he caused her a lot of worry. You couldn't hear her very well with everyone at the bar talking and arguing and banging dice cups, a couple of pool sharks shooting, a guy at the pinball machine making it clang, and an old doll at one of the tables croaking along with Lelah, a beat or two behind her and out of tune, croaking away. The Pink Pickle is bottom-rung for a girl singer with talent, but Lelah has sung there for six years and says she likes it, likes the people, likes the Ripsnorts though they seem to play the same tune whatever she's singing. She says if she's any good she'll move on and up—and if she isn't, that's all right too, she'll just stay on at the Pickle. I can't argue with that—I enjoy her singing and so do the other regulars, even if they do make noise while she sings. If working here gives her pleasure, why not?

I stood a minute inside the door, sizing up where there might be room at the bar and listening to Lelah singing and the old doll croaking. I was beside the guy at the pinball machine. He wore a leather jacket and a green army fatigue cap. He had a thin, tight-looking face. I looked at him and he shot me a look. His eyes were quick and flat, at the same time kind of muddy.

I had a feeling. You get feelings about people. I had a feeling that this tight-faced little guy was on the weird side, and trouble.

I moved away from him toward the bar, where there was room up near the far end near the bandstand. Lelah saw me. She smiled, a look of pleasure in her bright eyes—and a question. I gave a little shrug, and that and the look in my eyes answered her question. She gave me back a shrug, and a smile that was sympathetic and not surprised. She went on singing.

I went to the bar, set my bag at my feet, ordered a beer. Benny, who owns the place, yelled, "Shut up, Rose!" at the old doll, who went on croaking. I watched Lelah, and she sang, looking at me—not all the time but often enough to let me know she was singing to me.

Benny brought my beer and a glass, and said, "How's it going?"

He didn't know and nobody else in the neighborhood knew that I was

prizefighting on the side. Only Lelah knew—and she kept quiet about it. You have a dream, you want to keep it private if you can—until it starts turning good. In that neighborhood, people pretty much stay in it—they aren't fight fans, they don't go crosstown to see the fights.

I told him it was going O. K. and asked, "Who's the guy at the pinball machine?"

Benny looked. "I dunno." He pondered a few seconds, then turned his head to yell "Shut up!" at Rose. She didn't pay any attention. He said, "What about him?"

"I don't much like his looks."

Benny shrugged. "So who do you expect to find in here—Harry Belafonte? This is a dump."

I nodded. "But that's the way you want it."

"That's right. I feel at home. Only riff-raff comes in here. I'm riff-raff too. Lelah's the only one comes here who isn't riff-raff—but that's all right, I love her anyway. *You're riff-raff.*" He enjoys insulting the people he likes. "Rose is riff-raff, vintage riff-raff, crème de la riff-raff, so I love her the most. *Shut up, Rose!*"

Rose heard him this time, gave him a dim smile, and went on croaking.

"So that guy at the pinball's just some riff-raff who's drifted in here. He don't bother me."

"Did he come in with anybody?"

"Came in alone—half an hour ago. But that big guy there came in a little behind him—walked past him, came up to the end there."

I looked down at the guy near the end. He had a worn grey windbreaker, a flat wide face, a skin-bald head. He sat quiet with a beer, his back to the Ripsnorts, looking straight ahead. He was big, all right—as tall as I am and twenty pounds heavier. Ten years older, a little soft-looking under the chin—but not too soft-looking.

Maybe they were all right, just two guys who had nothing to do with each other. Maybe the muddy-eyed guy was just a normal pointless pinball player and the big guy had just come in for a beer. I didn't know otherwise. All I had was my feeling.

The Ripsnorts left off whanging. Rose left off croaking and went back to drinking, and Lelah smiled at the spatter of handclapping like it was bouquets of roses and smiled her way over toward me. I picked up my bag and my beer and walked with her to an empty table. She sat down and frowned at my jaw and murmured, "Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure. He wasn't so much."

"You're not ready to give it up then."

"Not yet."

She looked troubled for me but smiled at the same time and said in a low voice, "Just like me with the singing."

"You're a good singer, Lelah."

She was quiet, looking over at the bar where the Ripsnorts were hurrying to get down as much as they could during the break. "Probably I'm not. But nobody's going to pound my face for being wrong."

She took my hand and held it in both of hers and looked at me with her big bright eyes and said, "I guess you have to go on until something shows you you'll never be a boxer."

"Uh-huh. And that kid showed me nothing tonight but a set of big nostrils. But Gopher quit."

She looked surprised. "Did he? I thought he was as lost in his dream as you are, as I am in mine. If *he* quit, maybe there's hope for us."

"It's a possibility." I wrestled up a smile, loosened my hand from hers, and said, "I'm going to talk to the guy at the pinball machine." I got up.

"Who is he?"

"Nobody, probably. But I'm curious about him."

I took two steps and then there wasn't anything more to be curious about. As I moved he jumped up on a near chair and yelled in a sharp clear voice so everybody heard and went still like frozen, "Stickup! Anybody moves, anybody yells, they've had it!" A gun was in his hand. I shot a look over and the big guy at the end of the bar had stepped back from it and turned three-fourths of the way away from it and was bent forward, swiveling to cover the bar and those of us at the tables. He had a gun in his hand too, which swiveled with him.

The quiet went on a few seconds that seemed longer. Everybody was as still as you can get. Between them those two guys were seeing all of us and the guns in their hands looked right at home.

The guy on the chair said in his high hard voice, "Everybody down on the floor. Kneel down, put your heads on the floor, hands on your heads. My partner'll walk over and you just kneel there and he'll get your wallets. He's got his gun, so nobody moves. I'm covering you all from here. And you there, fish-eyes behind the bar, keep your hands in front of you, move slow, open the register, take out the dough, lay it there on the bar—that's the way.

"Everybody else kneel down slow, move slow, put your heads down like I said. You broads kneel down too. We ain't going in your clothes or purses or anything, we just want you down and quiet while we go over the guys' wallets. This is just a nice peaceful neighborhood robbery, nobody gets hurt, everything's clean and O.K. If you play along all you do is lose a little money, so do like I say. If you don't, it's your funeral—and I mean that."

I knew he meant it. In spite of his words, which were cool and reasonable, I knew he didn't really give a damn. He'd as soon shoot as not. If it seemed simpler to shoot, he'd shoot. As for everything being clean and O.K., I wasn't sure. If he thought it seemed a good idea to take a hostage or hostages he'd do it. Maybe Lelah—she was the pretty one, the one who stood out. He was a nut. His partner—I didn't know about him. He could be just the dumb shlunk he looked. But the skinny one—those muddy eyes told me he was a nut, unpredictable and freaky.

Just a nice peaceful robbery. Sometimes it starts like that, is meant to be that—then something, or maybe nothing, freaks the gunman and the bullets start flying. Then you read a headline like **FOUR PATRONS SLAIN IN TAVERN HOLDUP**.

O.K.—the thing right now was to play along. Wait until everyone was down on the floor. It was safer for everyone that way.

Lelah was looking at me and I gave a small nod. She took a breath and let it out, got up and went over and knelt on the dusty floor, and put her head down on her crossed wrists. Others were doing the same, all around the big floor. I heard Rose give a groan as she knelt down. I took a step to Lelah and knelt between her and the nut and put my head down facing her and winked. She looked a little scared and then her mouth got set. What my wink told her was that something was going to happen because I was going to make it happen. The set of her mouth sent back that she trusted me and was ready for it.

It could be a dumb move and could trigger the nut. How can you know? You can't know. You can only go by feel. My feel was that this guy meant trouble if I did something or didn't; and if trouble's coming you have a better chance moving toward it than you do staying quiet, hoping it won't happen.

I heard the big guy moving. The way my face was turned, toward Lelah, I couldn't see him. He'd mumble, "Keep still, don't move—" Then I guess he'd pat a guy and pull out his wallet. There'd be a soft

plop and that would be the wallet tossed away after he'd stripped it. Getting wallets fast was a cinch with guys in that position, their rear ends up.

The weirdo, having made his speech, was silent now, standing on the chair up front, looking over everything. If someone came in the door he'd have his gun on him from behind before the guy knew what was happening. Nobody came in the door.

Now the big guy was working on the guy kneeling beside me. That was where I wanted him, near me, pretty much between me and the nut. I gave a sudden yowl, scrambled around, rolled over, and sat up, showing my hands all the time. Then I put them down at my belly, squeezed it, changed the yowl to gasping and groans. The big guy had his gun a foot from my face and he was strained and wild-looking around the eyes. "What the hell are you doing?" he yelled.

"Terrible pain! Ulcer! Spasms! Terrible pain!"

"Lie down or you're dead!"

"Can't! Can't help it! Terrible pain!"

The guy at the door screamed something—I think it was "Shoot that guy!" He'd have done it himself, but his partner was too close—I was the big guy's pigeon. I sure hoped he was the shlunk I thought he was.

I muttered, "I'm trying, I'm trying— Let me sit a few seconds. It's fading, it'll fade. Let me take some deep breaths." I sat rocking forward and back, my legs straight out, squeezing my belly, my hands in plain sight. I let out some heavy sighs. "I think it's O.K. now." I took my hands from my belly and let them wave around a little, looking humble and helpless.

The big guy was a foot to my right side, near my knees, kind of crouched. Perfect position—I couldn't have asked for better.

I was waving my hands in a feeble way and looked about as passive and non-dangerous a guy as you'd hope to see. I gave the big guy a sickly smile, like I really appreciated how nice he was not to have shot me, a poor ulcer victim who wouldn't cause anybody any trouble. I put my right hand to the floor and leaned my weight on it, looking ready to roll back over into the prone position and pull my knees under me again like a good boy. The gun relaxed just a little in his hand and he gave a quick glance to the guy alongside me that he'd been working on, ready to get back to business as soon as I was back on my belly.

My weight was all on my hand now. I took it away quick and fell

backward to the floor, rolling on my right hip and kicking up and across with my left foot as neat and slick as ever I'd done it in practice, much quicker than it takes to tell it—and got him right where I'd aimed, right where it counts.

His scream told me he wasn't wearing any protection. The gun flew out of his hand as he jumped away and bent and hung onto himself and went on screaming. My left hip had followed my kick around. I was on my belly and pushing up to my knees, yelling over his screams to the room at large, "Stay down!" I'd whipped my hand under my jacket and had my .38 from the clip on my belt and the safety off and had it pointed at the nut on the chair almost before I finished my yell. He hadn't had his gun right on me, he'd been partially blocked by the big guy and then startled by his screaming and jumping and my rolling, but now he had a clear view and was twitching the gun to me. But mine was dead on him and I didn't wait or wonder or anything. I just fired.

It was the luckiest shot I ever made.

Because I was dead on his belly and in twitching his gun on me he got his wrist right in line as I fired and my slug smashed him in the wrist, not the belly, and it didn't go straight through but took an angle through his wrist and tore skin off his ribs and slammed into the doorpost behind him. Nobody got killed by it and all he got were burned ribs and a wrecked wrist. And I didn't have in front of me all you have to go through when you've wasted some goofball who's doing his honest level best to waste you first.

His gun went sailing and he was howling and holding his arm, then he went slack. I guess he was the type who can't stand pain—unless he's the giver. His knees caved and he fell plop off the chair—nobody was near enough to break his fall. He fell all the way to the floor, flat on his face, and was out of the action.

But the big guy was back in the action—he'd never left off screaming, and now his face was crazy. He didn't have his gun, it had skidded somewhere. Somebody had lunged over and covered it, I learned later. I was on my feet now and he was hobbling fast toward me. I pointed the .38 at him and yelled at him to hold it, but it didn't matter what I yelled or didn't yell, he wasn't hearing—his head was too full of lust for vengeance for the way I'd abused him.

I yelled again to everybody, "Stay down!" meaning it mostly for Lelah, who I saw was up on one knee, hands on the floor, weight forward. I had

the gun on this wounded wild horse coming at me but got the flash: he's unarmed now, that could mean trouble later. Too often you find yourself thinking like that. Sometimes it seems the authorities disapprove of anyone but criminals firing bullets. I swung the gun at his head but got his shoulder instead and that didn't seem to disturb him. Then I saw his right fist coming and moved to block it, but my arm didn't get there in time as usual. It was the best punch I caught all night. This guy had it all over the nostril kid as a hitter. I was knocked flat and out.

What happened then I learned about later. The guy hobbled over to give me a kick in the head that would have meant scrambled brains, and he would have gone on kicking, but Lelah, who hadn't obeyed me but had stayed in her crouch, gave a shrill yip, ran three steps and took off, throwing herself at him from the rear in a beautiful illegal football clip, 130 pounds of flying woman taking him right in back of the knees. Down he went, screaming from agony again, not animal rage—now he had ruined knees to count in with his previous wreckage.

Lelah lay across his thighs—and then, everybody seeing him there flat and screaming got the idea. Rose was the first one to jump aboard in front of Lelah, and then the wino they call Feelin' Lousy, then Doc the defrocked dentist who always wears two hats at the same time and women's sunglasses, and old Mr. Raggbush who claims to have been with the CIA, all of them piling on the gunman's back and shoulders and head, and then six or eight others, all jumping on top, while Benny yelled at everyone to show a little class, take it easy, keep pride and poise, behave like decent riff-raff. He didn't do anything, though, just leaned on the bar and yelled at them. If after a minute or so I hadn't come to and got up and started throwing people off, they would have squashed the life out of that poor shlunk—who'd had a tough enough night already.

Then the cops came and everything started getting taken care of. I went to the station and Lelah came with me and eventually by early morning it was all done, the report was written, the two creeps were doped out in the hospital ward of the prison, and Lelah and I got a ride to her place in a squad car.

I felt pretty bushed when we got the couch bed out. I got my shoes and jacket off, and unclipped my gun from my belt and put it in a near drawer and lay down. I had nothing on my mind but sleep and Lelah was the same. My jaw ached and she had picked up a fair number of

bruises and floor burns from her illegal clip. She'd sleep in her bedroom, and that was fine by both of us.

She brought me a beer but I said I'd rather have milk. She sat on the bed and rubbed her hand slowly over my eyes as I slouched there drinking the milk. "How can you be so slow with your arms and so quick with karate kicks?" she said softly.

"That wasn't karate. It was just kicking quick and hard. A guy's studied it, teaches it at the station. We use a dummy for practice."

"I would hope so."

I set the empty glass on the floor and kissed her and lay down. "Sing me a song. Sing me to sleep."

"I'm not so great as a singer."

"You're a better singer than I am a prizefighter."

"Some compliment." She touched my eyes and I opened them. She was smiling. She bent and kissed me.

I held her and thought of what she had done for me in the Pink Pickle. I told her I loved her.

"And I love you. We're alike—we're a pair of dreamers. You're a fine cop, but you've got to play out your dream. And I've got to play out mine."

"I guess we're both kind of silly."

"I guess so. But even silly dreams are better than no dreams."

"If you like getting socked in the jaw."

"I don't like it. *You* like it."

"Not really. But it's the price of the dream."

We kissed again and she held my head and sang a song or two, low, then went off to bed.

I went to sleep.

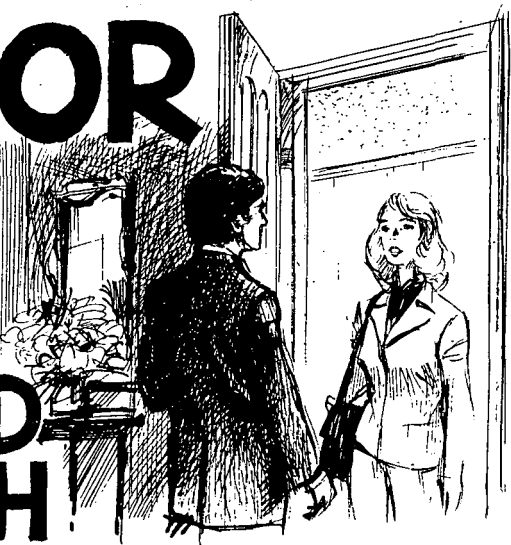
I dreamed of the kid with the nostrils. I took his famous left and just laughed, and after a time he got arm-heavy like I figured he would, and then my somewhat slow punches started getting in. Then things kind of faded, and I don't know how the fight ended.

One thing was sure, though—he still hadn't showed me a thing.

How much did family honor mean to Andrew Patterson's son? . . .

CODE OF HONOR

by
**EDWARD
D. HOCH**



The sea was foaming that day, slapping against the rocks with an angry roar that threatened to cut off my one link with civilization. I went down to the dock early, scanning the horizon for the mailboat from the mainland. It was a long and frustrating wait before I finally sighted it on the horizon. That was how, with the warm spray of the sea hitting my face and bare legs, dampening my shirt and shorts, I received the letter informing me of my father's death.

Andrew J. Patterson had been more a father to the world than to me personally for the past twenty-five years. From a government office in Washington to the London executive suite of a leading multi-national corporation, he'd continued to make headlines well into his seventies. Now, reading of his death in the night letter from his second wife, Mildred, it took me a moment to realize he had been seventy-four years old, most of those years in service to America and the world, if not to his family.

The oddity was that during his Washington years of the 1950s, when I was off to college and starting my first job, my father and mother were viewed by the press and the public as having an idyllically happy marriage. And perhaps they did. Perhaps a young man fleeing the strictures of family life in the Washington establishment is not the best judge of his parents' wedded bliss. Certainly my father seemed deeply shaken when Mother was killed in an auto accident in 1959. He gave up his White House post in the Eisenhower administration and moved to England. It was six years before he remarried and returned to the business world as chairman of Londex International.

During all that time I never saw him. I'd come home to attend my mother's funeral but that was all. Even after his second marriage in 1965 I only saw him once, when I stopped to dine with him while I was passing through London on the way to the Middle East. That was the only time I met Mildred, a woman just a few years older than myself who seemed pleasant enough and—surprisingly—was not the sexy blonde showgirl type I'd feared my father would choose for a second wife.

But through all those years Andrew J. Patterson was little occupied with the fortunes of his only son. When I'd left home in the 1950s it had somehow been a blow to the family honor—and honor was a very important thing with my father. Honor, and appearances, and doing the right thing. Remembering that now, after his death, I realized that Mildred was exactly the sort my father would have chosen for a second wife—perfectly designed to carry on the Patterson image in the media.

It had been a heart attack, her letter had said, and when at last I read about it in the newspapers it was confirmed. I flew to London the following day, because in some vague way the family honor demanded I be present for the funeral. I was a bit surprised to see the Vice-President of the United States in attendance, and it gave me a renewed insight into my father's one-time place in history. He might have been the ruler of

some foreign empire instead of merely the board chairman of a faceless conglomerate.

Mildred seemed pleased to see me, and took pains to introduce me to all the proper people. But it was not until the evening of the funeral, back at my room at the Dorchester, that I began to meet the improper ones. That was when Honor Blanc came to my door.

She was trimly built and quite pretty, with soft pouting lips that parted slowly to reveal a set of perfect teeth. "Hello, you're Kevin Patterson, aren't you?"

"Sorry, no interviews," I said, starting to close the door.

"Wait a minute—I'm not from the press. My name is Honor Blanc."

"I don't know you."

"It's about your father."

"My father is dead. I'll be leaving London in the morning. If you have business regarding my father it should be discussed with his widow or her solicitor."

"Not this business," she insisted with a shake of her head. "This is personal, a family matter. It's about some letters your father wrote, a long time ago."

"All right," I decided reluctantly. "Come in."

"Thank you." She was dressed in a pale-green pantsuit that went well with her blonde hair. I guessed her age to be in the early twenties, and it was obvious the letters she alluded to could not have been written to her. Not if they were the type of letters I suspected.

"Are you American?" I asked.

"Yes, but I've lived in Paris for the last few years, since college."

"Did you know my father?"

She shook her head. "But my mother did."

"I see."

I sat on the edge of the bed while she occupied the chair opposite me. She opened her big shoulder bag and took out a single folded letter. "I brought just one along to show you, so you'd know I wasn't lying."

"This is a letter my father wrote to your mother?"

"That's right. When he was still in Washington, in 1957. The letters continued until after your mother's death."

Unfolding the piece of paper, seeing once again the familiar scrawl of my father's handwriting, gave me a chill. In that instant, perhaps for the

first time, I felt the full impact of his passing. He'd meant so little to me in recent years, but seeing again our Washington address brought back all the pain and misery buried inside me. I bit my lip and started to read, trying to conjure up again the vision of my father in those days—Andrew J. Patterson, Special Assistant to the President.

3426 Utah Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20015
May 18, 1957

My Dearest Cora,

Two long nights without you is more than I can bear. Please arrange to meet me at the usual place on Thursday. Barring a national crisis, or more flak from the Russians over Britain's H-bomb, I should be away from the White House by seven.

All my love,
Andrew

I handed her back the letter. "Cora is your mother?"

"Was. She died two years ago. I debated a long time about these letters. Some of them are extremely personal. There are many American magazines that would pay well for the chance to print them."

I shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Fine. Go ahead and sell them."

Her eyes widened. "But these letters indicate he was having an affair that stretched over several years. There's even an indication that the discovery of it might have driven your mother to suicide."

Her words chilled me. "My mother's death was an accident."

"A one-car accident on a deserted highway. It could have been suicide. Your father thought it was."

"I don't believe that," I insisted, but in my mind I knew it could be true. Almost anything could be true about this man who'd become a stranger. When he'd stopped approving of my actions, including my job in the Middle East, I'd ceased to care about his.

"I can show you the rest of the letters."

"They could be fakes. There are plenty of samples of his handwriting around."

"You know they're not fakes."

I knew no such thing, but her certainty was very convincing. I'd started out not caring one way or another about my father's old love letters, but

now I found myself caring very much. "What do you intend to do with them?" I asked.

"That depends on you. I read in the papers that you'd flown in for the funeral, so I thought I should get in touch with you."

"What else do you know about me?"

"That you made a great deal of money working for the Arab oil countries in the Sixties and early Seventies, that you have a reputation as a playboy, and that you live on an island off the coast of Spain. It was all in the papers."

"Did you ever approach my father with these letters?"

"No," she admitted. "It's only recently that I find myself in financial difficulties. I have to raise a great deal of money."

"How much?"

She took a deep breath.

"One hundred thousand dollars."

"And you think these letters are worth that much?"

"I think so, yes. A friend of mine who's familiar with the American press says there's a weekly tabloid that would pay that much for them."

"I see. But you're offering them to me first."

"If you want to buy them, yes. I thought it was the fair thing to do."

"Miss Blanc, are you familiar with this country's laws against extortion?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she answered indignantly. "I'm simply offering you the letters first because you're Andrew Paterson's son!"

"And threatening to sell them to the press if I don't buy. I'll tell you something, Miss Blanc—I'm not buying. What my father did or didn't do is past history. Sell them to whomever you want."

She stood up, ready to leave, but paused to say, "I thought there was a thing called family honor. You must have read the obituaries on your father. Do you want his name and your mother's dragged through the newspapers? You don't know what the press can do these days."

"I know."

"Honor," she said again, her hand on the doorknob. "It meant a great deal to your father, and to my mother. I think that's why they called me Honor."

"What?"

"We'll never know for certain, will we? But there's a strong hint in the letters that I could be your half sister."

After she'd gone I sat for a long time on the bed, smoking and staring at the open window. A gentle evening breeze was billowing the curtains, reminding me of my room at home, on the island. I'd be back there in a few days and this would all be behind me. My father would be dead and buried for good.

Honor Blanc's last words had been that she would phone me in the morning. I should sleep on it, she said, and then make my decision. The money, of course, was no real problem. Even without knowing the terms of my father's will, I knew I had more than one hundred thousand dollars in ready cash available in various bank accounts. The Middle Eastern years had been profitable for me, as Honor had said. Still, I had no intention of paying that kind of money to an extortionist—not even one who claimed she could be my sister.

I tried to think of someone I could turn to for advice, but I was a stranger in the city. The only person I really knew was my stepmother and I didn't intend to ask her for help. I took out a pad of paper and started making notes, much as my father would have done. As I saw it there were only three courses of action open to me. I could pay the money, I could ignore the whole thing and let her publish the letters, or I could scare her into giving up the idea.

The first course—paying the money—would certainly uphold the family honor. The letters could be destroyed and my father's good name would remain unsoiled. Perhaps this was the course he would have wanted me to take. And if Honor Blanc really was his daughter perhaps she deserved the money.

Then a thought hit me. If Honor was his daughter, mightn't he have mentioned her in his will?

Reluctantly, I picked up the telephone and called my stepmother. She greeted me coolly. "I thought you'd be back on your island in Spain by now."

"No, Mildred—I'm still in London. I'd like some information about my father's will. Are you familiar with its contents?"

"Certainly. I was with him when he drew it up. Are you wondering how much he left you?"

"Not really. I learned to live without my father's money a good many years ago."

"That's exactly what he said," Mildred told me. "He left you ten thousand pounds because he said you didn't need any more."

"I'm interested in the other bequests."

"The bulk of his estate goes to me. Three small gifts go to his secretary and two servants."

"Anyone else?"

"No."

"Is there any mention of someone named Honor Blanc?"

"None whatever. What are you implying?"

"Not a thing. Just checking."

"Andrew was completely faithful to me, and to your mother before me. It was a point of honor with him."

"Yes, I know. All right. Thanks for the information, Mildred."

I hung up and went back to staring at my pad. I wasn't getting off the hook that easily. Dealing with Honor Blanc was up to me and no one else.

The second option—ignoring her—would be easy to do but difficult to live with. I'd suddenly realized that if the memory of my father meant very little to me, the memory of my mother meant a great deal. I couldn't let the letters be published.

