

CRIME AND JUSTICE

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

JANUARY

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**Run Fast,
Run Far**

by ROBERT TURNER



CRIME & JUSTICE

Detective Story Magazine

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Franny drew back her head and her wet red mouth opened round! "Don," she said, "you're crazy! We can't ... not here ... I'm too scared ..."

RUN FAST, RUN FAR



by ROBERT TURNER

THEY stood there with the full glare of the spotlights ready to blind them if they looked into it. But they didn't look into it. They looked at each other, their eyes moving over each other's face. Her arms clung around his neck;

his hands held her hips, arching her toward him.

The spotlights showed their faces sick-white and too thin and young, the taut features oiled with sweat.

The crowd watching them began to make a sound, now.

It was a many-throated animal murmuring, swelling with excited anticipation beginning to get unendurable.

"Listen to them," he said. "They like this. They love us, now. This act is going over, Franny. You hear them? Maybe nobody cares anything about our regular act but we're the greatest right this minute."

She didn't answer; didn't say anything. She just moaned and nuzzled her mouth against his thin, corded throat.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Listen. We made a mistake. This is nothing; this isn't really our biggest act. We forgot all about the really big one. You know what I'm talking about, honey? Our own personal act—the one we do better'n anybody, anybody at all, I'll bet. Let's give 'em that one."

She drew back her head and her lashes made sweeping shadows on her high cheekbones. Her red wet mouth opened round.

"Don!" she said. "You're crazy. We can't— You mean here? Now?"

"Sure, here, now." He talked with his teeth so tightly together the words came out with a metallic grating sound. "We'll show 'em that way, show 'em that's one thing they can't ever

take from us because then we'll have it forever and ever. You understand me? Forever, Franny!"

He got very excited about it, now. His hands moved to her shoulders, squeezing them cruelly. "Don't you get it? Come on! We'll have to hurry before someone gets to us to stop it. Come on!"

"I—don't know, Don," she said. "I'm too scared. It—it'd be awful with everybody watching. It—"

"Don't think about that," he cut her off. "You won't be able to, you'll see. I won't give you a second to think about that or anything." His mouth moved against her ear. "Come on, Baby. You promised me anything, remember—anything, that means even this."

Some of the excitement took hold of her, now. She whispered: "All right, Don. All right, then..."

IT'S FUNNY. We thought the money was so much, that night. We thought it was maybe like a million dollars or something. It wasn't, of course. It wasn't anything, really. It didn't last very long at all. It's probably just as well.

We counted it before we left the house. There was \$3,716.

exactly. That'll show you how crazy Momma was. There was twenty of every kind of bill. Twenty 100's, twenty 50's, twenty 20's, twenty 10's and twenty 5's, too. We guessed that there had been twenty singles when she'd cashed the check but she must've used four of them for something because there was only sixteen of them when we got it, which made the odd figure.

That was real crazy, her being so neat in the way she got the money from the bank. Franny and I tried to figure that out but couldn't. I couldn't remember Momma ever being neat about anything before. But she sure was about that.

Because of all those hundreds, of course, the money didn't make a very fat pack. We didn't have much trouble figuring how to carry it. I took the hundreds and stuffed them into my wallet. Then I took out a hundred and fifty in smaller bills for traveling expenses and stuck that in a wad into my pocket. We rolled the rest up tight and put a rubber band around it and Franny put that in her purse.

Then we left the house. I didn't take anything with me. I just went around shutting the windows and pulling down the

shades and then we went out the front door and I locked it. It was around one o'clock in the morning. There was nobody out in our neighborhood. Nobody saw us leave. Nobody saw us at all until we got on the downtown bus and it was the last trip and there was nobody on it but the driver and he didn't even look at us when we got on.

All that time, ever since it happened with Momma, neither Franny nor I had said much. Right afterward, Franny had looked at me and her eyes are awful big and dark, anyway, and she always was kind of pale but right then her eyes looked enormous so that they were her whole face, almost, especially thin-faced the way she is and there was so little color in her face right then I could see a lot of the veins under her skin, around her forehead at the eyes and along her jawline. She was breathing very fast and she kept turning a ring on her finger, around and around.

"What are we going to do, Don?" she said. Her voice was very quiet and she didn't sound scared at all. "What are we going to do now?"

"Go away," I told her. "What else is there to do? You're going with me, aren't

you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I mean, sure, of course, Don. But, how? How're we going to go any place? We haven't got any money."

"We've got money," I said. Then I saw her remember what I'd told her earlier about Momma and the money.