Option three—scaring her into doing nothing. How could I go about it? Threaten her with the police? Threaten her physically? Kill her?

Kill her?

I couldn't do it, could I? Can one act on a matter of honor by committing murder? No—certainly not when the victim might be one's own sister. At least I knew I could never do it with my own hands.

So I was back to option one—paying the money.

Is that what Andrew J. Patterson, Special Assistant to the President, would have wanted me to do? Or would the deception of his affair have colored all his decisions? If his loving marriage had been a sham, what might he not have stooped to?

I crossed off the second option on my list. Doing nothing was out of the question. I would either pay her the money or I would—

What?

I went to bed still undecided.

In the morning the answer was waiting for me, nestled in my brain as if it had always been there. When the call came I was ready. "I've decided to pay you the money," I said. "Bring me the letters. All of them."

"To your hotel?"

"No, I think it would be better if we met in Hyde Park, across the street. There's a bench near the entrance, just down a bit from the hotel."

"I'll find you," she assured me. "What time?"

"I'll need all day to have the funds transferred here. I have no accounts in London banks. It'll have to be tonight, around eight."

"It'll be getting dark then."

"Don't worry. The park's lighted."

After she hung up I made another call. I spent the next several minutes speaking quietly to the stranger on the other end, and I arranged to meet him that afternoon. When I met Honor Blanc in the park that night, I wouldn't be alone.

I was there by the park bench at a quarter to eight, but it was nearly ten minutes after the hour before she appeared, walking quickly from the direction of Hyde Park Corner. "You're late," I greeted her.

"I don't like this park after dark. Why couldn't we have met in your hotel room?"

"The staff might have noticed you visiting me two nights in a row. I don't want any trouble that way."

She smiled slightly. "It never troubled your father."

"Did you bring the letters?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Five of them."

"Five! You led me to believe there were many more than that!"

She shook her head. "That's all. The one you saw and four others."

"How can I be sure you won't show up in six months with another batch?"

She shrugged. "You'll just have to trust me."

"All right. You're asking a hundred thousand dollars for these letters. Is that correct?"

"What is this? You know that's the amount."

"A hundred thousand or you threaten to publish them."

"Just give me the money."

I raised my eyes and saw the shadow moving up beyond her left shoulder. "All right. Here it is."

She took the envelope from me and greedily opened it. Though the light was dim I could read her disappointment. "What is this? These are all dollar bills! There are only a couple of hundred dollars here!"

But by then the man behind her had moved close enough to reach out his hand. She felt it on her shoulder and whirled around. "What in hell is this?"

"Pardon me, Miss. I'm Detective Sergeant Ambrose of New Scotland Yard. Your conversation has been recorded and I'm going to have to place you under arrest."

She turned on me and tried to grab the tiny tape recorder I'd produced from my pocket. "What are you doing? Those letters will ruin your father's memory!"

"Those letters are fakes—or at least the one you showed me is a fake. You or someone else used samples of his handwriting to forge them. But it's not likely he'd have put his return address at the top of a note to his mistress. I suppose since the notes would be signed only with the first name you needed the address for supporting evidence that he wrote them. But there was one really damaging mistake only someone as young as you would have made. You included the zip code in his address—and there were no zip codes back in 1957."

She was cursing me as the sergeant led her away, but I didn't care. I was thinking that for once in my life I'd done something of which my father would have approved.



The telegram said, IF NECESSARY DEACTIVATE . . .

PROTECTED SPECIES

by
**MACLEAN
O'SPELIN**



The eighteenth hole, a short but challenging par five, ran parallel to the Blue Nile on the right for 220 yards, then doglegged abruptly left for another 265 to a tight green. John Foxx, a slender man of just under medium height, hit a workmanlike drive that rolled five yards past the gnarled mubela tree that guarded the bend of the dogleg like a watchful old askari. A solid three wood and a crisp little pitch and he'd be home.

"Not bad, Foxy," said Rein van de Kroc, a fake Hollander whose long

and thick torso and muscular but disproportionately short arms and legs gave him a look of animal power that was not fake. "For a pygmy, not bad at all."

Foxx clenched his hands on his driver. On first sight at the airport that morning he'd disliked Kroc. By now he detested him. With an effort he kept his tone mild. "Thanks, partner."

Kroc showed big and jagged and very white teeth in a fierce, wet-lipped grin. "Partners. Right. Two of a kind. Protected species, you and I, Foxy. Not destined to end up as trophies for these two white hunters."

Foxx glanced uneasily at their African opponents. Although both were too young to have fought white colonialists in their nation's liberation struggles, their fathers undoubtedly had. But neither seemed offended by Kroc's play on words, and the shorter one smiled and shook his driver playfully. "No protected species is safe from this weapon. Beware, Foxx; beware, Kroc."

As his caddy teed up Kroc's ball, the match, for a friendly twenty shillingi, stood all even. Impatiently Kroc motioned the caddy out of the way and went into his preparatory ritual, rocking on his feet, menacing the ball with the clubhead, sighting down the fairway, then backing off for three practice swings.

"Have mercy, Mr. Kroc," said the taller African, the Deputy Minister of Industry, amiably. "Administer the *coup de grâce* speedily."

Foxx chuckled. Kroc glared from him to the young official, then stepped up and with his short but powerful swing hit a whistling drive that, 180 yards out, sliced wildly and disappeared toward the papyrus reeds lining the river. He slammed his clubhead against the turf. "Stir those bones, boy," he snapped at his caddy, "and, damn you, don't tee this one so high."

Sharply, Foxx said, "Wait for our friends to hit," and again Kroc glared. Then, visibly, he collected himself. "Right you are, partner. Fire away, lads."

The Deputy Minister hit a good drive that his shorter partner, a successful diamond trader, almost matched. Both were in fine position for second shots that conceivably could reach the green. Since the match was best ball and Kroc's whistling slice had probably eliminated him, Foxx had his work cut out.

Kroc hit his provisional drive long and safely down the middle, then immediately stamped off to look for his first ball. Courteously but unen-

thusiastically, the other three and their caddies sweated after him to help search in eye-high elephant grass and thick, heavy-plumed papyrus.

"Watch for mambas, Mr. Kroc," said the shorter African and Kroc laughed harshly. "All Krocs eat green mambas for high tea, friend Michel."

An image of a snake's writhing tail disappearing between Kroc's long and bony jaws rose before Foxx. He shuddered. No man can really look like a crocodile's brother but Kroc came close, and seemed to revel in it. Probably, the Consortium's dossier on him speculated, he'd chosen the alias Kroc for that reason.

A strange conceit, in Foxx's opinion. His own thin, somewhat triangular face could look distinctly foxlike, he knew, if he narrowed his eyes and grinned. So he avoided grinning and wore round horn-rimmed glasses he did not need. And tried never to narrow his eyes, not even to squint in the blaze of the African sun.

The big glasses gave him an owlish expression, true. But in either his actual or his cover position, the wise visage of the owl was a far better image to present to the world than the sly countenance of the cunning fox.

In his view, he was neither wise nor sly—just reasonably competent. Reasonably competent as professional spy for the Consortium, reasonably competent as manager of his cover company, Sisal Buyers, Ltd. Maybe a little more than competent as husband, maybe a little less as father. Overall, about average.

If he'd been a brilliant spy, he wouldn't be Chief of Consortium Station 102 in a tiny, hot, humid, forgotten African nation bisected by the Blue Nile. He'd be chief of a station sporting a deputy, six or seven case officers, plus a full support staff. Here, *he* was Consortium Station 102—with not even a secretary.

His cover job was just as imposing. He alone was Sisal Buyers, Ltd.

John Foxx preferred it that way. He was his own man. Jenny, his wife, was her own woman now that their children, two daughters, had left the nest to pursue embryonic careers and/or mates. Foxx loved the girls, but life was simpler now.

But few men are completely their own and Consortium Headquarters' cabled instructions re Kroc, a covert field operative for the South African external security service, posed Foxx a problem he feared he could not handle.

REIN VAN DE KROC (ALIAS; DOSSIER FOLLOWS) USEFUL SUPPLIER BOART TO CONSORTIUM AFFILIATE COMPANIES, the cable had read. ASSIST HIM MAKE LEGITIMATE COMMERCIAL CONTACTS WHILE YOU UNCOVER HIS TRUE MISSION. IF NECESSARY DEACTIVATE.

"Found it!" shouted Kroc triumphantly. "In a hippo print, by God!"

In late evening, hippos heaved up out of the river to browse peacefully ashore. A relic of the colonial era which nowadays welcomed African members, the Blue Nile Golf Club had long boasted of being the only links in the world permitting a free drop from hippo prints.

Kroc picked up his ball gleefully and dropped it over his shoulder. It skittered to the only clear spot visible. He manufactured a powerful shot that burst through the reeds and elephant grass onto the fairway and stopped 150 yards from the green.

"Good shot," said Foxx in grudging admiration and hit an adequate but far less spectacular three wood.

Possibly shaken by Kroc's semi-miraculous recovery, neither African got home with his second.

His luck still holding, Kroc bladed a six iron that bounced along the hard ground to within six feet of the pin. Foxx hit his best wedge of the day. Backspin pulled it up just inside Kroc's ball.

Michel Lingala, the stocky diamond trader, caught his ball too fat. It trickled to the front fringe of the green. His partner hit his more crisply, dropping it in some eighteen feet from the hole.

"Got 'em by their round black arses, Foxy," exulted Kroc in a stage whisper. Foxx glanced hastily at their opponents, but neither seemed to have heard.

The consortium of multinational corporations that employed Foxx had no important stake in this small tranquil nation; the IF NECESSARY DEACTIVATE was routine, a reminder to Foxx that Kroc's clandestine activities must not upset even the least profitable Consortium-related applecart. And, actually, Foxx had somehow avoided killing anyone in his career. But, damn it, this bore of a boor of a Boer was getting to him. Still, you don't deactivate a man simply because he's an unconscionable boor. Do you?

Everyone lay three. But Kroc and Foxx had short putts for birdie fours and the other two looked to have par fives at best. Lingala chipped his fourth from the fringe, left it ten feet short. The Deputy Minister ad-

dressed his eighteen-footer carefully, backed off to brush a fat elephant fly from the ball, stepped up and stroked it smack into the heart of the cup. Birdie four.

"Masterful, Deputy!" exclaimed his partner. "They can't beat us now!"

"Bleeding luck of the Bantus," growled Kroc. He crouched to line up his six-footer. "Aim three inches right—that correct, boy?"

"No, *bwana*," said his caddy. "Hit just for right edge cup."

"Ruddy nonsense." He rocked back and forth, menaced the ball, rocked again, stroked, and left it two inches outside on the right. "Up to you, Foxx," he snapped.

Foxx tapped his putt. It broke left, hovered on the lip, stayed out.

"Oh, rotten luck, John," said Michel Lingala. "Lovely putt. Damn shame."

Yes, thought Foxx, it had been a good putt. He was proud of it.

"You're a sly one, Foxy," said Kroc affably, accepting a drink on the Foxxes' verandah overlooking a sweep of lush zoysia and the green hills beyond. "Your pulling that putt a hair off line blistered me, I admit. But it was good business. Winning put those Bantu boys in high humor. Cunning little feller, our sly Foxy—eh, Mrs. Foxx?"

"I've always found him just the right size," said Jenny Foxx, herself small and trim, her black hair still curly and thick as a girl's and showing only a few flecks of grey. "And never cunning or sly."

"Bravo." Kroc eyed her sardonically. "The perfect loyal, submissive wife."

Insolent bastard. Biting back his anger, Foxx gestured at the comfortable rattan chairs. "Let's sit and relax and enjoy the view."

"Splendid. Pity I can't dine with you two. I must see a chap about some boart—" Kroc checked his watch "—in exactly ninety-seven minutes."

"Boart?" said Jenny, coldly making conversation. "Isn't that the trade term for diamonds?"

"For industrial stones, not gem quality," said Kroc, taking a chair as if he owned it. Foxx noticed that, like his watchstrap, his shoes and belt were fashioned of richly tanned crocodile belly. Although crocs were a protected species in most African nations, their skins were, like many other things, smuggled across successive borders until they reached a place where commerce in them was legal. Kroc might, of course, prize

crocodile leather for its own sake. But Foxx was certain it was just the man's absurd penchant for advertising his resemblance to a dangerous animal.

Rein van de Kroc travelled on a false Dutch passport buying board. But his true role was the deactivation of South African black nationalists and those who supported their cause financially. Deactivate—kill. More and more Kroc looked like a man who relished his role. Relished, hell; wallowed in it.

"Yes," Kroc was saying to Jenny, "those boys Foxy let beat us today were Bantus. Not, dear lady, in any degrading sense of the word. Not at all. You simply couldn't ask for jollier lads to play golf with."

"They're key people for you, Kroc," said Foxx acidly. "There's damn little industry here, but the Deputy Minister does oversee diamond exports to make sure the government gets its tax bite. And Michel Lingala is the biggest trader in town."

"So grateful for your arranging the introduction, old boy. Michel—French name. Not a native, then?"

"A citizen for years, but born a Congolese. He learned all the smuggling tricks as a boy there. No board mined here, of course, but Michel gets it in and the Deputy gets it out. All legal and above board."

"Lovely chaps, I do agree," Kroc rose. "To my sorrow, I must be off. Bath and brush-up before business." He bowed to Jenny. "Permit me to say that you are pretty enough to eat, dear lady. Kroc will shed no crocodile tears should you desert our sly little fox and once again be on the open market."

Foxx recognized the glow in her dark eyes as repressed anger. But she smiled up at Kroc, whose long grinning jaws looked as if making a meal of her would be a matter of seconds. She said, "John Foxx is the man for me, but I do thank you for the elegant compliment."

As the front door closed behind Kroc, Foxx said, "Quick, Jen, love—sneak a look at the Peugeot he's rented. Station 102's got a tail job tonight."

An hour and a half later, Foxx stopped his nondescript Fiat just ahead of one of the few cars parked on the dark curving street a couple of hundred feet past the fenced grounds of Lingala's large but unpretentious house. The city was too small and the traffic too light for secure tailing, so he'd guessed at Kroc's destination.

An easy guess, but just in case it was wrong Jenny was parked in her VW bug where she could watch the entrance to the better of the city's two hotels. Using his pocket transceiver, Foxx checked and got her no-action report before walking quickly through the hot thick darkness to Lingala's fence and scaling it.

He wore a black jumpsuit and had left the useless glasses behind, and he moved with the silent ease of long practice as he located and avoided the askari, who was gossiping with someone inside the servants' house behind the main house.

Several trees grew in the grounds but Foxx headed directly for a heavily crowned baobab, climbed it, and wormed on his belly far enough out on a thick limb to look down through tilted shutter slats protecting an unglazed window into the room Lingala used as office.

Lingala sat behind his plain wooden desk. Foxx could see the backs of two other African men seated facing him. Moving gingerly, Foxx brought the transceiver to his mouth and whispered a one-syllable signal.

Tight now against his ear, it whispered back that Kroc had just emerged from the hotel, apparently heading for his rented Peugeot.

One of the unidentified men shifted position and Foxx nodded to himself. A South African nationalist, a Zulu educated at the London School of Economics, charged with bolstering the economics of his group by soliciting hard cash.

Strain as he would, Foxx in his baobab tree could hear only indistinct murmurs from the office. He still couldn't see the third man clearly, but it didn't matter. He had to be a member of the nationalist group because Lingala was now bundling thick packets of shillingi notes into an old-fashioned strapped briefcase. Michel Lingala's contribution to African nationalism.

Foxx checked with Jenny. In the Peugeot, Kroc was headed in the general direction of Lingala's house. Foxx thought a moment. There were other boat traders in town, small operators compared with Michel Lingala. Ten to one Kroc was coming here. Risking having him spot Jenny on his tail in the sparse traffic wasn't worth the gamble.

Foxx whispered the signal that would send her home. Before shifting the transceiver to his ear for her acknowledgement, he added, "And thanks, love."

"Anytime, Br'er Fox, anywhere," she whispered back. "Anything."

In the dark, in his tree, Foxx smiled fondly.

He watched Lingala strap up the briefcase and hand it to the third man. Everyone rose and they shook hands all round. Then all three disappeared from Foxx's line of sight. Maneuvering cautiously, he glanced at the faint glow of his watch. Hurry, men, hurry, he urged under his breath. Mack the Kroc, teeth of pearly white and all, is damn near on you.

He heard a door at the rear of the house thud shut simultaneously with the sound of a car close by on the street. Kroc would be arriving early for his appointment. A useful trick—who knew what interesting thing one might interrupt?—but Lingala had got rid of his nationalist pals just in time.

The car's engine stopped. Foxx listened for the rusty protest of the hinges of the heavy front gate. Nothing. A blurred figure appeared around the front corner of the house, moving stealthily. Kroc. He must have checked the noisy hinges, then climbed the fence.

Foxx pushed his nose hard against the branch to guard against a chance reflection from his white face. Kroc was having what he'd probably call a dekko around, and he wouldn't overlook the big tree.

Foxx moved his head half an inch. From his slitted right eye he saw Kroc take a long look upward. Foxx held his breath.

Dropping his gaze, Kroc moved silently on toward the rear of the house.

Softly Foxx breathed out, shifted his head again, and from his left eye saw Kroc crouch low and ease forward until he could see around the rear corner, then rise and continue on his casing of the outside of the house.

Relaxing as much as he could, Foxx raised his head. Damn. He liked this twisted old tree but it was sure as hell hard. The front of his slight body felt as if he'd gone ten rounds with a fast, dirty-fighting bantam-weight.

Lingala was back in the office, his wife and two of his several children with him. The front gate's hinges complained loudly as Kroc made his proper entrance. The lever-operated bell at the front door clanged. The Lingalas disappeared from view. Moments later, Lingala reappeared with Kroc.

Slowly and stiffly, Foxx backed off his branch. At the base of the baobab he flexed his joints and eased his cramped muscles while checking the whereabouts of the askari. He became conscious of a faint, rhythmic rasp of steel against stone and, warily, he inched away from the tree until he

spotted a squatting figure engrossed in sharpening his foot-and-a-half-long machete-like panga on a flat rock by the light from a window in the rear of the house.

Keeping the askari in view as long as possible, Foxx slipped through the shadows and over the fence and on to the Fiat. Kroc and Lingala would talk industrial diamonds and look over samples, and even if Kroc suspected the African merchant of being a money angel for the nationalists he would try nothing so long as there were potential witnesses in the house.

There was little more Foxx could learn tonight but he adjusted the mirror and slouched down in the front seat to wait nonetheless. An hour dragged by.

A little long? It seemed doubtful Lingala liked Kroc enough to invite him for a late supper. Better check. For a smuggler, Michel was a decent, trustworthy type—attractive family too.

Foxx started to sit up, then stopped as in the mirror he saw a figure moving with Kroc's deceptively awkward, long-bodied, short-legged gait toward the Peugeot. The engine started, the headlights flashed on. Foxx slid almost flat in his seat. The Peugeot drew level, passed, and went on into the night.

Professionalism called for Foxx to verify his guess that Kroc was headed back to the hotel. He was ninety-nine percent certain that nothing untoward had happened in the Lingala house, but he'd been a pro far too long not to know that even one to ninety-nine odds can explode disastrously. If they had this time, he'd better know now.

He ran to the fence, scaled it, found the baobab. He didn't climb it, just concentrated on listening. Faintly, the sound of children's voices. A male rumble, female laughter. Foxx expelled a soft breath of relief. No panic, no terror. Just happy family sounds.

He negotiated the fence for the fourth time. Idiot way to make a living, even for a twenty-year-old—and how long ago had he been twenty?

He drove the Fiat hard back to town, but the Peugeot was not parked near Kroc's hotel. On a hunch, Foxx cruised what passed for the entertainment district.

There, in front of the city's lone nightspot, was Kroc's car.

Difficult to picture the Afrikaner dallying with forbidden fruit, the pretty Bantu hostesses therein. Maybe crocodiles feel free to compromise their standards when on the prowl far from the lairs they call home.

Slitting his eyes, Foxx grinned slyly at the fox face in the mirror. Then he went home to Jenny.

He didn't see Kroc to speak to for two days. He tried to keep tabs on the South African's movements but he had other ops and agents to handle, and he would not risk sending Jenny out alone unless he could be in close transceiver range. He did, however, learn two things: Lingala had sold a respectable weight of boart to Kroc; and there was as yet no definite sign that Kroc had tumbled to Lingala's pro-nationalist activities.

On the third day, Kroc telephoned Sisal Buyers, Ltd.'s one-room suite of offices. Might he pop over for a natter? Sure, Foxx told him—come ahead.

Kroc had a favor in mind. "I hate to ask, old boy, but, well, between golfing chums, what?"

"Chums?"

Kroc smiled his crocodile smile. "Two of a kind, you and I. Because of you, Lingala beat us on the links and now he eats out of my hand. Seems he's acquired a fistful of first-water gem diamonds he'd like to sell. Without the formality of his friend the Deputy Minister's tax bite."

"That doesn't sound like Michel."

"Good show, Foxy—stick up for your chums. I like that. But you're overlooking the Bantu mentality. Dodgey buggers, one and all."

"I didn't know that."

"Fact. Anyhow, he wants to negotiate the deal in complete privacy. On safe neutral ground, so to speak. Straightaway I thought of you."

"I'm flattered." Foxx pursed his lips in thought. "Jenny and I have a picnic hut where we fish a bit or just snooze in the shade. About five miles out. Cool, quiet, private."

Kroc's prominent eyes warmed as much as they could. "Perfect. You see, you are a chum. There'll be a tidy finder's fee for you, old man."

"Not necessary. Still, from a chum—it'd be rude to refuse."

Cheered by the thought that, if the deal went through, Kroc would be stuffing the nationalists' coffers richly, Foxx briefed him carefully on how to find the picnic hut.

"Splendid, Foxy. I'll work out the timing with Lingala."

The hut, a three-sided cane-and-palm-thatch structure, stood by itself in a small clearing that extended to the river. If Kroc had learned of

Michel's nationalist connections—perhaps by climbing the old baobab tree he had looked over so carefully—the lonely hut was ideal for deactivating Michel as money angel. That would not disturb the Consortium; it had no stake in the nationalists. But it would want to know. Its appetite for knowledge was insatiable.

Foxx cancelled all other activities and, with Jenny as backup, staked out the hut. This time he tucked a .22 Ruger target pistol into a special pocket in the jumpsuit and its twin into the spring-loaded clip under the Fiat's front seat.

Kroc cased the place that same night. The next night, two hours after sundown, both Kroc and Michel showed. Foxx, knowing every inch of the area, moved in close enough to see and to hear snatches of muted but intense bargaining as Kroc examined sample diamonds by the powerful light of a battery lantern. A tentative price was agreed on, the exchange of gems for cash to occur the following night at the same hour.

Without doubt both men would be armed. A panga for Michel, Foxx knew. According to his dossier, Kroc also preferred the silence of steel. Mack the Kroc's razor-edged pet was an eight-inch hand-crafted carbon steel gravity knife.

The next night Foxx concealed the Fiat behind a thicket of elephant grass and told Jenny, "If there's trouble, remember the Ruger but stick by the car."

Michel arrived first, undoubtedly to conceal his panga in the hut. Kroc arrived. The lantern snapped on. The full packet of diamonds was examined and shilling notes were counted. The lantern snapped off.

In the thick silence, Foxx strained to hear. Kroc's knife snicked open. Foxx drew his pistol. But before he could move closer both men erupted from the hut, cursing and struggling for room to use their steel.

They went down in a heap, their bodies merging into a writhing mass that rolled over and over toward the edge of the clearing. A figure broke free, rose to one knee. Foxx flicked on his pocket flash, raced in. Just as Kroc's arm snaked downward, driving for Michel's belly, Foxx smashed the gun on his wrist. The knife spun away into the darkness.

Snarling wordlessly and still on one knee, Kroc looked contemptuously at the Ruger, swung his head away from the light. Foxx turned it on Michel. He'd lost the panga and was gulping in air but seemed unhurt. "A good night's work, Michel. Got the cash? Good. Take the diamonds and get out of here!"

Michel got to his feet slowly. "Thank you, my good friend."

Foxx pointed the gun at Kroc's groin while Michel took the packet of diamonds from a rear pocket, then hesitated. Foxx said, "Get the hell going!"

"Do, Michel," a voice behind him said. "Br'er Fox has the situation well in hand."

Reluctantly the African turned and silently disappeared into the night.

"Thanks, love," said Foxx without turning his head. "Get back to the car."

"Ah," said Kroc, cradling his wrist to his body, "the brown Bantu beauty."

Anger flamed. The gun jumped upward, stopped inches from Kroc's left eye.

"I underestimated you, pygmy. But you haven't the guts to shoot."

Dropping his hand, Foxx shot Kroc in the left shoulder. Kroc wavered but did not fall. "Toy bullets bounce off Kroc's hide, old boy." He struggled to rise, failed, and, in slow motion, collapsed sideways to the sandy ground. His voice was weaker now. "The bugger slashed me. In the hut. Been bleeding like a gut-shot boar, Foxy. Have your tame Bantu woman stop the blood. Quickly."

"Still here, love? Hold your gun on him." Anger still hot but now under control, Foxx bent and examined Kroc warily. A panga slash had opened the front of his left thigh, then bitten deeply into the soft inside flesh of the right. Blood oozed from the first wound and poured in a thick stream from the second.