She said, "oh," and then we went and got the money where Momma had hidden it, the two of us. Then we counted it, like I said and then we left. Just like that. It was as though it was all perfectly natural, as though we'd planned it.

ON THE city bus, going downtown, Franny whispered, even though we were sitting way back from the driver where he couldn't possibly hear us over the sound of the bus motor and there wasn't anybody else around: "When do you think they'll find out, Don?"

"About what?" I said. I knew about what she meant in general but not in particular.

"About your mother," she said. "About what happened."

"You mean when will they find her? I don't know. Maybe soon; maybe not for quite awhile. All the shades down and all, they'll think we just

went away for a couple of weeks on a vacation. I mean Momma and me. If they think that, it'll be quite awhile."

Franny didn't say anything, then. I waited awhile and then I said: "It doesn't make any difference, anyhow. Nobody's going to get us. I'll see to that."

Even when I said that I somehow knew it wasn't so. I really knew that they would get us but I thought I could make it so it wouldn't be for awhile, anyhow. At least not before we both got what we wanted more than anything in the world, outside of each other.

About two hours later, we were on a plane out of Tampa, heading for New York. For awhile, on the plane, Franny didn't say anything. She just sat there, looking out the window at the night sky. I wondered what she was thinking about but I didn't ask her. What I was thinking about was the things that were ahead of us; the Big Time and money in our pockets to buy the best of it—a good agent, real sharp outfits for Franny and I to work in, brand new, original dance routines and band arrangements written especially for them, the big, fine clubs with decent floors to work on and hip audiences that would

know a good thing when they saw it. No more playing creep joints in Tampa for five bucks a night, before a bunch of drunken bums and their chip-pies, who wouldn't have known the difference if you were Marge and Gower Champion.

I thought about all of that and I didn't think back about what had happened earlier tonight, at all. It was just as though it hadn't happened, or something. I mean, I didn't think about it because I was *trying* not to; I just didn't.

It was early morning when we got to New York and checked into a small, off-Broadway hotel where they wouldn't worry about us not having any bags if we paid in advance.

Franny watched me sign the register and when the rabbit looking little bellhop who took us up to the room was gone, she put her arms around my neck and smiled up at me. She had the most perfect, the most beautiful small white teeth I'd ever seen. I could never get over them. She said:

"Hi, Mr. Ambler. I'm Mrs. Ambler. How are you?"

"It was the first name came to my mind down there," I told her. "I don't know why."

Then we hid the money in-

side the pillow cases where we were going to sleep and we got undressed. Franny unhooked her bra and hunched out of it and then slid her pants down over her long curved, dancer's legs. She said:

"You don't mind if I sleep in the raw, do you, hon? My underwear is tacky enough, without sleeping in it."

I WATCHED her drape it over the back of a rickety straight chair and I saw that it was a little dingy and frayed looking and I wondered why I'd never noticed that before. A simple, silly little thing like that, it got me for a moment, the way a lot of crazy, wonderful little things about Franny have always got to me since the first moment I met her.

Almost fiercely, I said: "Later, when we've rested up, we go out and dress up, Fran. From the skin out. Everything. And the best, too. No cheap crap for us from now on. And a new hairdo, styled especially for you. You're going to be so beautiful, hon, you'll tear the guts out of every guy who looks at you."

"That'll be swell, Don," she said.

"Not that you aren't that way right now."

She smiled over her shoulder at me and walked as completely without shame as a child, with none of this phoney bashful stuff, naked, toward the bed. I watched her pull back the sheet and climb onto the bed and lay there on her back. I realized it was the first time I was really seeing her that way. I mean, all at once, like that, without any clothes at all, from a little distance. I'd seen her undressed before, of course, but always up close and in the dark or just moonlight or something.

Yet all I felt was a crazy kind of awe and wonder, because she was such a perfect and beautiful thing to look at; the way some people feel, I guess when they see a really great painting, a work of art or terrific scenery. I don't know. It's hard to explain. Anyhow, I didn't want her or anything. Not that moment.

She seemed to know that, too. She didn't look toward me or try to attract me in any way. It's funny but it's always been that way with Franny and me, since the first moment we saw each other. She always seemed to know in advance how I felt or reacted to anything and it was always all right with her; she never attempted to change

my mind, to force anything.

From the bed, now, she said: "I'm tired, hon. I'm going to doze off. You come to bed when you're ready, huh?"

"All right," I said.