"My people said your piddling company could be a Consortium front." Kroc's voice had faded to a weary mutter. "One look, I figured you . . . not the type. Was wrong. Outfoxed me. Set me up from the start. Sly, cunning Foxy . . . two of a kind, you and—"

Foxx rose. "Let's go, Jen." As they moved away, he talked to mask the sounds behind them. "Femoral vein severed. Not as dramatic as an artery, but it's a big vein. Slow but not painful. So the experts say. You get sleepy. You nod off. In an hour or so that's it."

Jenny remained silent until Foxx had maneuvered the Fiat away from the elephant grass. Then she said quietly, "No, John."

"My God, Jen. He was going to deactivate Michel. Christ knows how many other Bantu nationalists he's killed. And enjoyed doing it."

"No, John."

"I've never killed, love. I'm not killing now. Just walking away."
"No, John."

He stopped the car, switched on the overhead light, and looked at her for a long time. Then, gently, he touched her cheek and turned the Fiat back.

Leaving it by the hut, he ran down to the edge of the clearing. A lake of blood soaked into the sandy soil. But Kroc was gone.

Foxx flashed his light around. No traces of a crawling man.

Traces of long heavy bodies and reptilian feet. And one, just one, sign of Kroc. A shoe. A shoe of richly tanned crocodile belly.

Foxx picked it up. It was heavy with the flesh and bones still in it. He ran to the Blue Nile and threw the shoe as far out as he could. Swinging around, he ran toward the car before the blood scent and his own movements again attracted the crocodiles.

Words spun in his brain as he ran. Protected species. Funny, most places the fox is not protected . . . most places the croc is.

Although not, of course, from its own kind.

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Mitchell Moss had attended a school for killers . . .

TWO CHEERS FOR A HERO



by **ALLEN LANG**

Lean as one of Mr. Lincoln's handhewn rails, and as straight, Mitchell Moss stepped off the cars at Union City, a town marked on the map of Indiana by the smallest dot that Rand-McNally stocked. If Moss limped a bit the idlers at the railway depot paid no mind. A game leg was common mustering-out pay this year of 1865.

Moss stared down the platform to the girl who was hurrying in his direction. "It can't be," he murmured. "No man is so lucky."

“Cousin Mitchell!” she cried, holding out her arms.

“Cousin Abigail!” He hugged her, then pulled away to gaze at her. “You don’t look four years older but you do look four years prettier.”

“Don’t you feel we’re kin enough to kiss?” the girl demanded.

“Third cousins are practically strangers,” Moss said, and kissed her. Then: “Where’s Uncle Amos?”

“Daddy’s in court,” the girl said. “He’s winning a case of criminal conversion and losing a case of catarrh. I swear, Mitchell Moss, you’ve got no more flesh on you than a rake handle.”

“If you’ll have dinner with me, I’ll get in the way of correcting that fault.”

“I will, Cousin Mitchell, and with unconcealed delight.” Abigail took his arm. “While we dine, you can be telling me what you were doing these last awful four years.”

“No, ma’am!” Moss said. “I’ll be pleased to speculate from here to the moon about the next fifty years if you like, but I’ll not lay tongue to the four just past.”

“How long will you be in town?”

“Just long enough to get my important business done,” Moss said. He held open the door to the Union City Hotel’s restaurant.

“What sort of business, Mitchell?” Abigail Allen asked, slipping into the chair he’d drawn back for her.

“Fitting out my farm with one last essential,” Moss said. “What I need most now is a farmer’s wife. Daddy left me those two hundred acres and the house. And I’m here now in mind of a promise made me by a girl of seventeen that she’d share that house with me.”

“You’re as matter-of-fact as though you’d come to town to buy a mule,” Abigail said.

“Am I maybe too late with my asking?”

“I crossed my heart to wait,” she said. “Now we’re done with waiting.”

Mitchell Moss glanced up as Cyrus Figg staggered into the dining room, wearing about his head a bubble of whiskey vapor, his face fisted in animal rage. He bumped up to the cousins’ table. “Hey!” he bellowed.

“Mitchell, do you know this fellow?” Abigail asked.

“We met not long ago,” Moss said. He stood to extend his hand. “Good evening, Mr. Figg. May I suggest that we begin our civilian association with a handshake?”

“I’d sooner grapple with a rattlesnake than take your hand,” Figg said.

He stared at Moss with eyes that seemed to have been sandpapered, and stepped back. "I've got other plans for you," he said, thrusting his hand into his waistcoat.

Moss darted his own hand into his jacket, snatched out a small pistol of the sort soldiers like to keep as an extra, and shot Figg square between the eyes.

The grey gloves Figg had been reaching to get—very likely to slap them into Moss's face—fell as limp as their owner to the floor.

A daughter's tears persuaded Amos Allen to undertake the defense of Mitchell Moss. Rumped from three days and three nights in Union City's jail, the defendant took the witness stand. Facing him was Prosecuting Attorney Hans Guenther.

"You maintain, Mr. Moss, that you shot Cyrus Figg in self-defense?"

"I do," Moss said. "And I did." His right leg was propped straight out before him.

Guenther dangled before the jury a limp pair of grey gloves. "Are these not the weapon Cyrus Figg threatened you with?"

Counselor Amos Allen stood, but the effort started him coughing so furiously he could not speak. Abigail pounded her father's back and he sat down again.

"You are quick with firearms, Mr. Moss," Guenther continued. "Was it perhaps in Chicago's lakefront dives that you learned to kill so skilfully?"

"No, sir. I attended a school for killers, but it held session at Ball's Bluff, at White Oak Swamp, and at Gettysburg." Mitchell Moss dropped his hand to his right knee. "Those lessons cost me a stiff tuition, sir."

Old Amos Allen began another coughing fit, his face scarlet as he hacked into his fist.

Abigail stood. "Your Honor? Forgive me, but may we approach the bench?"

Hans Guenther accompanied the Allens to whisper-shot of the judge. "Daddy is too sick to carry on alone," Abigail said. "I know this case. Given the permission of the Court I could present the argument for the defense."

The Prosecuting Attorney shrugged. "I've no objection," he said. "Whoever represents Moss, the jury will find him guilty."

"Bearing in mind the skill with which Shakespeare's Miss Portia dealt with a similar situation," the judge said, "I'd not count this a conviction

till the jury's out and back, Mr. Prosecutor. Very well, Miss Allen. So long as your father remains to counsel you, you may speak in Mr. Moss's behalf."

Thus it was Abigail Allen who next spoke to Mitchell Moss. "May I ask, sir—what was your most recent employment?"

"I was a Sergeant of Infantry, ma'am," he said.

"Objection!" Guenther snapped.

"The prosecution has required that my father's client explain his facility with arms," Abigail said. "I am no more than enlarging upon a point Mr. Guenther was the first to raise."

Amos Allen smiled. The judge nodded.

"Sergeant Moss," Abigail continued, "you have mentioned Ball's Bluff and White Oak Swamp. How did you come to visit those unwholesome precincts?"

"I followed my flag to them, ma'am," Moss said.

"And you came through all those battlefields unscathed, Sergeant?"

"Not exactly, ma'am." Mitchell Moss rolled up the right leg of his trousers. "Begging your pardon for what's no pretty sight—" Crawling up his calf and gaping its jaws around his kneecap was a purple serpent of scar tissue. "A bayonet," he explained.

"Sergeant Moss—" Abigail began.

Hans Guenther, sighing, stood. "I must object," he said. "The defendant is now, with all of us, a civilian. He should be addressed as such."

Abigail Allen shook her head. "If the prosecution will undertake to expunge Sergeant Moss's scars," she said, "the defense will forfeit the use of Sergeant Moss's title."

Guenther glowered, but sat.

"Sergeant Moss," Abigail said, "your habit is to act quickly, is it not?"

"It is that habit that has kept my head above the grassline, ma'am," he said.

"Why did you shoot Cyrus Figg?"

"I'd met him in the Army," Moss said. "We were—not friends. When he reached inside his jacket, blackguarding me as he did so, I gathered that he was reaching for his pistol."

Abigail Allen picked up Figg's grey gloves. "You were mistaken," she said.

"I had rather be mistaken and walk into court," Moss said, "than be mistaken and be carried to the graveyard. Ma'am, if I'm threatened now

with a rope for doing what I thought best at the moment—well, I've been threatened with worse."

When his turn came, Prosecuting Attorney Guenther hammered at Moss for three solid hours, making over and over again the point that Cyrus Figg had been unarmed. Making it one last time, he relinquished the jury to Miss Abigail Allen.

"Sergeant Moss cannot have known that Cyrus Figg's sole weapon was his unpleasant tongue," the girl began. "In defending himself against what he supposed, with some reason, to be a pistol, Sergeant Moss acted as any soldier would have. Can we hang this young man for having learned too well his warrior's task?"

"Gentlemen, I need not recall to you battle veterans what I, a woman, can but imagine. I never heard the crash of cannon; I never gagged at the stink of a field of wounded and dead three days after those cannon moved on. I never saw the bloody aprons of the surgeons, never felt the aftermath of pain. You did. I need not recall it for you."

But recall it all Abigail did. She took judge and jury from Bull Run to Appomattox. As she evoked the thunder of cavalry, the judge gnawed the ends of his moustache. A jurymen whose left sleeve was tucked into his armpit gritted his teeth when Abigail mentioned the name of Chantilly. A woman back on the spectators' benches wept at the word Gettysburg. Hans Guenther closed his eyes when the girl talked about the surgeons' tents at the Wilderness and the horrid refuse piles behind them.

It was well past Hoosier suppertime when Abigail Allen paused at last. Standing with her handkerchief pressed to her forehead, she spoke so softly that only the judge and the jurymen could hear all her words. So familiar were they, though, so well remembered their pace and rhythm, that the lips of all those present moved with Abigail's as she recited them.

"Down with the traitor, up with the star!

While we rally round the flag, boys, rally once again,
Shouting the battle-cry of Freedom!"

Without budging from the box, the jury foreman whispered with his peers. Smiling then, he faced the judge.

"Sir," he announced, "we the jury have the honor of declaring Sergeant Mitchell Moss not guilty."

Abigail Allen adjourned with her father, Mitchell Moss, and Hans Guenther to the judge's chambers, escaping thereby the importunities of tearful women and cheering men.

Inside, Moss accepted the two ounces of bourbon the judge pressed upon him. "Your Honor," he said, "I have a considerable favor to ask of you." He seized Abigail's hand. "I'd like for you to marry us, sir. I'd like for us to board the nine o'clock train tonight and ride a hundred miles to a farm that's been four years growing weeds."

"I'd be proud to witness that marriage, Sergeant Moss," Hans Guenther volunteered.

"I've likely given you my catarrh as a wedding present," Amos Allen said. "I may as well add a father's blessing."

Twenty minutes later, Mitchell Moss kissed Mrs. Moss, glanced at his pocket watch, and marched his bride off to the station to meet the train. The lady had no more trousseau than what she was wearing.

Thoughtfully lowering the level of bourbon in the flask before them, the three older men sat around the judge's desk. "Grand bit of showmanship your little girl did today, Amos," the judge observed.

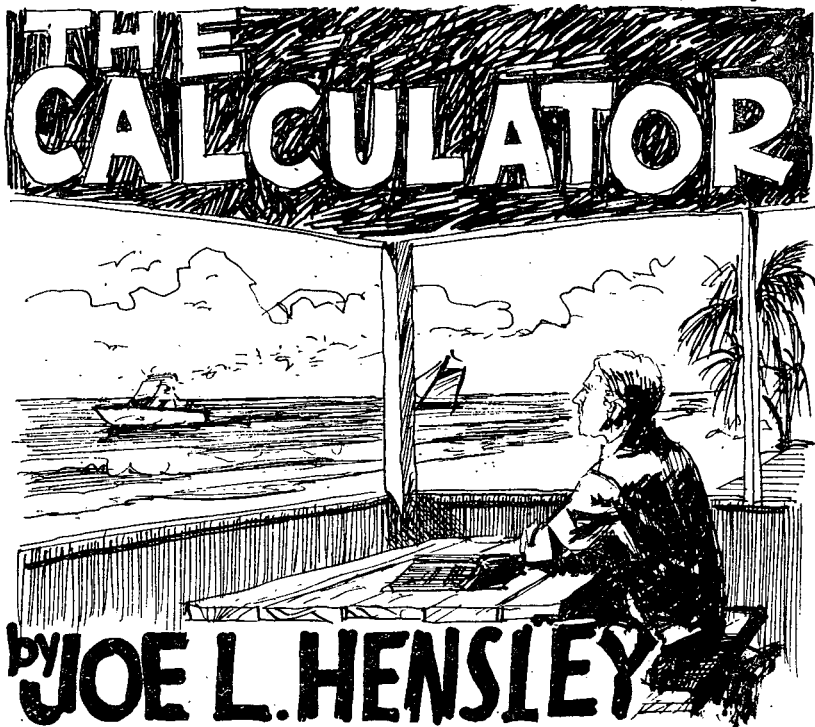
"It was her damned flag waving that won the day," Hans Guenther growled. "Fool that I was, I let sweet Abbie march the Grand Army of the Republic into the courtroom and fire a volley over the jury's heads. If I'd been able to stop that parade the sheriff would be stretching hemp come Saturday morning."

Amos Allen coughed. The judge acknowledged the hint by pushing the whiskey nearer him on the desk.

Three blocks away a train whistle announced that the nine o'clock was outward bound. Somewhere a band played. The newlyweds were headed toward their farm.

"You're right about Abigail waving the flag, Hans," Amos Allen said. "If my daughter hadn't made such a fuss about Mitchell Moss's glorious war record we'd have lost him for sure. But it was your second error, Counselor, that kept my new son-in-law off the gallows trap. If you'd pushed a little harder—and my Yankee heart half hoped you would—you'd have discovered that Sergeant Mitchell Moss fought that gallant war wearing the grey of the Confederate States of America."

Cyril Ratchford had been charming juries all his life . . .



That was the year Cyril Ratchford abandoned practicing law until Hysell hired him for a dollar. It was a year which began badly, with Judge Evans granting a guardianship of the person on Ratchford. Ratchford felt no anger at Evans, who was an old friend. He even admitted during the judge's hearing that he had been drinking heavily since Connie had died, that his legs had recently given out, and that he'd not been eating properly—or hardly at all, for that matter.

Judge Evans appointed one of the young partners in Ratchford's law firm as guardian and together they plotted and sent Ratchford to the Sunset Years Nursing Home. There he began to mend—or mend as much as can be expected of a seventy-year-old man with a bad liver and a problem heart.

Sunset Years was all right with Ratchford. The food was good and plentiful and his appetite returned. The attendants were friendly, although Ratchford quickly learned one didn't leave items worth stealing in view. His legs came back a little so that soon, with two stout canes and much effort, he could slowly get around.

The nursing home was full of old people and problem people, many of them forgotten or abandoned. Once Ratchford was well he soon got to know most of them and found they were people who'd lived uninteresting lives and were awaiting routine deaths. Ratchford, who'd spent his own life in deadly combat in courtrooms, found they mostly bored him.

There were minor exceptions. Down the hall there was a large old man who hit at people. He hit at attendants, nurses, doctors, and other patients—he was impartial about it. He liked to lie in wait and spring out from behind things, laughing and striking mean little blows.

The second time he did it to Ratchford, Ratchford thumped him with one of the canes. The large old man cried a little and seemed confused and hurt about it, and refused to lie in wait for Ratchford thereafter.

There was also a lady who had something growing inside her head and could no longer communicate. She talked but none of the words associated or made sense. Now and then she would stumble into Ratchford's room, fall into the lone chair, and blather away, very bewildered and earnest about it.

Ratchford found himself, more and more as time wound down for him, enmeshed in a vague ennui. He resisted attempts to get him back to the office. When he was asked if he wanted to move elsewhere he recoiled from the idea. Sunset Years was home.

He did have his guardian instruct the nursing-home management that he should be allowed to wander outside by himself.

Outside was where he re-met John Hysell.

Sunset Years had once been a resort hotel-motel until cooler winters and newer motels had forced it into receivership. It had then been picked up by the nursing-home chain which now operated it. Ratchford thought

his firm might have handled some of the transactions.

Across the road from the rambling main nursing-home building he found a path that led down between huge beach houses to the sea. Partway down the path, leading from the largest mansion—now in disrepair and seemingly abandoned—someone had built a new boardwalk continuing to the beach and terminating in a roofed lookout complete with a weathered picnic table. The lookout was open from floor to roof, but the breeze was pleasant there and the roof kept the sun from being too fierce.

So during the days, to escape the talker and to avoid the accusing eyes of the bully man, Ratchford would take a book and walk laboriously to the lookout. Sometimes he'd read, other times he sat watching the birds and the waves and the passing boats, sharing the luck of occasional fishermen and observing the beach walkers who passed.

The third time he was there John Hysell came. He came from the huge, half-ruined house, and Ratchford didn't know him at first. He rode in an electric wheelchair fabricated of shiny aluminum, and he operated it smartly. He wheeled into the lookout and smiled at Ratchford. He was carrying an ornate box on his blanket-covered lap. In one shirt pocket Ratchford spied a thin battery-powered calculator.

"You play checkers?" he asked.

Ratchford saw that Hysell's legs were useless under the thin lap blanket. His left arm was also affected. But the right arm still worked some and, above the neck, he seemed all right—smiling and waiting for an answer.

"I play checkers, chess, cribbage, gin rummy, and anything else you can think of." Connie had been a game fanatic.

Hysell's face tilted. "Don't I know you?"

"Cyril Ratchford. I am—or was—a lawyer."

Hysell nodded. "You did some work for me years back. And I built you a house. I'm John Hysell."

Ratchford remembered. Hysell had been a young, intent engineer-builder. Ratchford had later heard Hysell had made a fortune in construction and acquired a reputation as a man who did things right. He had built Connie's dream house when Ratchford could barely afford dreams, and it had continued to be her dream house until she died. In Florida, where anything built could be sold, Ratchford had been grateful.

"I've been watching you from what the last hurricane left of the balcony," Hysell said, pointing up. "I like the way you swing down here on those canes—like it was an effort but worth it. I'm not allowed out by my

sweet new wife, Miss Two-Ton, but today she went to a bingo party and by now she's probably stuffed herself full of ice cream and cake. It was easy to sneak past the maid. She takes a nap every time Miss T-T goes out."

"Your wife doesn't understand you," Ratchford said, smiling.

"Very perceptive," Hysell said, smiling in return. He appraised Ratchford—the expensive clothes, the white hair. "She'd like *you*," he said.

"Is that good?"

"No, not really," Hysell said. "She has a history of not picking her males for permanence." He thought for a minute, looking away so that Ratchford could no longer see his face. "Can I hire you?"

"Perhaps. I'm still a lawyer, although I've been inactive."

Hysell found a worn dollar in one of his pockets. He handed it up. "Consider yourself retained."

"For what?"

"What I really need is someone to help me kill my wife. Would you do that? No?" He shook his head. "I shouldn't have asked. I can read the shock in your eyes."

"I'm only a lawyer," Ratchford said. He looked down at the troubled man: "I can be hired only for that kind of work." He hesitated and then put the dollar in his pocket. "Have been hired," he amended.

Hysell sighed. "I've never really understood your profession. I suppose that now if anything happened to her you'd report me, wouldn't you?"

"No, I wouldn't. Some lawyers would. It's a technical point of ethics. I'm going to treat what you told me as a privileged communication."

Hysell nodded. "Well, if you won't help and you won't tell, that puts us back into the checkers area." He handed over the lap box. Ratchford opened it and found an exquisite folding checkerboard.

"The checkers are in that little drawer. We turn them over for kings." He smiled. "I shouldn't stay too long. Next time I'll sneak away as soon as she goes. But she doesn't go often. She's the meanest, most calculating woman I've ever known. My third wife." He lost the smile.

"I see."

"I remember when we were younger you did a lot of criminal work, Mr. Ratchford. Did you ever defend anyone accused of killing his wife?"

Ratchford nodded. "Many times."

Hysell shook his head. "It's such a problem. She's big and strong. I bumped her once accidentally with my chair and she stopped me cold.

I put some stuff in her wine, some corrosive cleaner, but she spit it out. She watches me all the time so I can't go out and buy a gun." He shook his head. "I used to be a good engineer. Now I can't do anything but operate this infernal chair and play with my calculator. It lowers the possibilities. So I suppose she'll just sit and wait for me to die." He shook his head. "She won't even let me live someplace decent." He looked up at the old wind-damaged house. "She inherited that from her last husband."

"Divorce her," Ratchford said.

"She told me if I try to divorce her she'll hold it up and maybe get me committed. Probably to a place like your Sunset Years. Could she do that?"

"Perhaps." Ratchford considered the ruined man before him. "Maybe even probably." He remembered the frustrating years in practice, the slowness, the frequent futility. "Getting a divorce can take a while, but Sunset Years is all right."

"I wouldn't mind that much, but I don't want her to realize it. Not too long ago some policemen came looking for her and questioned her about one of her husbands who died. I think she knows she has to treat me carefully." He looked out at the sea, a long look. "When we were married she talked me into putting a lot of things into joint title. When I die my two kids will get next to nothing."

"She put on almost a hundred pounds after I had my stroke. She can let me die, but I think right now she's afraid to do more. So she'll outwait me, if she doesn't eat herself to death. She went on a diet when I first met her. That was when I imagined she loved me. Now she picks and punishes and argues, trying to hasten me along. And she eats and eats." He shook his head, sick and bewildered. "How did a smart engineer wind up in a mess like this?"

"Why not make her mad enough to put you in Sunset Years?"

Hysell nodded and smiled craftily. "I'll bet that's where she'd put me. She's too smart to let me get far out of sight, too fat and lazy to want to travel far to see me dying. Sunset Years would be convenient." He gave Ratchford an odd, calculating look. "She'd see you there too. While she's involved in that maybe I could . . ."

All of it meant nothing to Ratchford, but Hysell had been a joy to Connie in building her house. He owed him semi-free advice and counsel for that.

"You can try," he said.

A few days later Ratchford found Hysell as the newest resident of Sunset Years, ensconced in a double room with a man named Schmidt who continually muttered terrible things about his family. Ratchford had thought Schmidt pitiful and had avoided the man's room. Schmidt's family were all dead.

Hysell smiled up at him from a bed. "She took my wheelchair away when we first started arguing, but I'll get it back. She's got some tax papers I have to sign and she's afraid to forge my signature." He nodded. "Look in my nightstand drawer."

Ratchford did. Inside was a deck of plastic playing cards and a fancy cribbage board.

"You're better at checkers than I am, but I'm going to beat you to death playing cribbage," Hysell announced. He punched some numbers on the ever-present calculator. "The odds are two to one."

They were playing that afternoon when Mella Hysell came visiting.

"Who are you?" she asked Ratchford from the door. Her face was all arched eyebrows and full cheeks but Ratchford could see she was a handsome woman. Even far overweight she'd never be ugly—blimpish, but very pretty. She looked thirty years younger than Hysell.

Ratchford stood up haltingly. She watched him with eyes that seemed sympathetic.

"My name's Cyril Ratchford. Your husband was instructing me in a game called cribbage." He smiled at her. He'd been charming juries all his life.

"And you live here?" she asked, smiling back.

"Temporarily," Ratchford said.

She fussed around Hysell's bed; fluffing the pillows, straightening the sheets, all the time watching Ratchford.

"I brought those papers," she told Hysell in a low, intent voice. "Sign them now and I'll bring over your wheelchair."

"Bring my chair and *then* I'll sign," Hysell answered.

She nodded, still watching Ratchford, who was beginning to feel like a snake being eyed by a mongoose. "I started my diet today," she said to both men.

Hysell laughed. "I'll bet."

She gave him a baleful look. "Well, I did. And you know when I make my mind up to it I can do anything." She calculated him and the room. "Be nice and I'll bring you home."

"It's more restful here," Hysell demurred. "Or it will be when I get my chair."

"You'll get your chair when you come home."

Hysell smiled. "I'll sign the papers then too."

She smiled. "Whatever will Mr. Ratchford think of us—quarreling in front of him." She nodded at Ratchford. "He argues with me sometimes, but he knows what Momma says is best."

Ratchford smiled politely.

After she'd gone, Hysell seemed unwilling to go back to the cribbage game. He was pensive.

"Cyril," he said, "you must know some criminals. Couldn't you contact someone for me to hire? I know I can't last a lot longer."

Ratchford shook his head. "Let's suppose I did. If you made a deal, in law, I could be as guilty as you. Besides, your wife doesn't seem so bad. I think you're exaggerating."

Hysell gave him a penetrating glance. "She was interested in you, just as I predicted. By the time she sees you again she'll have checked you out. She took one look at your white hair and decided she was going to lose weight." He nodded. "She did that for me too. She was married then, to a man with a bad heart. He died shortly after I met her."

"You keep saying things like that. You talk about police and such. Are you saying she killed her last husband?"

"All I'm telling you are my suspicions. When we were married, for example, she admitted to two previous marriages. From what she's let slip and from what I've deduced since then, I've got to be at least number five or six. Those earlier husbands had to pass out of the picture somehow." He shook his head. "She's a creature for our time, Cyril. Florida abounds with old people. Mella's especially apt at caging the males of the species. She becomes impatient when she's not hunting. So I must watch myself and plan." He smiled. "One thing's for sure—she'll lose weight now."

"Many people diet."

Hysell shook his head. "Mella loves to eat. She'll lose now for one reason only. She means to impress you."

"I quite probably don't have as much time left on this earth as you do," Ratchford protested.