I went in and took a shower and when I came out, Franny was asleep. Except for the way she was built, she looked like a child, sleeping there, she was so completely relaxed, her pretty face so soft and innocent in sleep. I stood over the bed, looking down on her, for a moment. I remembered the time she told me some of how it had been before she'd run away from home a couple of years ago. She'd told it so simply, so undramatically, not looking for sympathy or feeling sorry for herself at all, that it hit me twice as hard. How her old man and old lady belonged to some fanatical religious cult up there in West Virginia and she'd never been allowed to have any decent clothes, not even a store bought dress, nor anything but cotton stockings and if she even looked directly at a boy, when she grew older, she was strapped until her flesh was striped and then locked in a closet for sometimes as long as twenty four hours. There was a lot more of it, some of it

hard to believe in this day and age, except that when Franny got to some of the real bad parts, she began to stare fixedly and to shake so that I made her stop talking, stop thinking about it.

That was the time I told her: "Franny, nobody's ever going to hurt you again. Not while I'm around. Honest to God, doll, I'll kill someone before I'll let you be hurt any more."

"Would you, Don?" she said, only she wasn't really questioning the statement; that was just an expression of wonder.

AT THE time I hadn't really thought anything about that. You know how you make wild, crazy statements like that on the spur of the moment. Only, this one, I'd had to make good on. I really had to kill someone who was hurting Franny. I had to kill Momma.

I hadn't wanted to start thinking about that. I'd promised myself I wouldn't. But now it had started I couldn't seem to stop it. I walked over to the window and looked down onto the street, that busy New York side street, with the traffic moving fast in a continually changing, yet ever unchanging pattern; the people bustling, hurrying, nobody taking it

easy, nobody relaxed. Yet I wasn't even seeing any of that. Behind my eyes what I was seeing was the way Momma's face looked when I kept hitting and hitting it, the way it swelled and got misshapen and the way her mouth kept moving, screaming the things I was trying to make her stop screaming, that twisting, hideous mouth that kept saying those bad things, that I couldn't stop, couldn't quiet, like a striking snake that keeps moving even after you've beaten it almost to a pulp.

And what I was seeing was the twisted way Momma's fat body looked when she finally went down and then didn't get up and didn't move and I saw the way her eyes were open but not seeing anything and I knew that she never was going to get up; never was going to move again.

Then I was hearing myself saying, sobbing some: "I didn't mean that. I didn't mean to do that but she wouldn't stop. She wouldn't shut up. I didn't mean to do it."

And hearing Franny say: "Of course you didn't, Don. Anyone would know that, hon. It wasn't your fault."

But it had been my fault. No matter what, I shouldn't have

gone crazy like that, no matter what had brought it all on. I should have kept control. Because now I'd made big trouble for Franny and me; the kind of trouble we might never get out of.

I stood there by the hotel window, looking down and seeing and hearing and thinking things like that and I got all sick, like, inside and hurting, as though hands were tearing me all apart inside and I was all filled with a big, aching scream that wouldn't come out and I thought I was going to break apart, burst, explode and that's the only way I can give you some idea how I felt at that moment. What would have happened to me, that instant, I don't know, if suddenly Franny hadn't called my name.

She said it very softly, "Don! Don!" but it came through to me and I turned around and I was trembling so my teeth were chattering.

I LOOKED at Franny and she was sitting up on the bed, her eyes still heavy and her lovely mouth a little swollen with sleep. She said: "I was dreaming about you, hon. I was dreaming that you wanted and needed me but I

couldn't get to you. There was a big wall of fire between us that I could see through but couldn't break through. But that was just a dream. It isn't true and you can get to me if you want to, can't you?"

"Yes, angel," I said. "Yes, I can."

I went to her, then.

There's no real way to tell you how it was with us; how it always was from the very first time, three hours after Franny and I first saw each other. I'd had girls before. I'd even known a couple of older women. None of that was anything; it was nowhere.

About the only thing I can say is that with this thing with the two of us, after awhile we both went away somewhere and nothing had ever been, nothing would ever be, except that time right then; it was like being in Heaven forever, those few minutes.

I remember once, afterward, I told Franny: "Wouldn't it be terrific if we could die like that, both together, right at the right moment and maybe by doing that, dying right then, we could capture that moment and hold it forever? Wouldn't that be something?"

She thought about it and then she said: "I do, Don.

Every time, with you, I die and then I'm born all over again because nothing I ever did, nothing that ever happened to me, before that, means anything."

I guess, in a way, she was right about that; that's the way it was with me, too, because this time, afterward, there, that first day in New York together, in that sleazy hotel room, I stopped thinking once more about what had happened with Momma. I was all right again. And right afterward, both of us went to sleep.

Some time later, when I awaked, though, I almost died. I turned to look for Franny and she wasn't there on the bed beside me. The first thing that came to my mind was that she'd run out on me, had taken all the money and left me and decided to run by herself. That was a lousy thing to think about her but I couldn't help it that moment; I did.

Then I dug my hand under the pillow and the money was still there. Then I heard the commode flush and I turned and looked toward the little bathroom and Franny came out. I let out a sigh and fell back onto the bed.

Franny looked at me and sat down on a chair. She was al-

ready bathed and dressed and made-up. She said: "What's the matter? Why'd you look at me so funny when I came out of the john?"

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing's the matter."

SHE DIDN'T say anything else. She sat there, picking at some flakes of old nail polish on her nails. The only thing about Franny that wasn't pretty was her hands. The fingers were too short and it wasn't just that they were so stubby; I don't know what it was, they were just too short. And there wasn't enough nail on them, somehow. Anyhow, I didn't like to look at her hands too much.

When she didn't look up or say anything for quite awhile, I said: "What's wrong, Franny?"

She waited awhile, still not looking up at me, before she said: "I guess I'm scared. This afternoon, all of a sudden, when I woke up, I was scared, Don."

"Don't be," I told her. I said it a little sharply. "Stop being scared."

"What will happen to us if we get caught, though, hon? What'll they do to us?"

If we get caught, I thought.

You mean *when* we get caught.

"So they put us in jail," I said.

"Then what?"

"How do I know?" I said.

"A trial, I guess. For Christ sake, what kind of thing is that to talk about? Let's stop talking about that, will you?"

"I'm sorry." She jumped up and came over to the bed and leaned over me and took hold of my head and hugged it against her. She held my head tightly that way, rocking back and forth a little and I could feel her heart going crazily and her voice sounded funny coming out through her chest as she said:

"Don't let them get us, Don, honey. No matter what happens, don't ever let them get us, please. You hear me? I couldn't stand that. I couldn't. I couldn't."

"All right." I pushed her away. She sat down on the edge of the bed and I looked at her. Even with too much makeup on, she looked very young and lovely. I started to tell her to stop thinking about it, again, about anything like that but then I found myself thinking about it and wondering if they'd get her for the killing, too, when we got caught. Even

though she actually hadn't done any of it. I thought that they probably would because she'd been with me, because she'd run away with me.

"Look," I told her. "The thing to do is get it completely off your mind. You've got to. It didn't *happen*, see. It never did. There was nothing. We didn't do *anything*, you understand what I mean? Get that through your head. Say it, even. Say it right now and then don't ever let yourself think about it again. You can do it. Come on, now, say it: Nothing happened. We didn't do anything. There wasn't anything happened."

"All right, Don," she said. Her eyes kept looking at different places on my face while she talked. "If you say so. There was nothing. Nothing happened. Okay? Now I'm not afraid any more."

The crazy part of that was that then she smiled and it seemed to have worked; she didn't seem to be afraid any more. She stood up and grabbed my arm, started yanking me off the bed.

"Hey, lazy-bones, come on. Out of there and get dressed and then let's go out and see the town. This is it, hon, re-

member? What we've always dreamed about, being here like this, together."

What we've always dreamed about. This is going to be the hard part to tell. I've been putting it off, because of that; I should have started with that part, really but I somehow couldn't. Maybe I can now.

Understand, I'm trying not to make this look as though I'm whining over things that probably couldn't be helped. I'm not. All I want is for everybody to know exactly the way it really was, no better but no worse, either.

You see, the one I called Momma wasn't really my mother. Not that it makes my killing her any less bad. My real mother died when I was a little kid. She was killed in the same hotel fire in St. Louis when my father broke his leg and hurt his back and couldn't dance any more and had to get out of show business. He did that jumping out of a window with me in his arms. I was about six, then.

I DON'T remember too much about the next few years; I mean, details or anything but I know my father was always kind of sad and too quiet. I guess he must've been pretty

nuts about my mother and pretty broke-up about what happened to her. We moved around a lot during those years and I guess things were kind of tough at times but my father was always good to me and I was always happy just so long as he was around.

Then, one day, everything changed. He sat down and talked to me, quietly. He said: "Don, this bouncin' around and changin' schools, missing a lot of time there, isn't any good for a kid. We're goin' to settle somewhere. And I'm going to get you a new mother. A kid needs a woman around. You got to have one."

Somehow, this didn't hit me so hot. I remember I cried about it and told him I didn't want any new mother, everything was fine the way it was and I didn't want anything changed. But after awhile, when I saw it was really what he wanted, what he thought best, I accepted it.

That was when we moved to Florida and my father met this pretty blonde woman and then soon they got married and she came to live with us. She was okay, I guess, especially while my father was alive. She was strict but never

really mean. And she and my father got along all right.