"She wouldn't be interested in you if you had a lot of time left," Hysell replied. "I wish you'd help me. Just a name and a telephone number would do for starts."

"I'm a lawyer, not an assassin."

"Fair enough. I'll just ask for one thing then—one favor. Show some interest in her."

Ratchford hesitated, then nodded, intrigued.

Ratchford found Mella Hysell the most direct and forward woman he'd ever known. It was as if she knew she could say whatever she wanted and that he was too much of a gentleman to argue or disagree.

Like the hitting man, she lay in wait for him, stalking him. Hysell took to sleeping away the long afternoons. That meant Ratchford must either spend the afternoons in his own room, lost in the agonies of daytime television, or go outside and cripple his way to the lookout area.

When he knew she waited for him he tried to find another alternative, but he was unsuccessful. Other than the path to the sea there was little of interest, and there was no other way to get to the beach within reasonable distance. To the north there were scores of tiny tract houses, most of them occupied by pensioners from the North. To the south there were more large homes, most of them damaged and unoccupied, then a bait store, then a boat place. Neither was a place to spend the long afternoons, although he tried, wandering north, then south.

So he went back to the lookout.

She waited for him on the unrailed balcony. At first she wore long concealing dresses. Later, as her weight diminished, she went to daring things—no bra, and finally bikinis.

Ratchford was alarmed, flattered, intrigued, and half a dozen other things all at once. She was perceptive to this, playing on his moods like a skilled harpist. If he seemed alarmed at the speed or direction of the ersatz affair, she soothed him. If he asked about her past life, she lied well. If he foresaw a dismal future, she always pictured them together in it.

"John isn't well," she told him. "He hates me because of that. He can't last much longer, his doctors say. And I need someone, Cyril. Someone like you—experienced, urbane." She'd accompany these speeches with

a melting look that became more and more effective as her excess flesh vanished. Ratchford estimated her weight loss after eight weeks at almost forty pounds. It went more slowly thereafter, but she continued to lose. It was as if, knowing the strength of her web, she knew it would support only a lean spider.

Hysell watched and, after a while, laughed at Ratchford, but it was a laugh which understood and sympathized.

"Now you know," he said.

Ratchford shook his head, not knowing.

"In your practice how many divorces did you obtain for women?"

"Hundreds, perhaps thousands," Ratchford said.

"Didn't any of those women try to latch onto you?"

Ratchford nodded. Some had, and it had been an agony for him to treat them nicely. Connie was alive then and she was the only woman for him. There had been divorcees who clutched and cried and promised multitudes of delights. Some had been beautiful. All had been interested in matrimony, a replacement of the one shed in court. But none of them, not even the best schemer he remembered, had been as good at intrigue as Mella Hysell. He found himself enjoying the performance, and uncertain as to whether he was moved by it or not.

There was a sane Ratchford who stood in the shadows watching all.

What would you do with her? the sane Ratchford asked. *I mean, what good would she be to you?*

But he could dream and he was intrigued. It was as if, in what he knew to be the last of life, he was to be allowed once again to engage in a "first affair."

"How much weight do you figure she's lost by now?" Hysell constantly asked, using his good hand to doodle on his calculator. "Does she still wait for you on the balcony?"

"She's your wife," Ratchford told him. "This is embarrassing me. I think you should come with me."

Hysell shook his head. "She has my chair. She's using it to get me to come home, and I think it'll be time soon." He doodled some more with the calculator, cleared it, and snapped it off. "Not quite yet though. Tell me what you see in her."

Ratchford shook his head. "She's young. She's ardent. She has definite ideas about things. And she's vivid and handsome. Sometimes I feel as

if I'm in distress and she's a knight riding to my rescue. She reverses the roles of romance."

Hysell smiled. "Those were my feelings exactly."

"But not now?" Ratchford said.

"Mella is interested mainly in the chase and the capture, not the afterwards. She'll pursue you as she chased me. Sooner or later you'll become the pursuer. Then she will temporize, demand plans, ask various conditions to prove your love. When you accede she'll marry you." He smiled. "By that time I'll be dead and you'll be the heir apparent."

Ratchford, realizing that Mella had already forced things between them close to the temporizing stage, said nothing.

"I tell her I hate you when I see her alone," Hysell confided. "She tells me to come home and look after my business. She understands jealousy." He smiled. "I'm not jealous. I'm only trying to figure some neat way to do her in before she does me in, but ideas that seem workable are hard to come up with. For her it would be easy. Too much or too little medicine, perhaps a pillow over the face or a fall down the steps—" He smiled again, more interested than afraid. "She's a lot stronger than either of us, Cyril. With your help, I might kill her more easily." He gave Ratchford an inquiring look.

Ratchford shook his head.

"Remember, when I go you'll be next."

"What if I'm not interested in her?"

"But you are," Hysell explained.

A few days later Hysell was gone. A nurse told Ratchford that Mella had taken him home. Ratchford waited for him at the lookout, but only Mella came.

"Where's John?" he asked, careful not to show too much interest.

"He's not feeling well," she said quickly. "He's failing, I'm afraid. Soon to be with me no more." She shook her head and Ratchford was unsurprised at the tears in her eyes. "Then I'll be alone."

He waited.

"It's been the story of my life. I've fallen in love with mature men. First John, then you. Now John will die and leave me." She eyed him warmly.

Ratchford, fascinated but wary, had a problem holding himself back from offering the wanted substitute.

"I'd like to see John," he said.

She inclined her head. "I know he's told you stories. I hope you don't believe them. I'll bring him out onto the balcony tomorrow so you can see him." The tears became profuse and it was hard to disbelieve them. "It may be for the last time."

She groped for his hand and held it.

The next day he went early to the lookout and waited. After a time he was rewarded. John and Mella came onto the balcony. They waved to him, Mella enthusiastically, John feebly. Ratchford hobbled up the boardwalk to be closer, to call out to them.

Suddenly, without Ratchford seeing why, Mella flew down, screaming, to join him, her black-and-white-print dress fluttering in the sea breeze as she fell. By the time he got to her she was dead, her eyes unseeing, her now thin body lying broken on the flagstones.

After a while John appeared on the boardwalk. He rolled down to Ratchford in his aluminum chair.

"She stopped my medicine," he said. "I think she was sure that would do it. I acted as if it was about to, but I feel all right." He looked down at her and did one more calculation on his calculator. "She'd lost a lot of weight. Just enough."

Ratchford nodded. "Have you ever told anyone else the things you told me?"

"Regrettably, yes."

"Well, tell no one else. And somehow you've picked up a bit of black-and-white cloth on the front of the arm to your chair."

Hysell nodded, his color better than Ratchford had ever seen it.

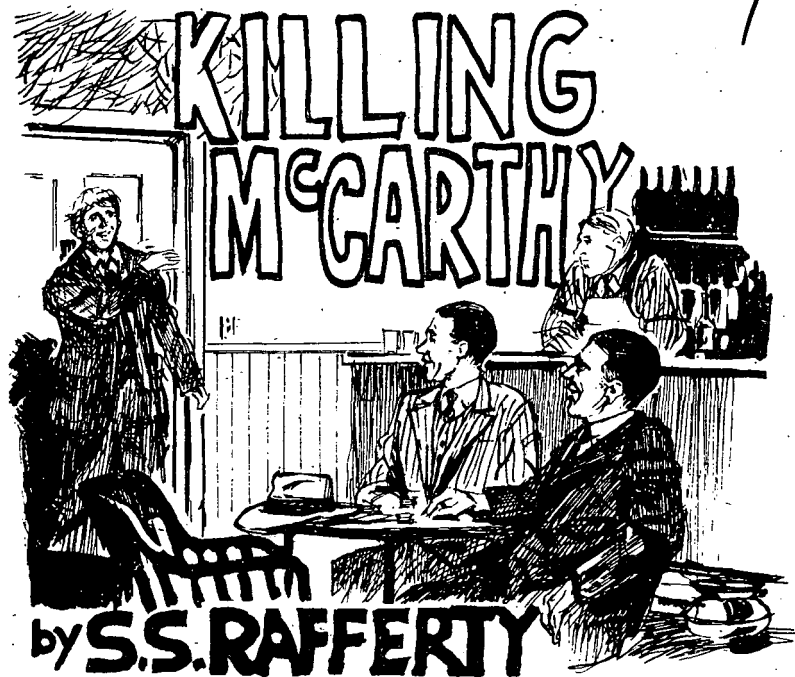
"Are you sure you're all right?" Ratchford asked.

"I'm fine."

"Certainly there's no way you could feel well enough to talk with the police about this tragic fall. When they arrive, you'll answer no questions. After all, your wife is dead." He looked at Hysell, whose good right hand was working at the nooks and crannies of the arm of his chair.

"Every thread," Ratchford ordered.

McCarthy was the answer to their problems . . .



In the bitter winter of 1933, amid the gloom and despair of the Depression, a glimmer of surcease flickered for the citizens of the Red Hook section of Brooklyn.

The speakeasies were having a price war.

The ferocity of the battle reached suicidal heights when one speak owner starting charging for the free lunch and giving the booze away, leaving the citizens delighted and the owners morose—none more than

Bruno Salmandrella, proprietor of a knock-and-sip shop just off President Street.

"This is pure murder," Bruno said, looking around his almost deserted establishment.

"And that's a fact, boss," responded Mickey Dooley, who was sitting at the rickety poker table with his employer. No one was ever quite sure what Dooley's duties were. The only visible job he'd ever performed had been driving Bruno's 1927 Ford, and that had been sold six months before. Of course, back in the good old days, he had ably assisted Bruno in rolling "drunks" after their victims had been introduced to chloral hydrate by the bartender, K.O. Kowowski—a moniker derived not from the sports arena but in tribute to his skill as an anesthetist.

"And now they're talking about repeal already," Bruno moaned.

"Indeed they are, boss, indeed they are."

"There's no more frontiers, Dooley, no virgin ground to till."

"It's a sad, sad state, boss."

"I gotta make a buck somehow, but how?"

"It's a perplexity, boss."

Before Dooley could finish his sycophancy, their attention was riveted on a strange young man who had just been admitted from the icy streets. The newcomer was strange for a number of reasons: he wore a tie, his shoes were shined, and his hair was neatly combed. In Bruno's place, the man's appearance was beyond strange—it crashed headlong into the unbelievable.

Bruno and Dooley eyed the newcomer like starving wolves as K.O. waited for a high sign to once again live up to his reputation. But to everyone's surprise the man did not approach the bar; instead, he walked straight to the poker table.

"Mr. Salmandrella, I presume," he said in an odd accent—possibly Manhattan. "I have very good news for you. I'm Philip Townsend from the Equity Life Insurance Company."

Bruno's mind raced with enginelike speed. He was trying desperately to recall anyone who would have died and left him money—a futile waste of memory power, for in the width and breadth of Brooklyn no one had an iota of affection for Bruno Salmandrella.

"Sit down, sonny," the owner said graciously, "and have a drink on the house."

"The seat is welcome, sir, but I don't imbibe. Not that I'm a Dry, mind

you, but I believe in individual choice."

"Yeah, sure. So what's the good news?"

"Well, sir," the young man said exuberantly, "for the next sixty days my company has authorized me to accept applications with no premiums due for one month. In a sense, Mr. Salmandrella, we are giving you complete coverage free of charge for thirty whole days, around the clock."

"You came in here to sell me insurance?" Bruno growled darkly.

"If I may be so bold as to correct you, sir, I came in here to *give* you insurance. No charge at all—free—for thirty days."

"But he has to start paying at the end of the month," Dooley observed astutely.

"True. But if Mr. Salmandrella goes to his maker in the thirty-day period, heaven forbid, his loved ones will have a \$3,000 gift from my company. And that's not all the good news, no siree. This new offer gives you the policy without a medical examination! Think of it—you could be sitting there racked with a mortal disease and still be eligible!"

"I ain't got no disease," Bruno glowered. "K.O., throw this bum outta here."

"Now that won't be necessary, sir," Philip Townsend said apprehensively. "No one likes to think of death. I'll just leave my card and you can think it over." And as if some primordial instinct told him danger was afoot, the insurance man was on his way out the door.

As if things weren't bad enough, now Bruno was saddled with the grim aspect of his own mortality. Dooley, sensing his melancholia, struck a cheerful note.

"Things must be bad all over, boss, if they're giving away insurance. Guess we're all in the same boat. Misery loves—"

"Shut up, I'm thinking."

And Bruno thought. He thought very hard. He thought so hard his ears were ringing and his scalp itched.

"You know, Dooley," he finally broke the silence, "this insurance thing's got possibilities. Suppose we was to take out a policy on some citizen and that citizen just happened to croak. The kid was right—it's like a free gift."

"It's a pure boat race, boss. But it's got to be someone who ain't got no family to put up a stink."

The door opened, sending a chilly blast into the room. There stood Seamus McCarthy. Bruno looked at Dooley and Dooley looked at Bruno

and they shared a divine moment of mutual ideation. Their brainwaves commingled into one clear message: Seamus McCarthy was desperately in need of insurance. He was ideal. No family, no home—he didn't even have an overcoat. If McCarthy were to step out of this life without a moment's notice, no one would care.

For a barroom bum and a drink cadger, he had a touch of nobility to him. The big, lilt-voiced Irishman could tell endless stories and never repeat a blessed one. His gift as a raconteur stood him well with forlorn drinkers in need of a bit of mirth in exchange for "a touch of bottled sunshine," as McCarthy put it.

"Ah, Bruno!" the red-haired man greeted them with a grandiloquent gesture of his arm. "You remind me of a prince of the Medici sitting there, ye do. And the honorable Dooley, the faithful liegeman, at his side. It's a grand picture, fit for Michelangelo's canvas. But, gentlemen, I detect a hint of despair in your regal eyes. Business is not brisk, I see."

"It's looking up, McCarthy, it's looking up."

"Right you are, my prince. When all is in darkness, I salute he that says 'gentle, let us light the candles.' If I had a drink, I would salute you."

When Bruno called over to the bar and ordered McCarthy a drink, K.O. Kowowski was as stunned as if he had accidentally taken some of his own chloral hydrate.

"In fact, set out a bottle for our friend."

"Most gracious, my sovereign lord. But such largesse?"

"Well, McCarthy—can I call you Seamus?"

"An honor, good sir," he said, pouring a glassful from the newly arrived bottle.

"Well, Seamus, when you walked in, I says to myself, Bruno, you're one bum businessman. Here I got one of the greatest storytellers on two feet, and I'm not using his talents. From now on, you drop in any time you want and the drinks are on the house. All you have to do is entertain the customers."

"A stroke of genius has descended into this room," McCarthy said, casting his eyes heavenward, or as far heavenward as the scabby tin ceiling would allow. "The court seanachie—like the revered storytellers of Ireland, who passed the oral traditions on and on, like pebble rings in a Kilkenny tarn. I salute you, sire, and pledge my life to you."

Bruno looked at Dooley and Dooley looked at Bruno and they reflected each other's smiles—the smiles of jackals.

Three days later, Bruno had gained some weight and some happiness. The weight was minimal, for how much could a "signed, sealed, and delivered insurance policy weigh? The happiness stemmed from visions of \$3,000 looming into view. During the three-day waiting period, Dooley had apprehensions that McCarthy would die of drink before the policy was approved, but they were unfounded—the Irishman's capacity was limitless.

"I don't know how he does it, boss," Dooley said with a modicum of awe as he looked at McCarthy blithely snoozing on a table. "That guy's got the constitution of an ox."

"Then we got to help him along. Hey, K.O.!" he called. The barkeep lumbered over. "We still got that can of anti-freeze we used to use in the Ford?"

"Yeah, it's out back someplace. You buying a new car?"

"Maybe sooner than you think. After we close up tonight, I want you to serve our friend over there a couple of shots of anti-freeze as a little nightcap."

K.O.'s eyes squinted. "Hey, Bruno, you're talking murder, and I ain't going to no sizzle seat for that bum."

Bruno explained the policy plan and cut K.O. in for a third, much to Dooley's chagrin—he had just lost \$500.

"For a G. O. K.," said K.O., "but what are you going to do with the body?"

"We'll toss him out in the street and let some passerby find him."

"But suppose he ain't dead, Bruno?"

"Give him three shots of the stuff and he will be."

"I don't know, Bruno," K.O. said warily, "I had an aunt once who sat right up in her coffin after a three-day wake. You gotta be sure the bum is dead—*real* dead."

This put a perplexing shadow over things until Bruno's ears started to ring and his scalp began to itch.

"Dreyfus the Undertaker!" he shouted. "Who would know more about being real dead than an undertaker?"

The choice was truly brilliant. Dreyfus was a lush himself but, drunkard or not, he wanted a piece of the action. Dooley, through lightning calculations, determined his share had dwindled to \$750.

It was three o'clock in the morning and Dreyfus returned to the table from examining McCarthy, who had slumped to the floor shortly after

1:00 A.M. Dreyfus poured himself another drink—his twenty-seventh by count.

"Well?" Bruno asked impatiently.

"I'm not sure, Bruno. We'd better give it another hour at least."

"Like hell we will. You're just stalling for free drinks." He got up from his chair, went over to McCarthy, and knelt down, putting his ear to the man's mouth for a hint of breathing.

"Ah, my sweet king," a voice boomed in his ear, "forgive me, for I am fat-witted with drinking old sack, which unbuttoned me and leaves me sleeping upon the benches after noon."

"The sonofabitch is alive!" K.O. gasped.

"Alive and to the fray," McCarthy said, solemnly getting to his feet and staggering over to what was left of the free lunch. "But first, a sweet morsel and then, lead on, O Hal, and we shall slay our Hotspur."

Five days later, the cabal had given up the idea of sending McCarthy out of this world by means of poison. Not only had the house seanachie withstood the corrosion of anti-freeze, he had also walked away from eating a can of tainted sardines which Bruno had helped along by shredding the can into curlicues of deadly fragments of tin. The only complaint emanating from McCarthy was that the sandwich was a touch on the gritty side.

Bruno was beside himself with rage. It was more than the money now; he was determined to kill McCarthy at any cost. And cost it did, when a professional was brought into the picture for a full share.

He was called the Tapper, a sinister old man who had retired from the Syndicate but liked to keep his hand in. As an equal shareholder, he gave them the benefit of his long years of experience.

"O.K., so the geek's got an iron gut, right? Lotsa freaks like that in circus sideshows, right?" Either the Tapper always talked in questions or he was in dire need of agreement. "Besides, poisoning ain't always a smart way to go. Coroner comes along and does an autopsy, right? Cops get nosy, right? Then we all go for our lungs—"

"Right!" Dooley said, picking up the tempo.

"Right!" Dreyfus, K.O., and Bruno joined the chorus.

"It's gotta look natural-like, right? Well, you got your snowstorm here, right? And it's about zero degrees, right? Drunk falls asleep in the open and the Coroner says 'Death from exposure to the cruel elements.'"

"Right!"

"Right!"

"Right!"

"Right!"

There was another complication, however. McCarthy would have to be dumped in some remote place to avoid anyone stumbling over him too soon and—heaven forbid—calling a life-saving ambulance. The complication was transportation, and no one owned a car, not even Dreyfus, who rented a hearse, when needed, from another undertaker.

"A hot car is out," Bruno ruled, thus forcing the entry of Sammy Opeso, the cabbie, into the pact. Dooley wondered if \$500 apiece was worth all this trouble, but Bruno was adamant. He was obsessed with the vision of attending McCarthy's funeral.

The wind was howling a frigid screech when Dooley and Opeso returned from their mission.

"I hope you picked a good spot. We want the guy found, you know," Bruno said as the executioners poured whiskey into their chilled bodies.

"We put him out on a side street in Queens, sleeping like a baby," Dooley said proudly. "No one's out on a night like this up there."

"And you poured water over him, right?"

"Right. Opened his shirt too."

"Well, boys," Bruno said, raising his glass, "here's to the dearly departed."

"It's about time," Dreyfus grumped.

But time became their enemy. Thirty-six hours after McCarthy had been committed to the elements, there had been nothing in the newspapers about any body being found frozen to death in Queens. Sammy Opeso was dispatched to nose around the disposal area and returned to report that the body wasn't there.

"If the guy walked away this time," Bruno swore, "I'm gonna shoot him dead and take my chances on going to the chair."

"Wait," Dreyfus said through slurred speech. "If the body isn't there, it's probably at the morgue. I'll check."

Check he did, in vain. Then he checked the hospitals in the event some damn Samaritan had happened to find McCarthy alive. There was no McCarthy recorded at any hospital within twenty miles of the city.

"Six dollars' worth of phone calls and no McCarthy," Dooley snarled. "He did it again. Maybe the geek's immortal."

"I doubt it," Dreyfus hiccupped. "No one could survive a cold night like that. Even if he did walk away from it, he'd head right back here for the free booze."

"Yeah—" Bruno eyed them all suspiciously. "—there's a lot of free booze being passed around here. You got any more bright ideas, Tapper?"

"All right, so the guy wakes up and does a fade, right?"

Nobody bothered to agree.

"But you still got a policy here, right? So we need a replacement, right? All you need is another rummy about his size with red hair, and we have ourselves a hit-and-run accident."

And so the search began. Speaks and flophouses were combed and recombined. Soup kitchens were scoured, park benches, redemption missions, Bowery alleys, freight yards. They did everything but put an ad in the paper (although it had been suggested).

Then, one glorious day when the sun glistened off the snow, Opeso walked (or helped) in a red-haired companion.

"Shay, thish plashe ish O.K., pal," the stranger said as he passed out on the floor.

"Whaddya think, guys?"

"Perfect—even the build's the same," Bruno passed judgment. "Good work, Sammy. Let's make sure he don't have no tattoos."

He didn't, but a card for a meal at a soup kitchen said his name was Butch Bremmer:

"Let's do it tonight, right?"

"Wrong," Bruno said. "Wrong, wrong, wrong. Finding this here card tells me where we slipped up with McCarthy. He didn't have any identification on him. We got to get some cards printed up with McCarthy's name on them and plant them on this clown."

"What would a bum be doing with printed calling cards?" Dooley questioned.

"Right!"

"Wait a minute." Dooley had a idea. "Why can't one of us go down and register at a soup kitchen as McCarthy?"

"Swell idea. You're elected."

"Aw, not me, Bruno. I don't look like no rumdum. Besides, you gotta sit around and sing hymns and listen to sermons before you sign up."

"Let's get something straight, Mickey. I've got a few bucks invested in this deal, feeding and boozing this tribe."

"And I haven't had a funeral in two weeks 'cause I'm too busy looking for a bum," Dreyfus chimed in.

"Hey, I'm out close to one hundred and fifty clams not paying attention to my cab business," Opeso complained.

"Who's working behind the bar all day not making any tips?" This from K.O.

"And I'm missing out on my retirement day, right?" the Tapper said.

"You're it, Dooley."

He was, and he went. And he sang and he prayed and he got the goddamned card. As an added touch, Bruno penned a letter to his dear cousin Seamus, imploring him to give up his life of degradation. He even included his phone number to insure speedy identification.

Now, at long last, they were ready. A deserted street was selected. Jobs were assigned. Dreyfus and the Tapper would hold the inebriated form of Bremmer/McCarthy at the side of the road while Opeso got up killing speed and, at the proper moment, the victim would be pushed into the path of the cab.

"Make sure he goes under the wheels," Opeso cautioned. "I don't want no dented fenders or busted headlights."

The deed was done, and a sense of accomplishment pervaded Bruno's barroom. All they had to do was wait until the next day when Dreyfus would go to the morgue and claim the body, get the death certificate, and they all could collect the insurance.

"We shoulda done it that way with the real McCarthy in the beginning," Dooley said through a mouthful of liverwurst sandwich.

He almost choked to death when a voice boomed from the doorway. "What ho, my merry men, the prodigal son returns!"

"Oh, sweet Je—"

"It's him, right? McCarthy, right?"

"You didn't recognize me, my lads, and who could blame you? Me with a shave, haircut, and new—or at least clean—duds. I must have wandered off in the snow and ended up in the hospital. I'm sorry if I caused alarm, my prince, but your seanachie has returned to duty."

"I swear I'm gonna kill him here and now," Bruno mumbled to himself.

"You weren't in any hospital," Dreyfus challenged him, "I checked."

"*Au contraire*, good gravesman. Ah, the name! I see. An old I.R.A. trick—confuses the Black and Tans. Everyone always says his name is Murphy. At one time, there must have been two hundred Paddy Murphys in Mountjoy Prison. It drives the screws crazy at rollcall."

"Well, Seamus lad, why don't you step over to the bar where K.O. will pour you a drink or two while we fellows discuss our business?" Dooley requested.

"*Avec plaisir, mes musketeers, adieu* for now."

"I'm not gonna shoot him, I'm gonna strangle him," Bruno pledged with his eyes ablaze. "With my bare hands—or, better still, a rusty chain. Yeah, a big linked rusty chain that'll cut into his—no, a piano wire!"

"Control yourself, Bruno. We have a bigger problem. We've got a McCarthy dead from a hit-and-run and another McCarthy walking around alive and cold sober, and that insurance agent will spot him if he's around when the time comes to settle the claim."

"I'll use a crowbar," Bruno continued. "A nice heavy crowbar that'll crush his voicebox—"

"We'll just keep him drunk and out of the way, right?"

"Tapper, have you ever seen this guy drink?" Dooley moaned in frustration. "He's sober now. It'll take him three weeks to get a buzz on."

"Well, we can't knock him off. God knows we've tried."

"We've got to do something, Dreyfus. Maybe you could bury him alive in one of your caskets."

"Ixnay, my friend. I don't take no murder raps alone. Besides, that guy would probably dig his way out."

"An axe, a nice, sharp axe—"

"Killing him is the last thing we want to do, right? We just get him out of town. We don't want two dead McCarthys, right?"

"You mean we got to send this bum on a vacation?" Opeso said angrily.

"At least until the policy pays off, right?"

"Right," Dooley agreed. "O.K., so it costs us twenty-five bucks apiece, which lowers our take to four seventy-five each, but it's better than blowing the whole deal."

Opeso stopped in mid-drink. "What's the matter with Bruno? He's foaming at the mouth. Hey, Bruno, you sick or something?"

"A tank full of crocodiles. Much better, hee hee. Yes, I'll get a whole swimming pool full of crocodiles, hundreds of 'em, starve 'em for weeks—"

"I think he's off his nut, Dooley, right?"

"That's why I want to get McCarthy the hell out of here."

As they drove to the bus station in Opeso's cab, Dooley said, "Now you understand what you're supposed to do, McCarthy? You deliver the first letter to Tapper's cousin in Chicago."

"Right you are, sir."

"Then you go on to California, where you deliver the second letter to Opeso's brother in Los Angeles."

"And if you have any money left, you might want to go on to China," Opeso said glumly from the front seat.

"Have no fear. It is a trust I will carry through to my last dying breath."

That'll be the day, Opeso said to himself.

"But I depart with a heavy heart, my brothers, for the prince of the Medici seems ill. Strange that he should mention a cage full of cobras as I was leaving. When I was hospitalized after my escape from death *al fresco*, I mentioned to the doctor that it was the luck of the Irish that kept me alive. And would you believe he told me that each of us is essentially alike but there is no such thing as the average man. Take these cobras that Bruno is so intent on buying. The doctor used that very same analogy. There are some people who can get bitten and they don't die. One man can take one ounce of alcohol and die of alcohol poisoning while another can live the life of a sot and remain healthy. It puts one in awe of the Almighty, doesn't it?"

They waited most of the night for the phone call from the morgue, and McCarthy's absence made a vast improvement on Bruno's condition. When the wall phone rang, he calmly said he'd get it.

"Mr. Bruno Salmandrella?" a woman's voice asked.

"Speaking," he said with a croak.

"Mr. Salmandrella, I have some bad news for you, sir."

A touch of a smile started to light up his face. "Yes?"

"Your cousin, Seamus McCarthy, has been the victim of a hit-and-run driver, sir."

"Oh, my. Well, the way he lived, you know."

"Yes, we have your letter. It's a shame."

"When can I come down and identify the body?"

"Body! Oh, forgive me, Mr. Salmandrella, for giving you the impression

that your cousin is dead. He's not. He's very badly injured—two broken legs, fractures, contusions, a slight concussion—but the doctors think he'll be all right."

"This isn't the morgue?"

"No, sir, this is the admitting office at Mercy Hospital. Now, as Mr. McCarthy's next of kin, you realize you are responsible for his hospital costs. Mr. Salmandrella—Mr. Salmandrella— Hello?"

Dooley took the receiver from the speechless Bruno. "Hello. This is a friend of Mr. Salmandrella's. He seems to be in a state of shock."

"Oh dear, I hope it's not my fault for giving him the impression that his cousin is dead. Please assure him that he is alive and will probably recover. Now about the hospital costs—"

When Dooley passed along the news, Dreyfus threw his hands in the air and said, "I quit. That's it. Kaput."

"Me too," Opeso said, getting into his topcoat. "This has been one Chinese fire drill from start to finish."

"Right, right?"

Dooley looked at Bruno, who hadn't moved from the phone. "A guillotine. I'm going to import a French chopper, and one of them wagons they haul the prisoners in. Or maybe an electric chair."

"K.O.," Dooley said, "you'd better use a little chloral hydrate on Bruno here."

Out on the sidewalk, Opeso was getting into his cab when a police car drove up.

"Hey, you," said an officer, getting out of the car, "you know your front license plate is missing?"

"It is! I'll be damned! I didn't notice, Officer. I'll get it replaced tomorrow."

"Don't bother. We have it at headquarters. It seems you left it at the scene of a hit-and-run accident. Let's take a ride, pal."

Six weeks later, a large red-haired man walked into a speakeasy and spent the last of his \$150 on a drink. He turned to the man drinking next to him and said, "Nice town, Chicago."

"This is South Bend."

"Truly? Well, I near the first leg of my journey then. You know, I find that life is stranger than fiction. Don't you?"

"Never thought about it. I'll have another, Al. Will you join me?"

"Only if I can reciprocate with a story that might interest you. You're going to say it couldn't have happened, but it did, and six men are spending many years in dungeons for attempted murder. The strange thing is that I knew these men, and would attest that they were incapable of murder. They certainly showed me every kindness, and yet they tried to take the life of a fellow creature."

"The victim didn't die, huh?"

"So the newspaper said—it was bungled."

"Maybe that's the answer, like you said—they *were* incapable of murder."



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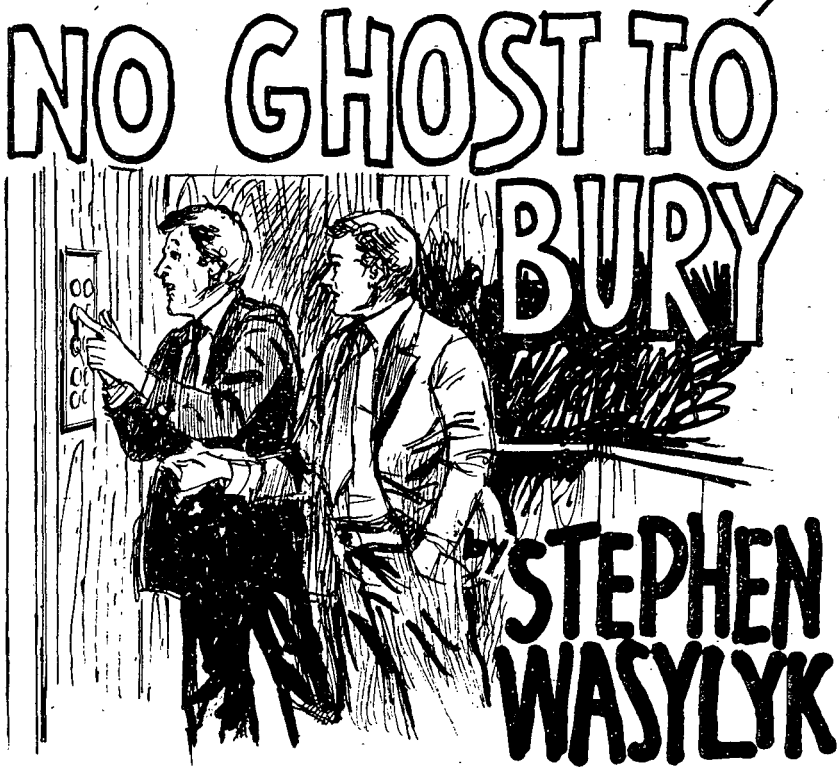
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Wilson's claustrophobia made him terrified of elevators . . .



The cold stare of the man standing near the elevator with his hands clasped behind his back seemed to be evaluating Wilson and the man alongside him as they waited for the hotel elevator. The stare made Wilson nervous and he punched the call button again, even though he was never anxious to enter an elevator at any time.

The doors swished open, Wilson and the man who had been waiting alongside him stepped in, and the elevator started down. It couldn't move

fast enough to suit Wilson as he watched the rows of numbers above the door brighten and dim in descending order.

The old, familiar tightness in his throat returned. He suffered from a mild claustrophobia that manifested itself whenever he entered an elevator, a problem he had evaded somewhat by moving to a small town where the buildings were no more than three stories high. But there were times when he had business in the city and he would have to grit his teeth, steel himself, and ride an elevator when there were too many stairs to climb.

The nineteenth floor went by.

"Cop," said his companion.

Wilson glanced at him. He was square-faced and heavy-set, wearing a grey suit that looked as if it had been fitted before he put on weight. "I beg your pardon?"

"The man watching everyone getting on and off the elevator was a cop. I should know."

"I suppose you should," Wilson said, not caring how or why.

The light blinked for eighteen and went out.

The elevator slid a few more feet and then stopped with a sudden jar. So did Wilson's heart.

It was too soon to be the seventeenth floor.

His mouth went dry. The walnut walls seemed to move perceptibly toward him; the cube of space he and the other man occupied was shrinking slowly.

Somewhere deep inside him a screaming began and wetness suddenly coated his palms.

The man with him reached out and pushed the ground-floor button again. The soft overhead lights flickered. The man pushed the button marked DOORS. Nothing happened.

The small voice inside Wilson screamed louder. He had always feared this, but had told himself it was stupid, that the odds were highly against an elevator breaking down while he was in it.

"It looks like we're stuck," said the man cheerfully.

The words clogged Wilson's throat. "Emergency button."

The man put his finger on the red button and pressed hard.

Wilson could hear nothing. He looked at the control panel. No legend seemed to fit the situation. Frantically he pressed one floor button after another, trying to bring the dead elevator back to life.

"Damn!" he said forcefully.

"Take it easy," said his companion. "They'll come and get us. This may not be the most modern hotel in town but it is busy. It won't take them long to realize one elevator isn't working."

The walnut paneled walls seemed to be closing in on Wilson slowly. The fan in the ceiling had stopped and the air was getting stuffy.

"Since we're stuck in here, we might as well introduce ourselves," said the man. "My name is Claymont Holley."

Wilson couldn't ignore the outstretched hand. "Wilson."

"Are you in town on business?"

He nodded. "And you?"

"I'm with the police chiefs' convention. That's how I knew the man watching us was a cop. Something's going on, I think."

"Then let them get up here and help us get out of this thing," snapped Wilson.

He felt his hand tremble as he loosened his collar, not knowing if Holley noticed his fear, and not really caring.

"One thing about being a police chief," said Holley, "you're always running into something new. Like the effect of fear. It's funny what it will do to people."

He has noticed, Wilson thought.

"Would you believe a whole town could be frightened?"

"I can believe anything," Wilson said tensely.

"Fear," said Holley thoughtfully. "It takes hold of some people and won't let go, and most of the time it's because of something in their minds, not because of anything real."

He was talking directly at him, Wilson realized, trying to convince him there was nothing to be afraid of, trying to divert his mind from the situation.

"You take my town," said Holley. "You wouldn't believe that something like a two-hundred-year-old skeleton could terrorize it to the degree it did. The whole thing started when a couple of Boy Scouts, working on their merit badges for tracking, found the skeleton a few miles out of town in a field. The rain and the wind had worn away the earth, exposing the bones. At first I thought we had a murder on our hands but the coroner announced that the bones had been in the ground for a couple of hundred years. Well, that sort of made it an anthropological curiosity, so we called in a couple of professors from the State University."

I don't want to hear any stories! Wilson's mind screamed. I want to get out of here! He dropped his attaché case to the carpeted floor and sat on it, his back braced against the wall.

Holley squatted beside him. "Good idea. Might as well relax. As I said, my first thought had been that it was murder because the bones of the forehead were depressed and fractured, but you can appreciate it was a little late to start an investigation. Anyway, the professors carted the bones off to the university to do whatever professors do with old bones."

Bury yourself in the story, Wilson thought. Forget the elevator. But in spite of Holley's calm voice he could feel his fear continuing to build. The blood was pounding softly in his ears. Listen to him, he told himself. Pretend you're in a nice open park and you and this man are on a park bench. See the trees and smell the grass and listen and ask questions and lose yourself in his crazy story.

"What did you do—list it as a unsolved murder?"

"I couldn't do that," said Holley mildly. "Do you know anything about burial customs?"

"Thankfully, no."

"Well, one of the professors told me that many cultures believe that if a man hasn't been buried properly his spirit will be released when the bones are dug up. A reporter happened to hear him tell me that and the next thing I knew, there it was in the morning paper. I think the headline was GHOST OF SLAIN MAN STALKS TOWN."

"Probably good for one issue if I know news stories."

"Ordinarily that's true, but once in a while one comes along that fools you. Maybe news was scarce at the time, I don't know, all I know is that the TV news picked it up, then a newspaper in a city close by, then another TV station. They all gave it the full treatment and the next thing I knew, we were on national TV and that skeleton was a celebrity."

Wilson's nails dug deep into his palms. The sharp pain helped to override his taut nerves. "The story must have died out quickly."

"In the news media, yes—but what do you think it did to my town? After all, if network television says you have a ghost, there are a great many people who will believe it. We had fifteen phone calls within an hour after sundown the day the story broke from people claiming to have seen the ghost. And the calls increased the longer the story ran. The whole town went ghost happy. Everything that had happened for a hundred years and hadn't been explained was blamed on the ghost."

The elevator was motionless, the air close. Wilson thought he detected a faint acrid odor. His fear seemed to come in waves. One moment he felt normally tense, then every nerve and muscle in his body would pull screamingly taut. He wondered how long his mind could keep control. He closed his eyes and fled to the green park and the park bench again. Keep talking, he told himself.

"Every town has its collection of nuts," he croaked. "Why should yours be any different?"

"Maybe none of them were wrapped too tight," agreed Holley, "but each call had to be handled. A car had to be sent to check them out or they'd be calling all night. One night a man staggered into the station and claimed he'd been mugged by the ghost. He'd been mugged, all right—he had the lump on his head to prove it—but one thing he'd never considered—what would the ghost do with his wallet?"

The acrid odor was stronger now, definite, nose-tingling. The lights in the elevator dimmed momentarily as though the voltage had suddenly dropped.

"Are you all right?" asked Holley gently.

Wilson wanted to yell at him to shut up. He mopped at his wet face with his handkerchief. "Go on with your story."

"The man had been walking down the street all alone. He neither saw nor heard anyone, so in his estimation it had to be a ghost. The first thing he knew, he said, was that something hit him on the forehead and he went down. He came to a few minutes later."

Wilson looked at him. "He was hit on the forehead but he saw no one?"

"No one. The reporter who broke the story ran it on page one, neglected to mention the missing wallet, and made it sound like the man was attacked by someone invisible because he hadn't seen anybody. Sure, it was irresponsible reporting, but you can imagine how many calls we got the next night. Still, it might have ended there and died a natural death except for one thing. The same mugger struck a second night—and this time he hit a little too hard. A patrol car found the body."

Wilson pushed himself to his feet angrily and punched viciously at the EMERGENCY button. "What the hell are they doing down there?"

"Take it easy," said Holley softly. "I've never yet heard of anyone being abandoned forever in a stalled elevator. They'll get us down. Sit down and let me finish. It isn't often I get a captive audience."

Wilson began to hate this man for his good humor and his calmness. What was wrong with him that he didn't get upset or angry at being stuck in a stalled elevator? He took a deep breath, sat down, and braced himself against the wall. "So now you had a body."

"A body was *all* we had. The man had been killed walking down a tree-lined street with plenty of shadows and houses set well back. No one had seen or heard anything and there was absolutely no physical evidence that anyone else had been on the scene. When that story hit the paper the town really went crazy. One faction believed we had a murderous ghost running loose, another wasn't quite certain, and another said it was all hogwash. It was like a UFO scare. We even had a couple of people who showed up at the station and made the papers with the story that they'd actually seen and talked to the ghost. It got so that no one would go out after dark. The whole town stayed inside behind locked doors—as if a door would stop a ghost if we had one. You have to realize that all of this was going on while we still had our normal, everyday problems *and* that murder to solve. Normally if a prowling cat knocked over a trash can in the dark, the homeowner would just curse and handle it himself. Now he wouldn't leave the house—he'd call us and a patrol car had to be sent out."

Wilson's hatred for the man's calm voice and coolness grew.

"The whole town was uptight and my whole force was being run ragged," Holley continued. "And then another man was mugged. Well, that little incident really made page one because this guy swore he had been extremely careful. No one had followed him, he said. No one had been in front of him and even though he had been on a tree-lined street no one had stepped out from hiding. Still, he had been hit from the front like the others. According to him, he was just hurrying along when, *pow*, he got it."

The acrid smell was much worse now and the lights had been dimming periodically. They dimmed again, but instead of brightening, this time they faded more and more and finally went out. The blackness in the elevator was stygian. Wilson's head was resting on his knees but he couldn't see them.

He threw his head back, perspiration running down his face, milliseconds away from screaming, but Holley's calm voice continued as though nothing had happened.

"Obviously the ghost thing was just mass hysteria, but the mugger had to be real. Catch him and the whole thing would fade away. I talked to the latest victim for a long time. He had definitely been sober, he had definitely been very careful.

"Then he said something that made me think."

I'll kill him, thought Wilson dully. Just reach for his throat in the darkness and squeeze. It'll be very easy. There was a ringing in his ears and his breathing was heavy and hoarse.

Holley's voice continued. "The man said he had been hit by something like a bolt from the blue. I asked myself, Why not? I gathered up the clothes the murder victim had worn and took them to the State Police lab. They found enough to convince me I was on the right track.

"Figuring our mysterious mugger was due to strike again, I gave all patrol cars the same instructions and sent them cruising a certain type of street. I guess it was about eleven o'clock that night when two of my boys brought the man in.

"He was the mugger, all right—there was no question about it. His weapon was a big round stone in the toe of a sock and he still had a couple of articles on him that had been listed as stolen by the first victim and the murdered man's wife."

Wilson lifted his arms in the darkness, his fingers extended toward the sound of Holley's voice. Somehow he became certain that one of the requirements of rescue was the death of Holley—that unless he stopped him, the story would go on and on and he, Wilson, would sit trapped in the elevator until he went mad.

Holley's voice out of the darkness seemed to shift. Wilson dropped his arms uncertainly.

"Once I managed to divorce my mind from all that ghost nonsense it was simple. Since they were all hit in the forehead but no one had seen anyone in front he had to be *above*. The clothes of the murdered man showed bits of bark and some traces of the chemical we had used to spray the trees the week before. O.K., I told myself. If the mugger hid on a low limb and waited for his victim to pass underneath, that would explain it. And it did. We watched and waited and one night we found him stretched out along a low branch with his loaded sock ready."

From above, metal scraped against metal and a voice sounded hollowly down the shaft. "Hello down there!"

Wilson leaped to his feet and yelled. Relief made his knees tremble.

"Just take it easy," said the voice. "We'll have you out in a minute."

Wilson's impatience turned the wait into a lip-biting, fist-clenching eternity. The firemen ran a lightweight ladder down to the roof of the elevator from the floor above, opened the service hatch in the ceiling, and helped them both up in the beams of powerful flashlights.

In the carpeted hallway between the banks of elevators, Wilson forced his trembling knees to carry him to the broad window that looked out over the city. He breathed deeply and clutched the windowsill, his hands shaking, perspiration running down his face. Holley stood by his side, his expression sympathetic.

One of the firemen came over to them. "Sorry we took so long. There was a short-circuit in the hoist motor that caused a fire. It burned through all the wires. We had to put that out first and then go looking for you—we had no idea which floor you were on."

"That's all right," said Holley. "How many elevators were affected?"

"Just yours. The other seven are working fine."

One out of eight. Great odds, Wilson thought.

"Feel better?" Holley asked.

"Much." Wilson smiled weakly. "I haven't told you how much I enjoyed your story."

"I didn't get to finish it," Holley said.

"You said you caught the man."

Holley leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "Ah, but that wasn't the end of it. The mugger was something the town could understand. Murder was something they could understand. But the other stories still hung around. The freaks who claimed to have talked to the ghost were still there. I had given them an explanation for only part of the problem. The rest still existed. The calls kept coming in, people still kept seeing shadows in the night and hearing unexplained noises. My men still had to investigate everything, even though they knew it was a waste of time."

Wilson tugged at his collar and took a deep breath. "The situation really should have died."

"I thought so too. Maybe a psychologist could explain why it didn't. Maybe the townspeople just wanted to believe they had their very own ghost. It gave the husbands the excuse to avoid walking the dog, it gave the wives the excuse to drag their husbands with them whenever they went out after dark, it gave the brave ones who went out alone the chance to brag that nothing scared them. You figure it out—I couldn't. All I knew

was that I had to get rid of the ghost talk before it drove the whole department into early retirement. So I went to see the town council and the mayor about dipping into the town's treasury for a first-class funeral."

Wilson passed a handkerchief over his wet face, his hand still shaking. "What for?"

"I'm getting to that. After they agreed to put up the money for the coffin, I got the funeral director to donate his services and drove up to the university. I picked up an old skeleton that no longer had any scientific value, brought it back, and buried what was supposed to be the ghost's skeleton with all due ceremony. That finished it. When we buried the coffin, we buried the ghost. No more calls. Things went back to normal."

Wilson threw back his head and laughed. "You buried just any old skeleton?"

Holley grinned. "Why not? I don't know whose it was, but he got a terrific send-off, and the town never knew the difference. It was the idea they bought. I told you most fear is mental."

Suddenly sober, Wilson nodded. "No one knows that better than I do."

Holley held out his hand. "It's always nice to run into a good listener."

Wilson thought of how that voice had saved him from panicking and now had turned whatever fear was left into laughter.

"Thank you," he said.

Holley smiled and walked away, stepping into an elevator still in operation.

A man in a dark suit who had been holding a small walkie-talkie and watching them approached Wilson. "My name is Martin. I'm with the hotel. Security. Do you know the man who was in the elevator with you?"

"His name is Holley. I understand he's a police chief, here for the convention."

Martin smiled. "His name is Holley, but he's no police chief. He's a confidence man and a pickpocket. I suggest you check your wallet."

Wilson reached into his pocket. The wallet was gone. He sighed. "He sounded authentic enough."

"Lord knows, he's met enough police chiefs in his time." He lifted the walkie-talkie. "I'll have him picked up in the lobby."

Wilson thought of Holley in the elevator. He didn't know where Holley's story had come from, whether he had heard it or read it or lived it—or even conceived it on the spur of the moment—but it didn't matter.

What did matter was the way Holley had handled it—how he had made it possible for Wilson to leave the elevator with his self-respect intact.

"Let it go," he said.

"You don't mind losing your wallet?"

"Call it a payment. He earned it."

Martin shook his head. "No complaint—no arrest?"

"That's the way I want it." Wilson had an idea the wallet would turn up in the mail, minus the cash. "But since you know he's in the hotel you can try to keep him off the elevators."

"I'm afraid we can't do that as long as our rooftop restaurant is open to the public. He's entitled to go there like any other citizen. But Holley isn't our only problem. Right now we have three conventions headquartered here and when we're jammed up like this, it's a perfect set-up for pickpockets and thieves who like to clean out conventioners' rooms of loose jewelry and anything else of value." He rang for an elevator. "Going down?"

Maybe fear was mental, as Holley had said. But Wilson had no ghost to bury, no dead man whose interment would break him loose from his particular problem. It would be quite a while before he built up enough nerve to enter an elevator again.

"You go ahead," he told Martin. "If it's all the same to you, I'll walk the rest of the way."

When the doors closed after Martin, Wilson headed for the door at the end of the hall, his attaché case heavy in his hand. Along with being trapped in the elevator, negotiating eighteen floors of steep stairs just might be enough incentive for a part-time, claustrophobic jewel thief to confine his activities to the low-rise motels in the suburbs.

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Fingers remembered there was something back home worth stealing . . .

A CHRISTMAS IDEA



by

LEE SOMERVILLE

If you had told me I'd be going home for Christmas I'd have laughed in your martini. As far as I knew there wasn't anything back home worth stealing.

Oh, yeah, there were some good people there. Sometimes at night, especially when I was behind bars, I thought of Zeb and Mary and those Mitchell kids.

Home was the poor part of Texas, the pine-woods corner just across

the river from Arkansas and not far from Louisiana. It's a primitive, forgotten part of Texas, a land of a hundred years ago.

I left Houston and all its money just before Christmas of last year. Left in a hurry—wild hurry. I tried to settle down in Dallas and got the freeze. Every lawman in Dallas was watching me like a cougar ready to pounce. One slip and I'd be back in the state pen.

I wandered into Flub's, half drunk.

"Hello, Fingers." Flub sat down beside me.

Fingers—that's me. Fingers McDuff, expert. If you wanted a door unlocked or a safe opened, I was available. Back home I was called Pete, but home was just a memory.

I sat nursing a beer, and Big Aggie got up and sang a tear-jerker about home and Christmas.

The song caught me unprepared, hit me like a virus. I blinked, but the tears came anyway. Mom and Dad were long gone, but suddenly I wanted to see Mary Adams and Old Zeb again, if they were still alive.

I thought of Christmases when we'd eat dinner together—of Mom and Mary in that big old farm kitchen. I remembered how Mary always brought out her treasured wine set, that antique flint-glass set of wine-glasses that had been in her family for generations. And suddenly I remembered seeing a set like that in a New Orleans shop at a fancy price, fancy as all hell.

And suddenly something else hit me. Yeah, sure, there *was* something back home worth stealing! It would be easy. On Christmas Eve everybody and his dogs would be at the Christmas program in the one little church. All I had to do was come in after dark and raid three or four of those old farm homes of antiques, and I'd be able to spend the rest of the winter in Florida.

At noon on December twenty-fourth I put my worldly possessions in my old Chevrolet and eased out of Dallas. Rolling prairie gave way to trees just east of Blossom. Dusk came early. It was a clear night with lots of stars and a big moon peeking over the horizon. I turned off Highway 82 at Caton City and swung north on a farm-to-market road. Pine trees grew thick and tall on both sides of the road.