When I said my father got out of show business after he hurt his leg and all, that wasn't quite right. He no longer worked at it but he never left the profession. It was all he talked about and most of our friends were ex-vaudevillians. From as far back as I could remember he'd taught me dance steps, a buck-and-wing, soft shoe routines, things like that. He never got tired of showing me his scrap book with all the pictures and write-ups about him and my mother and their act, Vaughn and Heath. Although Vaudeville was dead then, he kept telling me that someday it would come back. He said that as long as I was sure it was the one thing I wanted more than anything in the world, it sure would be nice if I became an entertainer, too.

Then when I was ten, my father died. He went suddenly. He had what they call a cerebral hemorrhage. That knocked me out. I went a little nuts. I kept running away and I kept trying to fight the cops who'd bring me back and I tried to kill myself with a boy scout knife and like that.

Then all of a sudden I quit all that. I just settled down with this woman I'd gotten in the habit of calling Momma.

We got along all right for a while, although it was a peculiar relationship; it's hard to explain. We saw very little of each other. She went to work right after I came home from school and she was always asleep in the morning when I left. She worked as a barmaid in a Tampa tavern. She wasn't kind to me, especially, nor was she unkind or mean. For a long time I often wondered why she bothered with me at all. Then one time when she'd been drinking she let it out that she got seventy five bucks a month to take care of me, as long as I lived with her, from some insurance my father had taken out back in a period when the act had been making big money. I knew then why she didn't just put me in an orphanage or something.

WHEN I was about fourteen I suddenly grew up or matured or whatever you call it. I wasn't very tall or very husky, in fact I was actually slight but that was as much as I ever grew, physical-

ly. And I started to look at things differently. For the first time I stood up against Momma. That was the beginning of the end, I guess.

I found out then that Momma couldn't stand to be crossed, not to have her own way. Always before, when she refused to let me do something I wanted to, or made me do something I didn't want to, I never really argued with her. Maybe I didn't like it, but I took it silently. But not that day when I was fourteen years old and I let her know about the dancing lessons.

It came over me all of a sudden and it was the first time since my father died that I'd thought about it much, that that was what I was going to be. I was going into show business like my father; I was going to dance like him. There was once again lots of work for specialty acts, vaudeville stuff—in television. So I made up my mind, then. I was going to be a star; I was going to make my old man proud of me.

When I told Momma about this and that I wanted to take lessons, she knocked the whole thing. She said it was stupid, that there was no money, no

future in that kind of thing and besides, it would cost money for lessons and there wasn't any money for that kind of nonsense.

I guess I was pretty fresh but I couldn't help it. I told her: "I see. But there's money for booze for you, every day, though, isn't there. Out of the seventy five bucks a month that's supposed to support me."

She flipped then. She tried to hit me but she only hurt her hand on my arm. I didn't hit back at her. I wanted to but I didn't. She called me every kind of foul name she could think of. I stood there and took it and then when she was all through I told her I didn't need any damn money of hers, I could earn my own.

That day I got a paper route and that week I started taking tap lessons down at the Moran Studios. Al Moran who ran the place was an old vaudevillian. He hadn't known my father personally but he'd heard of him. Al was a nice old guy and he knew his stuff up to a point. He worked hard with me and I guess because of the things my father had taught me when I was very young, I learned unusually

fast. Anyhow, at the end of the first year he starred me in his annual pupils' Revue. I was pretty proud. After two years, he called me into his office one day. By then I'd appeared on local TV shows and won some amateur contests. In his office he told me:

"Don, kid, I can't take any more of your money. You've had it from me. What you need now is to get to New York or Hollywood and get the best from here in."

There was a lot more but that was the gist of it. Of course I got all excited and full of dreams but then when I started to figure out the money it would cost, I calmed down.

That was when I made the full break from Momma, though. I told her what Al Moran had said, how he said that with the proper handling and the right connections I could make a lot of money out of my dancing. She was pretty drunk when I told her that. All she did was cuss me out and rant and rave about even if I *did* have any money I wouldn't waste it on such foolishness, *she'd* see to that. She kept on and on about that. At the time it didn't make

much sense. Later, though, it did. Anyhow, that night she got that drunken foul mouth of hers going just a little too much and I walked out. I walked out because if I'd stayed another minute I'd hit her. I didn't want to hit her. I was afraid of what might happen if I ever started hitting her.

I SLEPT at a friend's house that night. The next day I quit school and got a job. I never went back to Momma's house until that night a few nights ago when I killed her.