Just south of Red River, I turned right onto a narrow, twisting clay road. Tree limbs blotted out the rising moon, and a deer jumped across the road while another one stood frozen, blinded by the car headlights.

I'd better get the loot fast and get out of here. I thought. If a sudden rain caught me on this clay strip I'd be stuck like a fly in molasses.

I passed our old home. Windows gaped like empty eyes in an abandoned skull and winter-dead weeds clogged the unkempt yard. Only a half mile farther, prosperity set in. Prosperity shone in the long expanse of white board fence, in the wide driveway leading to a big home. I stopped, curious.

A garish sign proclaimed this was the home of Chumley D. Wade, Wade Enterprises, Realtor and Consultant.

Chum Wade in a home like this? How had that loud-mouthed no-good flim-flam built this sort of home? In the more than nine years I'd been gone things had happened, I guessed.

Lights shone from every window of the small church. Trucks and cars were parked all over the yard and several horses stood tied to trees. Yeah, everybody always turned out for the Christmas program.

I eased the car to a crawl, not wanting to attract attention, but I needn't have been so careful. The Reverend John's voice bellowed, "*O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum!*" Some of the cracked-voiced old folks tried to match his volume and the small church seemed to shake with the Christmas carol.

The Adams house was just like it used to be. Even in moonlight the yard looked carefully tended. A horse nickered in the barn. An owl hooted from deep in the woods and a coyote yipped near Pine Creek.

I left the car and walked cautiously.

A dog stood in bright moonlight, tall and lean. I froze. He looked for all the world like a dog I'd owned years ago.

He didn't bark. I held out my hand, palm up and fingers extended, to show friendship. He came to me slowly, then whined and let me scratch his floppy ears.

O.K., I thought, O.K. Get the loot and get out of here. You're lucky, but your luck might not hold.

The back door wasn't locked. It creaked as I entered, creaked again when I shut it as gently as possible.

I didn't turn my flashlight on at first. I didn't need it. I could have shut my eyes and walked every step of the house in pitch dark. I knew every inch of this kitchen, recognized all the smells of a farm kitchen that has been lived in for generations.

I walked into the dining room, aimed the flashlight, and bingo! Right

in the center of the beam, just where I knew it would be, that flint-glass wine set still rested in the china cabinet.

But then there was a creaking sound from the fireplace room, a scuffling of slipped feet. Somehow I switched off the flashlight.

"Oh, it's so nice of you to come!" Mary Adams' voice whispered. "He's been so restless. He wanted so much to go to the Christmas program."

There was no use running. The best thing to do was to stand there and play it as it came. Maybe I could think of a good story—some excuse she'd believe.

"I think he's asleep now. Oh, Lord, he's a handful! If it wasn't for you neighbors I don't know how I'd manage."

I heard her slipped feet walk unerringly to the table. There was a fumbling sound, then a match flared and she lit a kerosene lamp.

Looking down at her in the yellow light I was amazed at how old she had become, how shrunken and bent. She and Zeb would be in their middle eighties now, or maybe he'd be over ninety. They'd both been healthy nine years ago.

"Why, my gracious, it's little Pete! Little Pete, after all these years! Zeb will be so glad to see you!" She led me into the fireplace room.

"How is he?"

"Awful sick. People have been good about coming in to sit up with him. I figured nobody would miss the Christmas program, so I was just sitting there in the dark, resting."

It made sense. So I didn't need an alibi. Folks don't ordinarily lock their doors in Crystal, but folks don't walk in without knocking either. But when someone's sick, people just let themselves in quietly, afraid that their knocking will disturb the sick person.

And in a community like Crystal, when somebody is bad sick, the adults take turns "sitting up" or tending to the invalid.

"Little Pete. Goodness, have you eaten? Would you like me to cook something for you?"

"Thank you, but I ate at Blossom."

"Little Pete, come home after all these years—come home for Christmas. My, won't folks be surprised!"

Zeb groaned and thrashed around on the big bed. I threw wood on the fire. Flames brightened the room and Zeb sat up.

"Nothing like a good fire in the fireplace," he commented. "They didn't have no fireplace in that hospital."

"You ought to've stayed in the hospital where there was doctors," Mary scolded.

"Starved me to death in that hospital," Zeb rambled. "Starve a man—that's all they do."

"Hush," she said.

"I be danged if I hush! They took me to that hospital and they brung me boiled carrots for dinner, boiled carrots for supper. I wouldn't feed boiled carrots to a dog. I wouldn't even feed boiled carrots to a Republican. I tell you, woman, ain't nobody big enough to make me go back to no hospital!"

"Zeb, little Pete has come home."

"Pete McDuff? How you doing, boy? Soon as it warms up for spring, me and you'll go fishing. Fried fish is good eating, a lot better'n boiled carrots like they feed you in the hospital. Me and you'll go fishing like we used to." He fell quiet and stared at the fire.

"You'll have to humor Zeb," Mary said. "His mind comes and goes. It was that way before he got sick. Last summer he sold a cow and never could tell me what he did with the money."

I started to say maybe Zeb put the money in the bank, then remembered he didn't trust banks. He'd lost eighty-three dollars in a bank when it failed in 1930 and never set foot in a bank since.

Headlights flashed against the windows as a car turned in the driveway. Another set of headlights followed.

Chum Wade came in the front door without knocking and walked over to Zeb's bed. "Zeb, I got to talk with you."

"Not if I can help it." Billy Mitchell's big frame filled the front doorway. He came in and shut the door behind him. "I knew you were up to something, Chum. If you have a fast deal you want to pull on Zeb and Mary, let me hear it."

Chum had grown a pot belly and had black sideburns on his red face. He wore a tailor-made cowboy suit that looked like maybe it came from Joske's in San Antonio. His fancy boots must have cost a bundle of money. I remembered back when we both wore ragged overalls.

He saw me. "Why, ol' buddy Pete! How's the city treating you? Hey, you own that old Chevy car sitting outside, right? Old buddy, you take a look at what I'm driving. I'm driving a genuine, brand-new Cadillac with fancy upholstery."

Billy Mitchell held out his hand. "Pete. Welcome home."

Chum couldn't shake hands for bragging. "You see the house I built, Pete?"

Billy ushered me away from Chum. "I have to keep an eye on him all the time, Pete. Chum takes advantage of people. He waits till people have hard luck, then tries to buy their land for a fraction of its value. He has backing somewhere, I guess. He keeps saying he doesn't have any money—but he offers cash. Sometimes a cash offer like that is hard to refuse. I don't want him getting to Zeb and Mary."

Chum joined us. "You got secrets, old buddies?"

"Look, Chum—instead of trying to gyp these old folks, why don't you and me and some other people donate a little money to pay Zeb's doctor bills?" Billy asked.

Chum shook his head. "Old buddy, you know I'd give the shirt off my back to help those folks. But—"

"Twenty dollars' cash will start the collection."

"I was fixing to say I don't have one red cent, not one penny to rub against another."

"What about your new car and those fancy clothes?"

"Just keeping up a front, old buddy, just keeping up a front. A man's got to keep up appearances. If I had an extra dollar I'd donate it. Anyways, you know Zeb and Mary would never take charity."

Billy grimaced. "I know. They're stubborn proud."

I heard the church group coming down the road, singing "Joy to the World." The group wasn't in tune together, but what it lacked in harmony it made up for in volume.

"I used to think Zeb had money hid somewhere," I said.

Chum's head jerked. "Yeah. I ought to start digging around here and find where he buried it."

"You start digging around here and I'll break your arm," Billy promised.

The church group came in, still singing, and Zeb sat up in bed and sang with them. Then the Reverend John spotted me. It was too late to leave now. After lots of handshakes and questions Chum led me outside and showed me his red car. It was really fancy—with steer horns made special as a hood ornament. "Old buddy," he said, "help me with a deal."

"A deal?"

"Yeah, a deal. You used to be close to Zeb and Mary—you spent a lot of time in their house."

"So?"

"I got a buyer for their farm, see? And they need the money, see? You talk to them and advise them to sell to me. You do that and I'll pay you two hundred dollars."

I waited.

"O.K., old buddy, I'll make it three hundred."

I said I'd think about it.

I walked back into the house feeling troubled. Zeb and Mary had never had a child of their own, so they always made sure I got a Christmas present from them. A red wagon one year, a baseball glove another year—things like that.

I had three hundred and forty dollars in my pocket. Three hundred and forty dollars wouldn't do much more than get me to Florida.

And then I had a Christmas idea. I found Billy Mitchell and told him I had the solution to Zeb's financial bind.

The old house had lots of cracks and places where money could be hidden. With Billy watching, I shoved forty dollars in a joint of low rafters on the back porch. We found a loose brick behind the fireplace and put a wad of money under it.

"Yeah, it'll work."

Billy put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed. I grunted and he let go.

"Didn't mean to hurt you, Pete, but it's a great idea! We can hide money around the house and make sure Mary finds it. She'll think Zeb put it there. The way his mind comes and goes, he'll think so himself."

"Yeah."

"Pete, what you just did is the finest thing I ever saw."

I grinned. I felt just like Santa Claus.

"You know, I was worried about you, Pete. Did you know I'm sheriff now?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah. I been sheriff for three years."

I waited, a chill dousing the Christmas glow.

"I know about you doing time in prison. I never mentioned it to anybody around here, though. I wanted it so you could come home and live straight."

"Thanks, Billy." I felt better.

"You've just proved you have a good heart. Will you stay home now?"

I shook my head. "I can't, Billy. I have to leave right now. I'm on my

way to St. Louis. After I go, will you tell folks I wish them a Merry Christmas?"

"Sure thing, Pete." Billy hugged me again. "What you just did was real fine."

He went in waving a wad of money I gave him, telling people he and I had noticed something sticking between a crack in the wall and found the money. He said he bet there was more money Zeb had hid. Mary got all excited. Zeb got all excited too, and began rambling on about how he didn't trust banks. Kids and grownups lit more lamps, got flashlights, and the treasure hunt was on.

Billy Mitchell found the money we'd put between the rafters. Somebody else found the money under the brick.

I looked at Mary and I felt like Santa Claus again. Then I left quietly. With all the excitement, I knew Chum Wade would be at the Adams house for a long time.

He had locks on his doors but locks didn't bother me. I found more than eight thousand dollars in cash in a box in his safe. I took it, of course.

From the moment he said he didn't have one red penny to rub against another I knew he had money. Chum always was a liar.

I drove south to Florida. I was ten miles south of Caton City when I realized I was singing Christmas carols at the top of my voice.



Introducing Filbert, a very noticing sort of person . . .

THE WRONG POCKET



by JEFFRY SCOTT

I'm a very noticing sort of person, always have been. What you might call observant—extremely. Either you have it or you haven't.

Give you an interesting instance—extremely interesting, in fact. There's a tree at the corner of my road at home. A chestnut. The town council trimmed it last year—hacked it about, in my humble opinion—and the end result was, to cut a long story short (cut being the word, come to think of it, and I do dearly love a pun, always providing it's in good

taste), a lot of new twigs grew out toward the base of the trunk.

Not the roots, you understand, but nearer them than the lowest branches proper. Now where was I?

Right, the twigs. Ethel and I were on the way to the supermarket one afternoon. While not holding with this Women's Lib nonsense I do try to give her a hand, she's got no idea of budgeting. When we got to the corner of our road (well, the town council's road, I suppose, but indirectly ours) I made her stop.

"What's changed?" I challenged her.

Ethel sighed and thought for a bit and said it couldn't be my haircut because this wasn't the second Saturday in the month. I'm not by any means a creature of habit, mark you, but a man should have sensible routines and schedules.

Otherwise—well, no need to spell it out—That Way Lies Chaos, Things Fall Apart, The Center Cannot Hold, and so forth. Ethel never has been able to see it, though goodness knows I've explained my philosophy over and over, times without number.

"Come on, dear," I encouraged her. "You pass this spot pretty well every day of the week, always excepting Sundays, of course, and when we're on holiday. Do you mean to say you can't see anything different?"

She started shuffling her feet and complaining of the cold, a transparent diversionary ploy, although her nose was slightly blue. Just at the tip, and not very much.

"Well," I said, "you're not very observant, my girl. Not to put too fine a point on it, when it comes to using your eyes you're 'as the beasts that perish,' as my old headmaster used to tell us. Can't you see the tree's got a new twig?"

And so it had, large as life and twice as handsome, like the saying goes. There was a twig shaped something like a question mark (minus the dot underneath, it goes without saying, and the wrong way round, but remarkably similar) and another with brown splotches or, strictly speaking, largish freckles and, right between them, a new little arrival.

Ethel looked at me in a peculiar manner and said something I didn't quite catch. When I asked her to repeat it she said, "Sometimes I can't believe my ears, Herbert." An odd remark in the circumstances, really, because I'd told her something perfectly sensible and straightforward. Ethel often puzzles me.

But that doesn't alter the point of my little anecdote (I have hundreds

more on similar lines), which is that Herbert Filbert doesn't miss much.

I dare state without much fear of contradiction that not another soul in Cranley Park (Cranley Park being the residential suburb with our road and the tree), not another living mortal, had noticed that twig. Hadn't twigged it, in fact! (Another play on words, incidentally.)

You might wonder what all this has to do with what happened to poor Geoffrey Slinger. More than you'd think is the short answer. A good deal more.

A few weeks after the tree incident (I could pinpoint the precise date if I had my diary to hand, but it wasn't the second Saturday in the month so it must have been around April thirteenth—tell a lie, we'll settle for four days either side of that—sometime in the first half of April, roughly speaking), the Chief called me in.

"Bert," said he (I detest my given name being shortened, but he meant well), "Bert, I want you to go down to Tregessy Head for a month or so. Fisch is ill. It's not a formal research establishment—they rough it in old army huts, and what with that and the sea air playing Old Harry with his chest, poor old Fisch is crocked. Young Wilkins is back from Porton next month, but you'll have to fill in until then."

Naturally, I replied that I was fully at his disposal—or rather the department's and the nation's—twenty-four hours a day if need be, always excepting needful periods of slumber; and I reminded him of a few examples proving that what I'd stated was far from an empty boast. There was that half day's overtime when the pipes burst in 1972, and the time in 1959 when I'd altered my holiday arrangements at less than six weeks' notice without a whisper, glimmer, or hint of complaint.

The Chief gave me a funny look not entirely dissimilar, though obviously less than identical, to the one Ethel gave me when I pointed out her low observatory powers in connection with the tree at the corner of our road.

"Sit down, Bert," he ordered, and launched into a regular old rigmarole about Tregessy Head. How it was isolated and ramshackle; how the scientific staff were temperamental and "thrown on their own resources," whatever that was supposed to convey; and how everyone had to pull together and not get on people's nerves.

"You'll be ten miles from the ass-end of Nowhere," the Chief put it, most crudely if you want my frank reaction (which must not be suspected

of a taint of insubordination or disloyalty, since I kept it to myself and shared the criticism with only Yours Truly). "Ten miles from the ass-end of Nowhere," he repeated, as if he relished that unpleasant and inelegant phrase, "and the slightest—er—mannerisms or character defects can get blown up out of proportion. Get my drift, Bert?"

As soon as he spoke plain English and disclosed what was on his mind, I *did* get his drift. I'm not stupid, as you will have gathered by now.

"Set your mind at rest, sir," I assured him. "I'll keep my eyes peeled for friction. If there's the smallest sign of anyone getting on other people's nerves, I'll be down on him like the proverbial ton of bricks."

The Chief put his head in his hands (he suffers from migraine, I'm given to understand, so that must have been the reason).

Ethel was splendid about my being away for so long. She had my bag packed (well, not bag, exactly—it's an expanding suitcase I won at the Buffaloes raffle in 1971—and a smaller hold-all affair for my sandwiches on the train, et cetera—tell a lie, my shaving kit was in there as well, plus the manuscript notes for a crossword I have been trying to compile for some years) the very same evening I broke the sad news.

I had to laugh at that. I wasn't departing for another week. Her face fell at having been so silly and impetuous.

All that week she did her best to keep a stiff upper lip, as it were; going about humming and singing and smiling to herself—a transparent, wifely charade to make me feel better about leaving her without company for weeks on end. Conversation is my strong point. I'm never at a loss for a topic. Ethel often says I can find material for hours in a wallpaper pattern. So obviously she'd be in a terrible state while I was gone.

But duty calls. Called, that is to say, just to keep our tenses straight. I'm not at liberty to say what the Whitehall HEOC (GSR) Satellite Research Establishment at Tregessy Head is concerned with. Of course, there's the matter of my not being on the scientific side, so I don't know. But it's a matter of principle, and it goes without saying that even if I did know I wouldn't divulge a scrap, speck, smidgeon, or inkling of information.

However, HEOC (GSR) is important, that stands to reason. So its requirements far outweighed Ethel's conversational needs.

I could relate an enormous amount of interesting and colorful detail about my journey to Cornwall, starting with what the taxi driver told me

about the link between sunspots and his arthritis on the way to the railway station, but I like to stick to the point and not make a meal of things, so we'll take all that as read.

Tregessy Head was a tremendous—well, not to put too fine a point on it—a tremendous letdown. For a start, it wasn't much better than a slum, and most of the staff were fitted to their surroundings. Speak as you find; I'm the last chap on earth to be nasty, but *that* lot!

We slept in dank concrete army huts and worked in more of the same. (Not exactly the same, mind. The office and laboratory buildings were larger and had scientific equipment and filing cabinets and other office requisites, naturally.)

Professor Gamlin was the director. As I have said, speak as you find. If I had umpteen degrees I think I might get my beard trimmed and try not to wear terrible old pullovers with holes in them, but there you are.

Under him were three assistants, Doctors Henry Pillie, Sam George, and Geoffrey Slinger. All three were much of an age and type—very free with clever-clever remarks and bad language, if you really want to know.

During my first few days at Tregessy Head I worked like a dog. Fisch might have been ill, as the Chief claimed, but one couldn't help entertaining a mild degree of skepticism about his devotion to the work ethic—even before his health had given way, if indeed it had, which seemed dubious or at the very least open to debate in my humble opinion.

The Telex cubicle—my domain—was in a deplorable condition. One of the machines was undeniably dusty, and the files of service messages between Tregessy Head and Whitehall were in an incredible state. I discovered three wrongly numbered pieces of communications traffic within the first forty-eight hours, all dating from the good Fisch's reign.

Oddly enough, that gave me the first intimation that Professor Gamlin and his crew weren't my type. I took the Professor those wrongly numbered messages and he showed a very offhand attitude.

"It doesn't matter a damn," he said. (Fine language from a scholar!) "It doesn't matter a tinker's damn, Filbert. Those are just shopping lists for glassware or whatever. The fate of the world depends on other matters."

So it might, but a system is a system and breaches in that system caused by the sheer incompetence of my forerunner struck me as being highly germane to the general tone and efficiency of the establishment. Professor

Gamlin wouldn't listen. "Scoot," he said. "Filbert, get on your bike and scoot!"

Oh, Tregessy Head was a jolly place, all right. (Ironically speaking, you understand.)

When the heat and labor of the day were over, we would gather in what they called the Common Room (well did it deserve the name), and I would try to initiate stimulating conversations on topics of mutual interest.

For someone like myself who was unable to attend university, Tregessy Head represented a bitter disillusionment. These men of science and good brains hadn't an ounce of conversation between them! Pillie sat hunched over the TV set, cursing at the racing results and doing sums on the back of an envelope. George and Geoffrey Slinger exchanged vile anecdotes that one only hoped were fictional rather than the fruits of personal experience (and which betrayed diseased imaginations, if so). Professor Gamlin drank beer and built model aircraft, surely a slightly juvenile pursuit for one so eminent.

Sam George—one of those dreadful rugger-playing-looking sort of men with a big beefy face and, yes, a beefy *voice* even—and poor Geoffrey Slinger were the most tiresome. Mutt and Jeff, I termed them, but only mentally. (No need for discourtesy, whatever one's innermost feelings, I say.) George so large and Slinger so squat, Mutt and Jeff was *le mot juste*, beyond a doubt.

Both of them treated me extremely cavalierly. It was "Oh, shut up, Filbert" or "Give it a rest, Filbert" all night. Those two had an almost pathological resentment of intellectual stimulation by means of civilized talk. Professor Gamlin announced that he was engaged in delicate work and must not be spoken to (he meant his precious toy airplane), but at least he had a reasonable pretext. Sam George and Slinger simply snubbed and tormented me for no reason at all. But there was more to it than that.

This is difficult to explain. I hate—well, loose talk. I have always believed that, as the Bible holds, s-e-x was designed for the continuance of the human race. Thankfully, Ethel needed very little convincing after our honeymoon in 1958 (June, we went to Weston-super-Mare and had the advantage of not only a sandy beach and donkey-rides along the shore, but all the fascinating old churches of North Somerset) to adopt the same view.

Talk and, worse yet, outright bragging about s-e-x I find extremely, excessively, egregiously uncomfortable, not to say highly distasteful.

Geoffrey Slinger and Sam George talked of very little else. My understanding has always been that a gentleman does not kiss and tell, but those two! Most nights they'd sneak away very late, chuckling and leering, and one would hear them—not that one lay awake for the purpose—return in the early hours.

I wouldn't demean myself by descending to detail, as *they* did not scruple to do at the tops of their voices, but they were both—courting, in a manner of speaking—the same married woman living some twenty miles from Tregessy Head.

One could tell that Professor Gamlin didn't approve of that (I detected a certain gleam in his eye), but he never opened his mouth to reprimand them. And when I attempted to, they simply went right down into the gutter.

"Filbert's jealous," Sam George taunted. "Not to worry, Herbie my son, you shall have a chance too. Frantic Floss isn't too particular. A dab of after-shave and a fiver in your pocket and she'll think you're Robert Redford."

Both he and Slinger guffawed like the dirty little arrested juveniles they were. There was so much more in the same embarrassing vein that finally even Professor Gamlin was shocked and told them to "Stow it, the pair of you!"

It's strange, in my experience—which is really quite extensive—how troubles seldom come singly. (They do come singly *as well*, mark you—any fool knows that. But more often they occur in series, although I'm far from convinced as to the validity of their coming in threes despite Ethel's strong championing of the theory.)

Anyway, the first thing was that Henry Pillie slipped on a patch of grease (*he* said; intoxication may well have figured in the mishap) and broke his ankle. He was taken away to the cottage hospital at Starwheel Harbor, and didn't get back until long after poor Slinger's body was discovered. So he had an alibi.

The second thing, as you'll have guessed, is that Geoffrey Slinger's body was discovered. He didn't turn up for supper or high tea or whatever the proper designation for our evening meal might be, and of course *I* had to go and look for him. Christians mustn't bear grudges, and while

his crony Sam George was perfectly willing to let his friend go hungry, I thought it a kindly act to remind Slinger what the time was.

I guessed—wrongly as it turned out—that Slinger had become absorbed in some experiment. Each of our tame scientists worked in a different concrete building to which each man had the only key. (Well, more or less. There was a master key somewhere about.) I expected to find Slinger behind his locked door and I had knocked several times before I glanced aside. And there he was, crumpled on the concrete path at the side of the laboratory! There is no need for gruesome detail. My St. John's ambulance work and earlier Boy Scout training told me at a glance that he was dead.

— Naturally one assumed that he'd slipped, just as Henry Pillie had done, and cracked his head. He was lying on his back, one knee drawn up, his sports jacket hanging open. The setting sun (a poetic circumstance, but absolutely genuine, I promise you) glinted on the gold-capped fountain pen clipped into his inside pocket—the inside pocket, at the risk of being tedious, *on the left-hand side of the jacket*.

My heart bumped—really, *bump*, just like that—and came into my mouth. (So to speak. Nothing of the kind happened, needless to say, else I could not be telling this story.)

My heart came into my mouth. Because my memory is very precise—not quite photographic, but markedly superior. Geoffrey Slinger was left-handed. So he always stowed his pen in his inside *right pocket*.

Often he slung his jacket over the back of a chair in the Common Room, and I had the clearest mental picture of that pen in his inside *right pocket*, as the jacket hung there. You are probably right-handed. Take up a pen and put it in your jacket pocket. I venture to suggest that you will not replace it in your inside right pocket—not without dislocating your arm. But there was left-handed Slinger's pen in his left-hand inner pocket. It all came to me in a flash.

It wasn't an accident. Somebody had attacked Slinger inside his laboratory, where he always worked shirt-sleeved. For some reason they wanted to give the impression that he had died outside.

Probably because it had been drizzling, and he couldn't be found in his shirtsleeves. So they'd dressed him in the sports jacket before dragging him out. Putting his pen where it belonged, in the pocket—but the *wrong* pocket.

Further thoughts came to me even as I shouted for assistance.

Such as? You might well ask.

Well, *why* drag poor Geoffrey Slinger's corpse out of the laboratory? Memory supplied an answer. Professor Gamlin kept to himself, but Slinger and his friend Sam George often visited back and forth between their adjacent labs. Slinger never opened his locked door to me, though I'd often had cause to call on him there with urgent messages. He'd merely shout at me to go away. He didn't readily admit Dr. Pillie either. But George would have been admitted as soon as he announced himself.

Professor Gamlin came lumbering up with Sam George at his heels. "Good God," said Gamlin, "I believe the little wretch has snuffed it. These ***ing pathways are treacherous! First Pillie and now poor old Slinger."

Sam George mumbled something, his face green, the very portrait of guilt. Aha, I thought. But all I said was, "Excuse me!" Quietly yet firmly, with manifest authority and a tinge of significance. "Excuse me, gentlemen. I'm sorry—but excuse me!"

Even then, George could not resist a jeer. "Why, Herbie, what have you done?" he inquired.

I did not mention my theory about the body being moved. But I did explain, swiftly and concisely, the business of the pen.

Naturally enough, George pretended not to understand. Professor Gamlin combed his beard with his fingers and muttered, "Seems far-fetched to me, Filbert. It's obvious poor Slinger missed his footing on the path and crashed against the wall. The—um—skin of his forehead is torn, and that seems to match the pebble-dash on the concrete there."

Sam George lost his nerve at that stage. "Get an ambulance, for pity's sake! Herbie's just being his natural self, sticking his nose in and going on and on and *on*—" Before I could remonstrate (I may not be a scientist, but my work is responsible and I do have a certain measure of seniority), George burst into hysterical laughter and dashed back toward our domestic quarters.

Professor Gamlin gave him a sedative, I learned later. I related my observations to the police but (I do not wish to offend the Duchy of Cornwall, but truth must out) they were remarkably dense about taking the point. Having warned them that the Chief Constable would hear my testimony if they failed to demonstrate that it was gaining full weight (i.e., by allowing Sam George to escape the most rigorous interrogation), I left them to do their duty.

For once, Professor Gamlin had abandoned his model airplane and was sitting brooding over the tragedy.

It is bad to brood in that way, so I engaged him in conversation, explaining the significance of the misplaced pen. (I had, after all, given him only the sketchiest of outlines before George broke down.) He sat grunting and twisting in his chair as I explained the steps in my reasoning.

Surely, I argued, it was obvious. George and Slinger had fallen out over their shared mistress. George had confronted Slinger in the latter's laboratory, given in to ungovernable rage of the kind one reads about in crimes of passion (not that I read much about them, I hastened to add, being opposed to sensational Sunday newspapers making much of such lurid stuff), and killed him.

That, I ventured to suggest, left Professor Gamlin with the moral duty to avenge Slinger and confront George.

At which stage Henry Pillie limped in—or, to be more correct, *swung* in—on crutches, right foot and shin in a plaster cast. I was once more explaining my discovery regarding the jacket and the pen when Professor Gamlin started up and hurried out. I must confess a tinge of elation—I had reasoned him into taking the action which the police were so reluctant to initiate. Frankly, I was glad not to be in Sam George's shoes.

No sooner had I completed my by now well polished and rounded résumé—corpse's jacket spread open on the path, pen in wrong pocket, et cetera—than Henry Pillie burst out laughing.

"Well," he snorted, in the research station's customary smooth and diplomatic manner, "well, Herbie, you *are* a nerd! A grade-A twit of the first water. I borrowed Geoff Slinger's jacket yesterday afternoon. In fact, I returned it just before I fell over and bust my ankle.

"I wanted to go across to my bedroom, and it was chilly after that sunny spell. What a charlie you are, Herbert! I used Geoff's pen to write down the name of a horse. Being right-handed, I put it back in the opposite-side pocket. Geoff didn't have occasion to use it himself again before he tripped and bashed his head in—that's all."

And he laughed again, contemptuously. Events proved which of us had the last laugh . . .

EXTRACT FROM THE STATEMENT OF PROFESSOR GERVAISE ALVA GAMLIN:

"I loved Floss though Slinger and George never realized I even knew her. They were exploiting her, the bastards. *Young* bastards.

THE WRONG POCKET

"This evening I came across Slinger locking up his lab and he said something inane about Floss and—I hit him. Hard. It felt good. His head hit the wall with a tremendous crack. Served him right.

"What? Of *course* he had his jacket on. Pen? Don't talk to me about pens! That archetypal bore Filbert keeps droning on about pens and left-hand pockets and right-hand pockets. That's why I'm giving myself up. He'll go on and on, drone-drone, buzz-buzz, jaw-jaw, lecture-lecture. I can't tolerate it any more!

"I repeat, I killed Geoff Slinger. Now take me away, before I kill that
***** Filbert!"



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The police were annoyed that Skelcher let the burglars get away . . .

MY NAME IS LORENZO. GOODBYE.

by WILLIAM
BANKIER



It was a long walk from the Wimbledon shops along the Broadway so Skelcher arrived home feeling tired. He unlocked the door and pushed his way into the dim hallway, using his loaded shopping bag to hold the door open as he twisted the key out of the lock. The key snagged and he left the leather key case dangling. In the panel of daylight falling through the doorway he saw his stereo amplifier and cassette deck on the floor ahead of him, the wires coiled and knotted. A few feet further down the

MY NAME IS LORENZO. GOODBYE.

hall the television set was standing on its wheeled legs. He stared at the appliances for a moment, seeing them literally in a new light, noting previously hidden surfaces coated with dust.

The house was being burgled. It was happening right now. Without hearing a sound, Skelcher knew with absolute certainty that there were thieves in his house. They had not retreated through the back door at the sound of his key in the lock. They were, in fact, upstairs. He knew this instinctively.

Leaving the front door ajar, he walked to the foot of the stairs, catching a glimpse of his reflection in the oak-framed oval mirror—Connemara fishing hat jammed down low on coarse grey hair, face pink and parchment grey, eyes stern and sad. Mounting the stairs, he smelled a pervasive content of dust in the air and the odor was familiar to him; more than once over the years, moving from one house to another, he had lived for a day with this musty smell of disturbed possessions.

Two young men were standing on the landing near the open doorway of the bedroom used by Skelcher's younger daughter. They were in their early twenties—their serious faces exhibiting a hint of embarrassment. Skelcher trudged upwards, hearing himself say in a sarcastic tone, "Well, it looks like I came back too soon."

He felt no fear, no anger. His mood was that of a patient father discovering the children up to yet another devious prank. It was when he reached the landing and the larger of the young men approached him and seized him as he attempted to move back down the stairs that he experienced a flicker of anxiety. But a worse feeling followed.

Throughout his adult life and into middle age, Skelcher—a man who avoided unnecessary physical contact—had indulged in fantasies wherein he confronted intruders and destroyed them in outbursts of berserk power. Now here, in reality, was the classic situation: his home invaded, his family's property being handled, about to be taken away.

Skelcher flexed his arms and strained to free himself. The young man held him securely. Skelcher yelled at the top of his voice. "Hey!" He yelled again, hoarsely. "Heeeeyyyyyy!"

The young man holding him muttered something to his companion. It might have been in a language Skelcher did not understand. It might have been simply poorly articulated words in English. But it sounded as if a suggestion was being made, an invitation for the watcher to take part.

For the first time the realization struck Skelcher that he was in des-

perate trouble. Caught in the act, these young men would be much better off if Skelcher were rendered unconscious. Again the muttered word issued from the face pressed close against Skelcher's shoulder. The companion shook his head and backed off.

"Come on, what is this?" Skelcher managed to shrug himself free. All predisposition to violence was gone from him and the boy holding him had sensed this. "Come on, I'm not going to hurt you! Just go! Get out of here!"

"Get in the room."

"Where? In here? In the bathroom? I'll go wherever you say."

"No. You're gonna yell out the window."

"No, I'm not. Why would I yell out the window?" There was genuine exasperation in Skelcher's voice. What had been a potentially violent situation had deescalated into the sort of bickering discussion that occurs in large families. "I don't want to get you boys in trouble," Skelcher said. "Just go."

The larger youth moved to the head of the stairs. "All right," he said. "Give us some money." He said it sullenly and the relationship was more clearly defined: he was a put-upon child and Skelcher was the stingy father.

"I don't have any money," Skelcher said, pulling out the right hand pocket of his trousers. He was carrying two five-pound notes in the left. "I've just been out buying groceries. We aren't rich people." His voice rose in complaint. "What do you want—a couple of quid?"

"No," the boy said. He thrust his right hand forward. "Shake hands."

Skelcher shook the hand, feeling rough skin.

"If we'd known it was a gentleman like you we'd never have come in," the boy said.

Skelcher followed the pair of them down the stairs. "I'd like to buy you a beer," he said, feeling tears in his eyes and a strong fraternal feeling towards these young men who were on their way empty-handed.

His wrestling partner turned at the bottom of the stairs. "You go back. Go back up there."

"O.K. I'm going back." Skelcher retreated halfway up the steps.

The youth followed his partner out the door but before it closed completely he reopened it. He looked back inside. "Here's your key," he said, and tossed Skelcher the blue-leather key case he had left dangling from the lock. . . .

Skelcher spent most of the four hours before his wife and daughters came home from work putting the house back in order. Throughout this period he was euphoric. It was an incredible adventure. He had encountered burglars in his house, had grappled with one, had talked them into leaving, and had lost nothing. The criminals had, in fact, apologized—they had shaken hands and had symbolically promised him future immunity by tossing him his key.

As he worked to unpack the suitcases, reloading drawers, putting electronic equipment back in place, Skelcher marvelled at how nothing had been broken. The young men had handled his possessions with care. They were decent blokes.

His mind ran on, inventing conversations in which Skelcher persuaded the lads they were too good for this seamy sort of activity, his advice steering them into a more constructive life.

It was not until Skelcher's wife came home at six o'clock that the silver locket and bracelet were missed. At first she was amazed by his story, praised his courage and resourcefulness, absolved him of the guilt he felt for not taking on the youths and beating them up. It was evidence, she said, of Skelcher's obvious decency that they shook his hand and refused to steal from him.

After supper she went to her dressing table in the bedroom and sorted through her things. Skelcher had put the costume jewelry back in all the wrong places but that was no problem. Where, though, was the silver locket, the silver bracelet? These two pieces had been given to Skelcher's wife by her brother on her sixteenth birthday shortly before he had died from wounds received while fighting the Germans in Holland. They were irreplaceable—the two possessions she could not afford to lose. And they were gone.

Skelcher's euphoria evaporated. There was no soothing his wife's justifiable misery. The image of the young men changed in his mind. He had seen them as fair-minded fellows who had joined him as partners in a chance relationship. Now they were sneak-thieves, laughing at him as he collaborated in their escape from the scene of a crime.

The policeman who came round in mid-evening was inclined to share the latter view of the situation. He sat dead center on the settee, a looming figure in blue uniform and polished black shoes. He placed his helmet beside him and used it as a receptacle for his portable commu-

nications set. He expressed the opinion that the afternoon's episode had been a unique opportunity for the police to apprehend a pair of house-breakers and that Skelcher should have dialed 999 immediately. The police had enough problems with low pay and reduced numbers and soaring crime figures, and he hinted that they did not need people like Skelcher more or less patting burglars on the back and sending them off to rob again.

Taking out his notebook, he began to write down the details of the crime.

Increasingly throughout the interview, Skelcher felt embarrassment and remorse. There was no blinking the fact that he had been content to let the thieves go as long as he himself sustained no loss of property. He had disclosed the crime only after the loss of the locket and bracelet had been detected—and then not because he felt the police would find the stolen property but because his insurance company would not pay if the theft went unreported.

The policeman mellowed after Skelcher's wife offered him coffee. He closed his book and spoke at length about friends with the Dutch police who came to England on exchange visits. The officer and his wife had twice reciprocated.

He talked tediously about Amsterdam and obscure northern towns and the number of windmills still in operation. It was boring, and Skelcher's elder daughter went to bed.

Skelcher woke early in the morning, sunk in depression. His wife, roused from a light sleep, sensed his wakefulness and encouraged him to talk.

He wept as he described the shattered myth of his invulnerability to physical attack. One twenty-year-old boy had handled him easily—and he on his own ground, with everything to fight for.

His wife pointed out that he had been courageous to face them in the first place. That his wisdom saw him through a dangerous situation. In the end he felt better, more as a result of his tears than of her words.

A CID man arrived at the house the next day. Skelcher, trying to concentrate on a romantic novelette he was writing, let the young man in and faced once again the low-key disapproval of the law-enforcement establishment. The detective looked around and decided there was no use dusting for fingerprints. He asked for, and Skelcher gave him, the

best description of the young men he could manage. Before he went away the detective asked: "Would you be willing to identify these chaps from a lineup?"

"Yes," Skelcher said. "I could try."

He had no hope that such a ritual would ever take place. But if it did, he knew he would recognize them. Even though his verbal description had been sketchy there would be no doubt if they came face to face.

As for his promise when they were in his house that he would not call the police, that had been delivered at the height of his sentimentality. It was nonsense from the beginning.

They were dishonorable people, and to show them consideration would be pointless.

The next day a locksmith came and fitted the front door with a mortice lock. This done, Skelcher allowed himself the naive hope that the place was safe from intruders and he made his daughters laugh by shuffling to the door with two keys jingling in his hand instead of one, calling himself the concierge. But in his heart he knew the truth of the policeman's warning that any serious burglar if he wanted to get in would get in.

Skelcher was astonished two days later when the CID man rang to say that a couple of suspected burglars had been detained following information received. Since the possibility existed that they had been working in his area, and since Skelcher was in the almost unique position of having caught one pair at it, would he come down and take a look at them?

Approaching the lineup situation, Skelcher was trembling with a mixture of anxiety for his own safety and a wish to redeem himself in the eyes of the police. The former emotion was the stronger of the two—he had already begun to see to his own physical well-being by carrying a ballpeen hammer in his shopping bag when he made his daily trip to the shops. Now whenever he unlocked his front door the hammer was gripped rigidly in his free hand.

The police showed him a row of eleven young men, all of them wearing nondescript dark clothing. It wasn't necessary for Skelcher to look at them all; it was as he had anticipated—confronting his intruders again, he knew them on sight.

"Those two," he said, pointing. "That one, and the other along there."

"Any question in your mind?"

"None."

The young men so designated were told to step forward and Skelcher was asked if he was absolutely sure these were the men he had encountered in his home.

"They're the ones." He moved forward out of the protecting shadows and stood directly in front of the larger youth, the one who had held him. "This is the one I shook hands with."

The boy looked at Skelcher, a puzzled expression on his face. It was the face of someone absorbed in a problem; Skelcher had seen a similar look in his daughter's eyes as she studied the Christmas jigsaw puzzle. The boy spoke in a strained voice, the whisper of the unprepared student trying to cheat in a well supervised classroom. "Man, what are you doing—" he began to say.

Skelcher interrupted him. "I hope they put you away for ten years," he said. "And if you feel like coming after me when you come out, please do. I'm ready for you now, you bastard."

The CID man interposed himself and conducted Skelcher out of the room. "The law will protect you," he said. "It's better if you don't make threats."

Skelcher stopped in a pub on the way home. He considered ringing his wife at her office, but decided to wait. It would make better telling with her and the two girls around the table, admiring him as he described the final chapter of his adventure.

When Skelcher reached the house, ready for a nap with three pints in him, the postman had been round with the second delivery. The brown-paper package was carefully wrapped and sealed with scotch tape. It was oddly addressed; there was no name, just the house number and the street. The package rattled as he tore it open. He spilled the contents onto the kitchen counter—the hiss of a silver chain, the clatter of locket and bracelet.

Skelcher turned the locket in his hand. It gleamed as if it had been polished. There on the smooth back was the name of his wife engraved in elegant script and the date, November 30, 1945.

The enclosed note was brief. There was no salutation. It read:

"These were in my pocket. I was going to sell them so we'd have something for our trouble. But I saw they mean something to you. If we ever meet, we'll have that beer. My name is Lorenzo. Goodbye."

Skelcher lit a match and burned the note. Then he walked upstairs and lay on the bed. Usually he could sleep in the afternoon but not today. He ended up ringing his wife at the office and disturbing her by describing at length in a manic tone of voice how he had blown the whistle on those bloody burglars.

That evening, keeping it as a surprise, he produced the locket and bracelet and then had to bring a chair quickly to catch her as she almost fell. "How in the world—?" she said.

"The cops got them to return the stuff by saying they might recommend leniency."

"Will that happen?" she asked, sounding sympathetic.

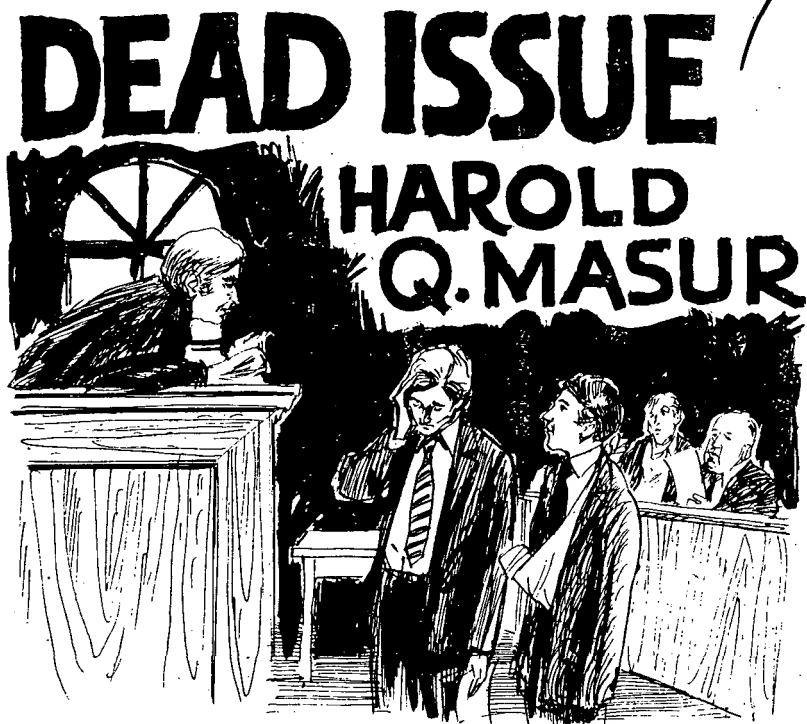
"I doubt it. They'll go to jail for a long time."

"That won't be fair if the police promised."

"Don't worry about it," Skelcher said. "These bastards are totally amoral." He busied himself filling the kettle. "They have no conscience. You have to beat them any way you can."



The millionaire's will was missing . . .



The judge looked down at me and banged his gavel. I heard him set bail and my eyes widened. Assignment to night court had not improved his dyspeptic temperament.

"Why, you simple-headed, sanctimonious old—"

"Next case," he rumbled.

"One moment, Your Honor," I said, out loud this time and not under my breath. "Five thousand dollars seems rather excessive under the

circumstances. I think five hundred would be more—”

He interrupted with a stony glare. “Are you instructing the bench how to run this court, counselor?”

“No, Your Honor, but we have a simple charge here—”

“Ha! Assault in the second degree, wilfully inflicting serious bodily injury upon this man, Tom Clinton, knocking out one front incisor and fracturing his left forearm. There was no earthly reason for exercising such a degree of force. You are a lawyer, Mr. Jordan, not a hoodlum.”

“But he was prowling around my office, Your Honor. I caught him emerging from the file room and when I tried to detain him, he swung at me. He refused to explain what he was doing there and—”

“He did not refuse, and he had a right to be there. A law office is open to the public. The door is an invitation to enter. He said he came to see you about drawing his will, and found the place deserted. He was looking for someone when you attacked him.”

“He’s lying.”

“Perhaps. On the other hand, if you didn’t like the man’s explanation, you should have summoned a policeman. Instead you elected to decide the issues and inflict punishment yourself. The Assistant District Attorney tells me you have a tendency to take the law into your own hands.” He pitched his head sideways, sounding irascible. “Now, that will be all, counselor. I have no intention of turning this court into a forum for public debate. Next case.”

I held my tongue, but my internal temperature was up about ten degrees. Usually a judge will release a lawyer on his own recognizance, but this bird was suffering from bad digestion or a henpecking wife.

I turned and saw Louis Homer in the back of the room, grinning at me. I beckoned and he came. Louis was a private eye who often acted as a bail bondsman.

I said, “Will you post a bond for me, Louis?”

“Sure. You got security?”

“Please,” I said, looking pained. “No humor. I’m not in the mood. Just send the bill to my office.” I started searching for the complainant, caught a glimpse of him disappearing through the door, and headed after him. I didn’t get far. A set of fingers lassoed my arm and swung me around.

“Just a minute, counselor.” It was a city detective named Wienick.

“Not now,” I said. “I’m on a job.”

“Me too.”

"I'm in a hurry."

"Forget it. You're wanted up on 20th Street."

"Lieutenant Nola?"

"The same."

"Can't it wait?"

He shook his head. "Let's go."

"But I'm trying to catch someone."

"So are we."

"Who?"

"A murderer."

I stopped struggling and blinked at his impassive face. He was dead serious and his iron grip on my arm brooked no argument. He had a squad car waiting under the street lamp and he convoyed me to the back seat. A uniformed cop straightened behind the wheel. The engine coughed and thundered and the siren keened and the tires started rolling.

"Who got shelved?" I inquired.

"A woman."

"Where do I fit?"

"Ask the lieutenant."

"Taciturn this evening," I said. "All right. You're following instructions. The lieutenant wants to play it cagey. But you can at least explain how you knew where to find me."

"Easy." He almost smiled. It was an effort but he tried. "Went to your apartment and found nobody home. Took a crack at your usual hangouts. No luck. Tried your office—bull's-eye. Couldn't shut the night man up. He told me about the fight in your office and how he called the cops. Phoned the precinct sergeant and learned you were in night court. What gives, Jordan?"

I shrugged. "Search me. I had a late appointment with a client and went down for a cup of coffee. The punk must have been lurking out in the hall. When he saw me leave he probably thought I had gone for the day and walked in."

"What was he after?"

"How do I know? Petty cash, maybe. He lied to the judge. Said he changed his mind about drawing a will after he sized me up."

"Did you have to break his arm?"

"That was an accident," I said resentfully. "He swung and missed and I swung and connected and he slipped and cracked it on the desk."

The car pulled up at 230 West 20th Street, which is headquarters for the Homicide Squad handling murders committed on this side of Manhattan. We went up to Nola's office and he took his chin out of a file, staring at me, unsmiling.

John Nola, Detective-Lieutenant, Homicide, a neat slender sober man with a dark intelligent face, alert as a squirrel and tougher than yesterday's eggstains, inflexible and incorruptible, a career cop who'd pulled himself up from the ranks and danced at the end of nobody's string. I liked, respected, and had worked in harmony with him on several cases.

He turned balefully to Wienick. "What took you so long?"

The detective explained about night court.

Nola dismissed it with a wave of his hand and switched back to me. "Unimportant. The name Millicent Mack mean anything to you?"

My mouth was suddenly-dry. "Yes."

"She's dead."

I stared at him. Bitter saliva threaded its way down my throat. "How?"

"Shot leaving her apartment."

"When?"

"Early this evening, about six o'clock."

My knees were weak and I sat down. I made a fist and almost broke it on his desk. "God damn it!" I said. "I spoke to her on the phone only this afternoon. She wanted to see me and made an appointment for 6:30. I was waiting for her when that other thing happened."

"What did she want to see you about?"

"She didn't say. She sounded upset and hinted that it was important." I frowned at him. "What led you to me?"

"A piece of paper we found in her purse. It had your name and address on it. She involved in one of your cases?"

"No."

"How come she selected you?"

"Because we used to work together in the same office. She was legal secretary to my first boss, Malcolm Warner. He's dead now and I took over what was left of his practice." I shook my head violently. "Millicent Mack. She was sixty-five if she was a day. A sweet old lady, a spinster, without relatives. Who the hell would knock her off?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Robbery?"

"I doubt it. Apparently nothing in her apartment was touched."

"Clues?"

"Not even a smell. Somebody rang her bell and when she opened the door, bang!"

"How about the neighbors?"

"They heard nothing. He must have used a silencer."

"The elevator boy?"

"It's a walkup."

We batted it around for a while, inspecting various angles. After a moment, Nola rubbed the back of his neck and his cheek bulged thoughtfully behind his tongue.

"How about this Tom Clinton? You think he might be connected with the murder?"

"Beats me."

"Suppose we talk to him."

"I'd like that. Call the precinct and get his address."

Nola used the phone. He spoke briefly, listened, scratched with his pencil, broke the connection, and was starting to push upright when the door opened. A city employee poked his head through and met the lieutenant's inquiring eye.

"We found Miss Mack's maid. She's here now."

"Send her in," Nola said settling back in his chair.

A short round cinnamon-tinted female entered, looking nervous and unhappy. Nola spent a couple of minutes putting her at ease. He learned that she had been working for Millicent Mack three hours a day, four afternoons a week, for over a year.

"You understand that Miss Mack is dead."

She nodded and dabbed a handkerchief at the corners of her eyes, swallowing hugely.

"Did she have many visitors?" Nola asked.

"Never. Except the last two days. A lady came to visit each afternoon."

"The same lady?"

"Different ones. I announced them."

"Do you remember their names?"

"Only the second one. A Mrs. Lovett. I remember because Miss Mack told me her husband owned that big department store—Lovett's."

It rang a bell. Old Oscar Lovett had been a client of Malcolm Warner's. His first store, a sprawling dingy cavern on 14th Street, had spilled over into adjoining buildings. Then it had moved up to the Fifties and begun

catering class merchandise to the carriage trade. When Malcolm Warner passed on, Oscar Lovett had found himself new lawyers. I didn't blame him. His interests were vast and I was still unseasoned.

Now Oscar Lovett was gone too. Old age and general deterioration. I had read his obituary in the *Times* last week, and it had stuck in my memory. Surviving him were Grace Lovett, the widow, and an adopted daughter, Mrs. Charles Gair, souvenir of an earlier marriage.

I said to the maid, "Let me refresh your recollection. Miss Mack's first visitor—was the name Mrs. Charles Gair?"

She pounced on it. "Yessir, that's it, Gair. I remember now."

"How long did they stay?" asked Nola.

"Bout half an hour apiece."