I had only one thing in my mind from that time on. I was going to show Momma. I was going to be a dancing star if it killed me. Some day I was going to have thousands of people watching me dance. Every night I went down to Moran's studios and practised, cooked up different routines for myself. Every time I got a chance I appeared on local TV variety programs. After one of these appearances I got my first professional offer. I worked one Saturday night in a Tampa Club. It was a real crummy strip joint, but to me, a seventeen year old kid, that night it looked like one of the

posh Vegas clubs. I danced my heart out for the people there. When I was finished there was only a smattering of applause.

The guy who'd hired me came back to the dressing room, later. I tried not to let him see I'd been crying but I think he knew. He wasn't a bad guy. He rumbled my hair and said:

"You were great, kid, don't let that bunch of schnooks get you down. The thing is, they come here for girlie stuff; they want it even in the variety acts. Get yourself a sexy lookin' little chippy for a partner and work out some routines and then come back and I'll give you some more work."

The trouble was I didn't know any sexy little chippies. I'd been too busy working and practising.

A little while later, though, I met Franny. She got a job as Al Moran's receptionist. Something smashed hard at both of us the moment we set eyes on each other. I took her out after we finished work that night and a couple of hours later we were up in her room, just the two of us and nothing, nobody could have stopped

what happened; it was one of those things that had to be and we both knew it. We were together every possible moment after that.

Then one night at the studios while I was practising and Franny was watching, I taught her a few steps. I got awfully excited at the easy way she caught on. She was a natural; you could tell it right away. With every move she made, untrained as she was, you could tell that she was made to dance. And she loved it. From that time on, she worked with me every night.

It was funny but it was almost like a miracle, as though all the things I'd learned, all the years of practise, came through to her when we worked together. Maybe it was because we were so close to each other in every way. I don't know. All I know is that in six months she was working beautifully with me. And when we went out as a team, we got work in the clubs around Tampa.

That was when we started building the big dream between us. We would save the money we made working weekends at the clubs. When we had enough we'd hit for New York and the big time. We'd make it all the

way, together. We had to. It was a terrible big yen that filled the both of us by then.

It didn't work out that way, though. We never made more than five or ten bucks a night. And most of that we had to blow back into costumes, shoes, to the guy running the band to cook up some simple music arrangement for the act. But we didn't get discouraged. We never even slightly lost that big dream.

THEN, RIGHT after my birthday, my eighteenth birthday, a crazy thing happened.

I was in my room, right after work, getting dressed and ready to meet Franny for dinner, when this guy came to see me. His name was Darcy and he was from the Global Life Insurance Company, and I could tell right away he was a salesman, so I didn't pay him too much mind. I waited for him to finish his spiel so I could tell him, sorry, I wasn't interested and get rid of him. But then he knocked me over. He said:

"Don, I've gone out of my way to look you up tonight because I thought you might be interested in re-investing some of that money with us. I've

got several very good propositions to show you how the money can work for you with—"

"What money?" I cut in.

He looked surprised. "Why the check from your father's insurance we sent you the other day. You did receive it, didn't you?" He laughed. "I figured by now you'd have cashed it and had yourself a little fling with some of the loot and—"

"Insurance? My father's insurance?"

"Of course. You mean to say you don't know about it?"

I shook my head, looking at him dumbly. "My father's been dead for years. Why should I get any insurance from him now?"

"Oh, that's easily explained," he said. "Your father made the terms that the money was to be held in trust for you by us, with accumulating interest at the usual rate, until your eighteenth birthday. It's a fairly common thing. So, of course, on your eighteenth birthday a few days ago, the check was sent to you. I don't understand why you haven't received it and obviously you haven't."

"Where was it sent?"

"Why to the only address

we had, care of your step-mother, I believe she is. Naturally, we didn't know you'd moved from there. I just found that out from a neighbor, tonight, when I stopped by that address to see you. I suppose, what's happened is that she forwarded the letter with the check and for some reason it hasn't reached you, yet."

"How—how much was the check for, Mr. Darcy?"

WHEN HE told me I could hardly believe it. Three thousand, seven hundred and twenty dollars, it totaled, including interest, he said. He said some other things after that but I didn't hear them. The only sound in my head was the ringing sound of those figures. So much money; so God damn much money and it was mine, my money.

Somehow I got rid of Darcy; I don't even know how. Then I finished dressing and went over to Momma's house. She was sitting in the kitchen, guzzling Bourbon and water and she was half stoned already. I didn't waste any time. Right off the bat I said:

"Where's the check?"

She looked at me a long time

from those bleared, little fat-hooded eyes of hers and then she said with a sly grin: "I got it. I got the check, Donald. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried about it," I told her. "I just want it. Let's have the check, will you. I ought to turn you in for opening my mail." The brassy boldness of her was beginning to get me a little excited.

"You couldn't do that, Donald," she said. "I have a right to open your mail until you're twenty one. I'm still your legal guardian, you know."

"Don't make me break-up, laughing. You're not my anything. You never have been."

"Never the less."

"I haven't got time to argue with you. I've got a date. I'm late, now. Give me that check."

For a moment she didn't answer. She was acting real strange, now, sort of nervous and upset; more so than she should have been under the circumstances. Her eyes were looking everywhere but toward mine.

"I've heard about your dates." She sniffed. "You and that girl. Up in her room together, all the time. Everybody's talking about you two."

Crazy darts of white fire began to run across in front of my eyes. For a moment my ears seemed plugged and ringing as though they were full of water. I held onto myself only by thinking about the money, saying it over and over in my mind: *The money, the money, don't let her get you, just remember the money.*

She looked disappointed then, that she hadn't made me flip. She said, softly: "What would you do with that money if I let you have it, Donald?" I began to wonder what was with this 'Donald' bit. I couldn't remember her ever calling me by my name before. "What are your plans?"

"Never mind my plans. The money's mine. My father left it for me and I'm eighteen, now. I want it."

"You'd go running off somewhere with that girl, wouldn't you? You'd blow all that money on your silly dancing. Every nickel would go up the chimney, all wasted. I don't think I can allow that, Donald. Certainly I'm entitled to part of it after all the years I put up with you. If you got your hands on that check I'd have never seen a sou of it."

While she was talking, this time, she kept throwing quick guarded glances toward the kitchen cabinet. I began to get it, then. But I could hardly believe it. I said: "You've already cashed that check, haven't you? You signed my name to it or something. Don't tell me you haven't; I can tell."

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and dabbed perspiration from her forehead with the back of a plump, small white hand. She glowered at me. "All right. What if I have? You can't prove I forged your name. And as a legal guardian I have a right to control all that money. You can't make any trouble for me."

Looking at her, listening to her talk like that I began to feel weak and cold and sick. Softly, I said: "I don't want to make any trouble for you. All I want is to get that money and then never have to look at you again."

I STARTED around the table toward the kitchen cabinet, remembering, now, that she'd once hidden some money she'd won on the horses in a cookie jar on the top shelf. I knew that was where the money was.

She moved very fast for a fat person. I was surprised. She got between me and the cabinet before I could get there. Her hands on my arms were surprisingly strong. But she was breathing so hard she had trouble speaking. "You ain't going to get your hands on that money."

"I don't know what I'll do to you if you don't get out of my way," I told her.

She was looking at my eyes when I said that and I guess she saw something there she didn't like because she took her hands off of me and began to back away. Just then the doorbell rang. We both stood there listening to it. It kept ringing and ringing. Momma looked all washed-out, now, as though she didn't have the strength to go answer it. So I went.

It was Franny. I almost dropped when I saw her. I said: "What are you doing here?"

She took hold of my arms. "Are you all right, hon?"

"Sure, I'm all right."

"I was worried. When you didn't show up for our date—you're never late, you know—I got worried. I went to your place and the landlady said you'd left some time ago and

you seemed all upset, all excited. Well, the only thing I could figure was that something was wrong here, that you'd come here.... You do look sick or something, Don. What is it?"

I suddenly realized that while I was out here, talking, Momma might be hiding the money in a new place where I wouldn't be able to find it. I jabbered something to Franny about Momma and the check and the money and I'm sure she didn't know what I was talking about. Then I pulled her by the hand, back with me to the kitchen.

Momma was still standing there where I'd left her. She was holding her hand over her eyes, breathing very hard. She dropped her hand when we came into the kitchen. She looked at Franny. I said:

"Franny, I'm glad you came. I want you to be a witness to this, in case Momma tries to make any trouble." Then, quickly, almost matter-of-factly, I told Franny the whole thing.

All the time I was telling it, Momma kept looking straight at Franny. I don't remember when I've ever seen so much hatred in a person's face. Then she said: "So you're the one.

You're the little trollop he's been sleeping with, carrying on with. I know what'll happen now. You'll get your dirty whore's hands on that money, won't you?" She began to sob with rage and to sputter. "That's what'll happen. You'll steal the money from him, you little bitch. I know your type, so pretty, so soft-talkin' and dirty, rotten, stinking inside of—"

I didn't hear the rest of it. I got to Momma and then I was shaking her, shaking her like a ragdoll, fat and heavy as she was, and screaming for her to shut up. When I couldn't make her, when she kept on mouthing obscene things about Franny, I slapped her. When she still didn't stop I kept slapping her and when that didn't do any good, I seemed to become somebody else, somebody I had no control of and I started hitting with my fist. But even when the blood was coming from her mouth and nose, she kept screaming things about Franny, so I had to keep hitting her, didn't I? What else was there to do? How else could I shut her up?