"That will be all, thank you." He buzzed for the city employee and got her a lift in an official vehicle back to Harlem. His eyes came back to me. "Well?"

"The background is sketchy," I said. "I don't have much but I'll fill you in. Oscar Lovett died last week. His widow had only five years on the course. She used to be a buyer in the lingerie department of the store, and is reputed to be young and beautiful. I have never seen her."

"Who is Mrs. Gair?"

I told him and added, "From an occasional gossip column or two, I gathered there was considerable friction between the two ladies. Mrs. Gair resented the marriage."

"Why?"

"Well, now, she was a legally adopted daughter. There was a sizeable inheritance involved."

"How much?"

"A million, perhaps more."

"Quite a slice of motive."

I gave him a nod and a lopsided smile. "How about this Tom Clinton we were going to visit?"

"O.K. It's only a few blocks away. I'll catch the widow next."

The old Chelsea district is only a stone's throw from Homicide West, providing Willie Mays rifles it over the buildings. But we made the trip for nothing; Clinton wasn't home. His landlady had a loose tongue, however, and enjoyed exercising it.

"I saw Tom half an hour ago. He was in a terrible accident. Knocked

out a tooth and broke his arm." The victim had been someone else and she was relishing the details. "Tom said a truck hit him. That beautiful blue Cadillac, my goodness, it must be all smashed in. I hope the Lovetts don't fire him."

"Who?" Nola was restraining himself.

"The Lovetts . . . those department store people. Tom's their chauffeur."

He thanked her quickly and hopped down the steps to the squad car. He was inside, with the door closed, looking out at me through the window and unsmiling. "Police business, Scott. I'll take it alone. Sorry."

Exhaust fumes fanned into my face as the car leaped away, careening around the corner on two wheels and burning an inch of rubber off the tires. I stood there for a moment, alone, feeling like an orphan. Then I shrugged. While he was tackling Mrs. Lovett, at least I could see Mrs. Charles Gair.

A telephone directory gave me the address.

They lived in style, in a tall building on East End Avenue, with an acre of casement windows blinking out over the river, with a fine view of barges and ferries and Welfare Island, with a liveried doorman and polite elevator operators. One of them took me up to the tenth floor.

A slender gent with a Coleman moustache opened the door. He was wearing Bermuda shorts of Irish linen, a slate-grey polo shirt, and white yachting shoes. One eyebrow moved up slightly.

"Something I can do for you, sir?" He had polished manners and first-class diction.

"I'd like to see Mrs. Gair."

"She's on the terrace. Who shall I say is calling?"

"Scott Jordan."

If he recognized the name, he gave no sign of it. "Come in. This way, please."

I followed him across the living room and through a pair of French doors. It was a warm night, with barely a breeze fluttering the drapes. A man and a woman were comfortable in deck chairs, holding long high-balls in perspiring glasses. Introductions straightened out everybody's identity.

The woman, a tall severe item, not yet past the deadline, was Anita Gair. The smooth article in Bermuda shorts turned out to be her husband, Charles. And I recognized the name of their visitor, Ray Burroughs, a

small precise gent with thinning hair and pince-nez glasses. He was general manager of Lovett's, Incorporated.

I looked pointedly at Anita Gair. "May I speak to you alone?"

She exchanged glances with her husband. "I hardly think that's necessary. I have no secrets from Charles."

"Quite," he said. "Speak up, old boy. What's on your mind?"

I said, "A couple of days ago, your wife visited Millicent Mack."

"Did you, darling?"

"Yes."

"Well, Jordan, what about it?"

"I'd like to know why."

A meager smile brushed his lips. "I can't see that it's any of your business, to put it bluntly."

"She'll have to tell someone," I said.

"Have to?" His eyebrow was up again.

"Absolutely."

"Who?"

"The police. Millicent Mack is dead."

Anita Gair and Ray Burroughs spilled some of their drink. The chair tipped over behind Burroughs as he bounced to his feet, jaw working spasmodically. Charles reached for his glass and siphoned it off.

Burroughs opened his mouth, managed to emit a little static, and finally got wired for sound. "Dead? . . . How? . . . Old age, accident?"

"Murder," I said.

Charles put his glass down and took a slow breath. "And just what is your position in this thing?"

"I was Millicent Mack's lawyer."

"Why do you come to us?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? Miss Mack was sixty-five years old. In all that time your wife never went to see her. Then she did. Two days later, Miss Mack was dead."

"Does that mean there's any connection between the two incidents?"

"How can I tell without questioning your wife?"

"But you're not a policeman."

"True. And you can toss me out on my ear, if you like."

He showed me his teeth. "I rather think I will."

"Just a moment." Anita Gair held up her hand. "What is it you want to know, Mr. Jordan?"

"The reason for your visit."

"It's quite simple. My stepfather, Oscar Lovett, died last week. No will was found, neither in his safe-deposit box, nor in his apartment. I believe Grace—that's his second wife—destroyed it."

"That still doesn't explain why you went to see Miss Mack."

"I wanted to know what was in Dad's will. I called his attorneys, but they hadn't drawn any will for him. Then I thought of his old lawyer, Malcolm Warner, and I wondered if Mr. Warner's secretary, who probably did the typing on it, might remember. So I went to see her."

"Did she remember?"

"No."

"That's quite a story," I said.

"Don't you believe me?"

"About this much," I said, holding my thumb and forefinger about a millimeter apart.

"Look here, old boy," Charles demanded, "are you calling my wife a liar?"

"Just about."

He may have looked like a gentleman, but he swung like a longshoreman and he caught me off balance, completely unprepared, and the impact of his fist, flush on the jaw, snapped my head back and sat me down, hard. The cement floor caught me at the base of my spine with a resounding wallop and for a moment I was paralyzed. I collected myself and started to rise slowly, measuring him.

But his hand had reached through a window for the telephone and I heard him asking for a policeman.

One charge of assault and battery was enough. This time the judge might not even release me on bail, and I had no stomach for spending a whole night in the tank. So I dusted myself off and said pleasantly, "Good evening, folks. Thanks for the hospitality."

I flushed a passing cab and went back to 23rd Street for another go at Tom Clinton. No luck. He was still out. I thought of trying Grace Lovett but was afraid of barging in on Lieutenant Nola. He wanted the field for himself and he had the authority to back up his demands. So I decided to go home.

I was thinking of a shower and a pair of scrambled eggs when I opened the door. I was thinking of a bourbon and a pair of slippers. I was not thinking of a blonde . . . but that's what I got.

She was sitting in a club chair, smoking a king-size cigarette through a filter-type holder. She was dressed in a tailored suit that fought a losing battle with her figure. Her face was rather angular in structure, the lashes long and curled over a pair of disconcerting blue eyes. Her mouth was wistful, with a full and slightly puckered shining underlip. Whatever you might need, wherever you happened to be, she had it, in spades.

"Mr. Jordan?" she inquired, shaking an ash into the tray.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I hope you don't mind my waiting here in your apartment. I told the superintendent that I was a client of yours and he let me in."

Either I kill that guy, I thought, or I promise him a bonus.

"My name is Grace Lovett," she said. "I wish you'd stop staring like that. Please relax."

I swallowed a bubble of air and walked to the bar. "Excuse me," I said. "I need a drink. Join me?"

"Please."

I poured two brandies and brought her one and sat down on the sofa. "Have you seen the lieutenant?"

"Who?"

"Detective-Lieutenant John Nola, Homicide. He was heading for your apartment when I left him about an hour ago."

She shook her head. "No. I haven't been home. I've been waiting here for you."

I took a sip of brandy. "Where's your stooge?"

"Stooge?"

"Tom Clinton, your chauffeur."

She gave me a reproachful look.

"He swung first," I said defensively. "And besides, most of that damage came from a fall. He slipped."

"Yes, I know. He told me."

"I wish he had told the judge. I got nicked for the premium on a five-thousand-dollar bond. Why was he in my office?"

"I sent him."

"What for?"

"To find a copy of my husband's will. I learned that you had taken over Malcolm Warner's practice and I thought you might have a duplicate of the will in your files."

"Who told you?"

"Miss Mack—Miss Millicent Mack."

"You know where she is now?"

"Home, I imagine."

"In the morgue. She was killed earlier this evening, murdered."

She digested it slowly, her lips apart and her face distressed. Suddenly she remembered the brandy in her hand and took a prodigious unladylike pull that put some of the bloom back into her cheeks.

"Why all the cloak-and-dagger stuff? Why didn't you come to me and ask instead of sending your chauffeur?"

"Because I didn't trust anyone." She dropped her eyes. "I'm sorry. I thought they might have reached you first, perhaps bribed you."

"Who's they?"

"Anita Gair and her husband. They've been against me ever since Oscar and I got married. They said I married him for his money."

"Didn't you?"

"A little bit, maybe. But I was very fond of him, and I respected him. He was a brilliant man."

"Did Oscar ever tell you anything about his will?"

"Yes. He was leaving me the bulk of his estate. There were a few minor bequests to the servants and twenty-five thousand dollars to Anita Gair."

"That's all?"

"She was only his stepdaughter."

"All right," I said. "Why did you come to see me?"

"They couldn't find Oscar's will in his safe-deposit box. I searched the apartment and couldn't find it there either. I thought he might have put it in the safe at the store and I asked Ray Burroughs, the general manager, who knows the combination. He looked and said he couldn't find it. If the original is missing, maybe we can prove the duplicate. Tom Clinton was searching your files for it, but you returned unexpectedly and stopped him. Now I have no choice. I'm coming to you directly. Besides, I asked some questions around town and everybody tells me you're tricky but honest."

"Thanks," I said wryly. "Are you retaining me?"

"Yes. I want Oscar's will admitted to probate."

I stood up. "Lady, you've got yourself a lawyer. Go home and wait for my call. One thing more, I want you to send Tom Clinton on a vacation. Tonight. If he doesn't appear as a complainant against me, those charges of assault and battery will be dropped."

"Agreed."

We went down and she took the first cab and I took the second. The night man in Rockefeller Center signed me in and gave me a pass and I took the elevator up to my office.

I sat down with a manual containing the Decedent Estate Law and studied for half an hour. At the end of that time, I checked the telephone directory for the address of Ray Burroughs, committed it to memory, and quit the office.

The precise little man answered my ring. He opened his door, goggled at me, started to splutter, and tried to slam the door shut. But I put a hand on his chest and backed him into the room.

"What . . ." he said.

"Quiet," I told him, slipping out of my coat and rolling up my sleeves. "Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know," I said. "You know and you're going to tell me. It may take the rest of the night, but I'm a determined man. What happened to Oscar Lovett's will?"

"Please, you're making a mistake."

"No mistake," I said, encompassing the room with a quick circular glance. "Where's your company?"

"What company?" he gulped audibly.

"Two highball glasses on the coffee table. You didn't mix both of them for yourself, did you?"

He shifted uneasily. "No, I—had company for a nightcap, but he's gone now."

"O.K. Let's get back to the will."

"I—I don't understand . . ."

"Not much," I said. "However, I'll spell it out. Sit down."

He sank weakly into a chair, watching me apprehensively, his Adam's apple working overtime, and not too much color in his puckered lips.

"Here it is," I said. "Listen. Oscar Lovett's widow asked you to search the store safe for her husband's will. You told her you couldn't find it. That was a lie. You found it and you read it."

He started to open his mouth.

"I'm not finished," I said. "Sit still. The bulk of old Oscar's estate went to Mrs. Lovett with a paltry token bequest to Anita Gair. If the will was

hidden, if it couldn't be found, if Oscar died intestate, his widow, under the law, would inherit only one-third, and the rest would go to Anita Gair as his legally adopted daughter.

"So you went to them with a proposition. For a substantial cut you would dispose of the will. And they agreed. But you had to be sure that no attempt would be made to probate the carbon copy, if one existed. Most probably Millicent Mack was one of the testamentary witnesses and that's how you got her name and address. So Mrs. Gair went to her and learned that a duplicate was probably in my office. Did you steal it?"

"I didn't." Pallor diluted the color in his face. "I swear I didn't."

"That much I'm inclined to believe," I said. "You haven't the guts. I imagine the job was performed by Charles Gair himself. And Charles assumed that Millicent Mack had probably typed out the will and might remember its contents. He paid her a quiet visit and found the old lady greatly disturbed. She'd been told the will was missing and she suspected skulduggery. She told him she remembered the contents and was going to see me.

"That meant she had to die. So he stopped her heart with a bullet and now he felt secure. But not for long."

"Forever, Jordan," a voice said behind me. "Secure forever because you won't live to tell anyone."

He'd come in from the kitchen where he'd been hiding and he held a carving knife in his hand.

"A knife," I said. "What happened to the gun?"

"In the sewers," he whispered, "where it will never be found."

He took a single crablike step in my direction. "Tell me, Jordan, how did you know?"

"It figured," I said. "Somebody found the original of Lovett's will and kept it under his hat. Somebody rifled my files and stole the carbon copy. Somebody killed Millicent Mack, who might have remembered its contents. And you were the only people who stood to gain if the old man died intestate."

He coiled his tongue over his parched lips and moved another step forward. "Keep talking."

"I suspected a conspiracy the minute I walked out on your terrace tonight, and your wife refused to see me alone. She wanted all three of you present and listening, in case she missed a cue. She said Grace must have destroyed the will. That was the last thing Grace would ever do,

deprive herself of a fortune. And she lied when she said Oscar Lovett told her he was going to change his will. The old man never believed a word she said about Grace."

And then I stood very still, holding his eyes with my own, not breathing, just watching, the scalp tingling under my hair. It was happening right in front of me, but I could hardly believe it. Ray Burroughs was on his feet, a heavy plaster bookend brandished like a hammer in his fist.

Gair sucked in a heaving breath, lunged and made his thrust. But the blade never reached me. With a rasping sob, Ray Burroughs slammed the bookend against the taller man's skull. Gair stiffened, his back arched, his eyes glazed, and he fell like a statue.

Burroughs collapsed behind him. "I had to do it," he said in a shredded whisper. "One murder was enough. I didn't count on murder."

"All right," I said. "I'll see what I can do for you. Get some cord and tie him up. Where's the phone?"

He pointed.

I dialed and got through to Nola. "The Millicent Mack murder is all wrapped up. Motive, means, and opportunity. Your man is waiting for you at this address." I gave it to him. "Hurry it up, lieutenant."

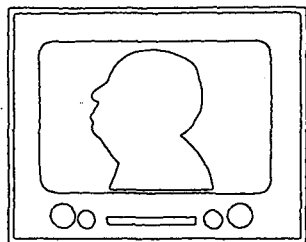
Burroughs came back. I took the twine from him and did the job myself.

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CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

His mission was to assassinate a superior officer entrenched somewhere in the green hell of the Cambodian jungles—to “terminate him with extreme prejudice.” Francis Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* is more than a thriller; indeed that is part of the film’s problem, for its nightmare journey upriver to where the troubled but likeable C.I.A. killer (Martin Sheen) meets his intended victim (Marlon Brando as the renegade Colonel Kurtz) is part epic adventure-suspense and part a brooding, philosophic enquiry into the madness of men and war. The mood is dark and nocturnal, its bloody ending as mysterious as a drug-induced dream. You will find *Apocalypse Now* oppressive—its two-and-a-half hours seem like four—but overpowering and gripping.

In comparison, everything else is lightweight for sure. *The In-Laws* brings together a quite sensible dentist (Alan Arkin) and a manic government agent (Peter Falk)—two strangers whose children are about to marry—in a frenzied plot that involves stolen Treasury plates and the overthrow of a South American country. Arkin, screaming, is pulled headlong into the bizarre capers of the unflappable Falk in an insane comedy-thriller concocted by Andrew Bergman (who wrote *Hollywood and Levine*). Nothing great, but the bonding of these two new and improbable fathers-in-law as the bullets whiz about them (“Run serpentine!” directs Falk) is pleasing.

Sunburn is not very hot, but adventures of three investigators amidst the pleasure domes of Acapulco (bullets whiz there too) are interesting

almost until the end. Up in the stratosphere, *The Concorde—Airport '79* is actually a supersonic espionage yarn, with plane and passengers about to be missile-bombed as it zips from Dulles Airport to Orly. The film has its share of clutching suspense, but is as claustrophobic as the jet itself; bring Dramamine.

Two new films concern themselves with the nitty-gritty of crime. In *A Very Big Withdrawal* Donald Sutherland and Paul Mazursky use their knowledge of computers to pry loose the assets of a bank that's under construction—aided by Brooke Adams, who wanders into the plot and decides to stay. It's all surprisingly witty and good fun. *Hot Stuff*, however, is torn from the headlines (with a snicker), the saga of undercover cops pretending to unload stolen goods in order to entrap a bunch of crooks. Donald E. Westlake co-authored the script, and he's no stranger to classy capers (*The Hot Rock*, *Bank Shot*).

An impressive array of mystery films lies ahead in the months to come. Still waiting to start shooting is *The Mirror Crack'd*, with Angela Lansbury as Miss Marple, and Agatha Christie's sleuthless mood piece, *Endless Night*, will be released to television next year. *Dress Gray*, about the bizarre murder of a cadet at West Point, is awaiting filming. Peter Benchley's *The Island*, which has inbred piracy still claiming two hundred lives a year in Southern waters, will shortly engulf Michael Caine, and *Return to the Deep*, a sequel to his earlier thriller, is about to begin shooting in Hawaii.

The Return of Maxwell Smart continues spoofing America's counter-espionage thrust and, much more seriously, *Chameleon* will tell the true story of a young girl spy in Berlin just prior to the Allied invasion. Albert Finney, in his first film since portraying Hercule Poirot in *Murder on the Orient Express*, has been cast in *The Wolfen*, in which werecreatures stalk two police officers in a suburban nightmare. And Burt Reynolds has bought rights to produce (but not star in) Don Pendleton's *The Executioner* series, to begin filming next year.

Recently the cinematic career of Bob Hope was given a tribute at New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Woody Allen listed Hope as his favorite comedian, citing especially his devout cowardice in the face of adversity as a source of comic inspiration. Hope as "the coward's coward," backing away from trouble so as to fall headlong into it, is a hilarious device in nearly all of his films, and enough of his screen ad-

ventures are mystery comedies that attention should be given to his contributions to the genre.

Interestingly, the first film in his career of importance, the first attempt by Paramount to tailor a property to his talents, was *The Cat and the Canary* (1939). The John Willard old-dark-house play, in which the heirs are assembled to hear the reading of the will and be killed, concentrates actually on the heroine—the plot is to drive her mad—and Hope's frightened innocent who saves the day is a role that was pleasingly expanded. He remembers (in his autobiographical *The Road to Hollywood*) being thrilled that Paulette Goddard was cast as his leading lady, for she was the wife of his earliest idol, Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin later told him, after watching the rushes of *Cat*, "You are one of the best timers of comedy I've ever seen."

True enough; Hope's mixture of terror and laughter as he pursues a masked fiend behind secret panels and underground corridors added greatly to a time-worn play. The next year he and Goddard replayed the same thrills in *The Ghost-Breakers*, where the "haunted" mansion is set in Cuban jungles. The film opens with New York City felled by a then-improbable total power blackout—caused by an electrical storm!

All of Hope's *Road* pictures involve crime and villainy, but he was at his mystery best coping with spies and enemy agents. The first of these was *My Favorite Blonde*, in which Paramount allowed him to play opposite Madeleine Carroll. ("Madeleine Carroll and I are making a picture. She's a spy and she keeps chasing me. And you think Walt Disney makes fantastic pictures!") Actually, he's a vaudeville comic—with a trained penguin—caught in a cross-country chase for secret plans Carroll must bring from the British government to Lockheed in Los Angeles. *They Got Me Covered* is more of the same, with Hope as a hapless foreign correspondent finally getting a story when he traps a spy ring.

My Favorite Brunette starts off with Hope in the gas chamber, about to be executed by Bing Crosby in a cameo bit ("He'll play *anything*!"), a small-time baby photographer framed by Peter Lorre in an assassination plot, a nice comedy reworking of the postwar vogue of *films noirs*. In *My Favorite Spy*, teamed up with Hedy Lamarr, he is a burlesque comedian who is sent to Tangiers by our government because he is the double of a notorious international agent who's been wounded. Otto Preminger, Francis L. Sullivan, Lon Chaney, Jr., George Zucco, and Gale Sondergaard are some of the baddies arrayed against him in these films.

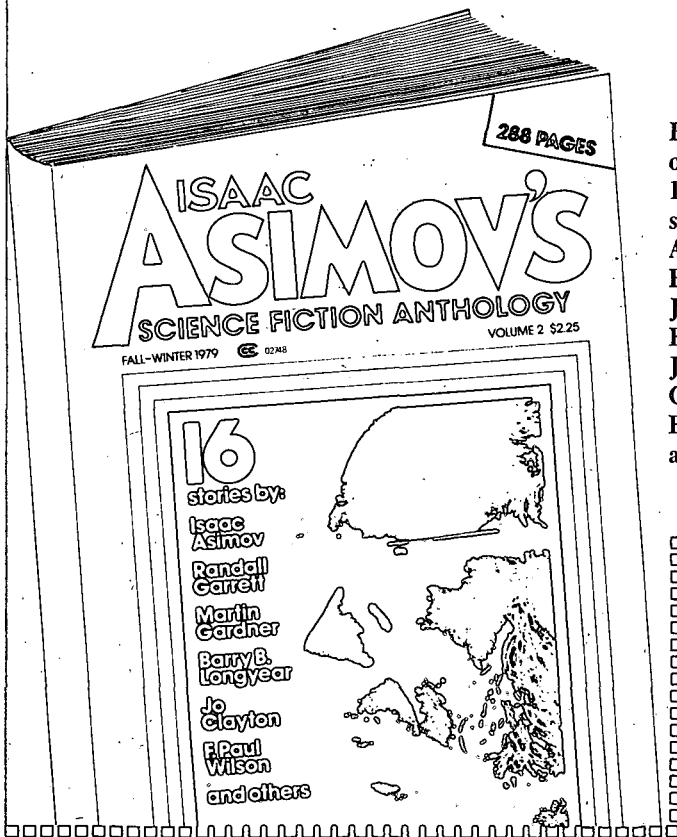
Even in his comedy westerns the melodrama element was strong: he was always pitted against the grimmest outlaws, and once, trying to match them for toughness, stammered the classic line, "I'll have a lemonade—in a dirty glass." *Where There's Life*—in which he learns he's the heir to a middle-European kingdom—is all Balkan intrigue, and *Here Come the Girls*, despite all its froth backstage at the follies, has Hope (as the world's oldest chorus boy) on an alarmingly dangerous perch trying to trap the murderer, Jack the Slasher.

In recent years the slapstick and melodrama has lessened. He is now the incisive commentator on the passing scene, and has gone to China without slipping *under* the bamboo curtain. Happily, though, late-night television and the revival movie houses still show us the Hope who, gun shakily in hand, feet ready for retreat, flirts with danger and lets a pretty face, against all his better instincts, lead him down that mystery mile. Thanks for the memory.



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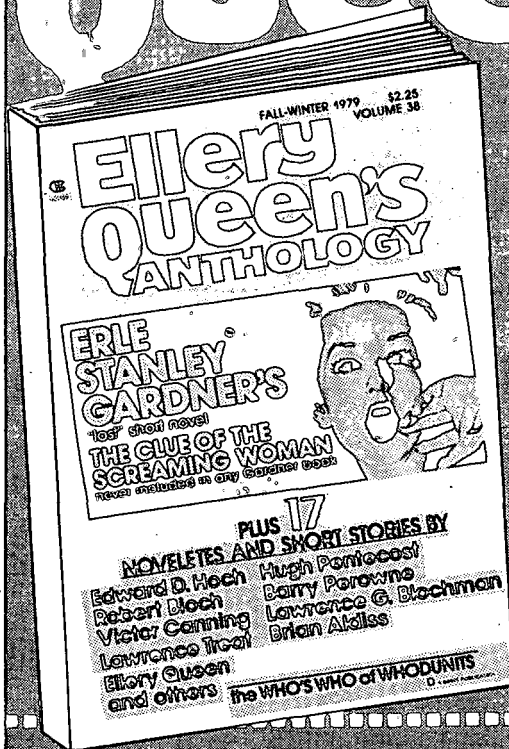
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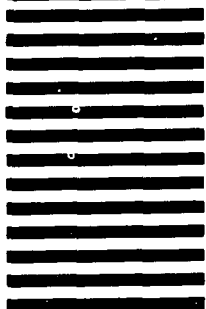
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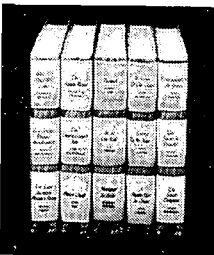
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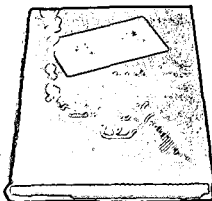
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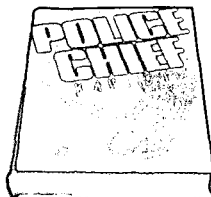
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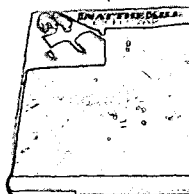
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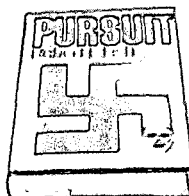
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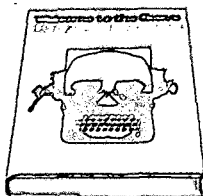
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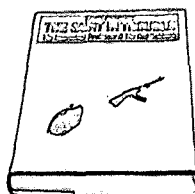
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