AND THEN that part of it was over. It was like waking up out of a nightmare and

being relieved, because although the nightmare was still there in your mind, you could remember everything about it; still it was over, in the past and it wasn't so frightening any more. That's about the only way I can describe it.

I've already told you what happened after that, what Franny and I did then. Because what had happened, Momma being dead and all, didn't change us. We were still the same people; we still had the same dreams; the money was still the same. Don't you see?

Now, looking back, sitting here in the hotel room, scribbling this all down while Franny sits and listens to the radio, I wonder about that, though. I wonder how we could have still gone ahead and done all the things we did. I guess it's something like it would be with somebody who learns they have an incurable disease and not much time to live. Once they get the idea through their head, they just go right ahead and live as much of their lives as they can, the way they want to.

Anyhow, that first night in New York for us, was something hard to describe. There were still some stores open and we dressed up a little. We

ate dinner in the most expensive looking place we could find. Franny almost died when the check was for \$18 and something but then we just laughed about it, because what was eighteen bucks out of three or four thousand. We went to the Palace and watched the acts and afterward, we went around the corner to *Gus And Andy's* for a drink and to gawk at the pictures on the wall of all the old vaudeville greats and to listen to the acrobats and dancers, the comics and ventro's, the MC's and the agents and flacks yacking it up along the bar and at the booths and tables.

Later we went to a couple of clubs, wherever we found one that had a dance act billed. Then we just walked along Broadway and it was still swinging at an hour when the main drag of every other town had long since rolled up the sidewalks. It was a big night. And the days and nights after that were just as big.

Every day, without letting Franny know, I'd go to the out-of-town newsstand on Times Square and get a Tampa paper and look it through carefully. A week went by and there was nothing in the

Tampa paper about us, about Momma and what had happened. So it began to be more and more with us as though it really *had* never happened.

During that week we spent money like it was water. We moved to a good hotel. We bought big wardrobes and spent a hundred bucks on a hair-styling for Franny alone. With that hair-do and in those hip new clothes, she was something to see; I could never get enough of looking at her.

We got an agent. He was a sweet guy name of Nat Suskin. He told us right off: "I wouldn't con you kids. I don't know whether I can do anything for you or not. If I can, it'll take time and money. Dancers are a dime-a-dozen on the Street today. But you're young, attractive and maybe some of that crazy enthusiasm will come through. Then with the right routines, the right outfits to work in, who knows?" He shrugged.

THERE were pictures to be made, a flack who had to be paid for hoking up an impressive background for us, in addition to publicity and taking ads in the trade papers.

There were a million and one other things. Once when I complained mildly to Nat, he said: "What are you talkin', kid? You're gettin' a way easy. You know what it cost to launch a singer or a name band or something like that? Why do you think so many people own a piece of a new star that when he first arrives he hardly sees any of the big cash he earns? It takes dough. But don't worry about it. If you go, what you've spent will be peanuts to what you'll make."

And along with the money, we spent ourselves. We didn't stop for twelve, fourteen hours a day. We both lost weight. Eight straight hours one day in a rehearsal studio, while a choreographer worked out an original routine for us and an arranger cooked up special music to go with it. Then four hours a day after that, just getting the new routines down pat. Then posing for the glossy stills that would be put up outside clubs where we'd appear; costume fittings. It was a crazy, wonderful rat race. Then, eight days after we hit New York, Nat watched us rehearse and told us:

"Okay. I'll get you some work."

It was for that weekend in a club in Queens. "It ain't the Latin Quarter," Nat told us. "And it only pays a hunnert for Friday and Saturday, three shows a night. But if you go, it'll be something better the following weekend. Anyhow, it's the best I can do right now."

That night came, that Friday night. There's no way of telling about it. Have you ever seen those big, wonderful glossies of yourself all over the front of a night club? Have you ever sat sweating it out in a dingy chicken-coop dressing room, waiting for your call and then hearing the MC giving you the big build-up? When we went out there into those blue spots, I don't think I could've made it, if I hadn't seen good old Nat sitting there at a ringside table. I couldn't have moved a foot, otherwise.

When we finished the applause was a little better than it had been in the Tampa creep joints. Back in the dressing room, Franny just cried. Me, I wanted to break down the walls with my fists.

"What do they want, for Christ sake?" I said. "A thou-

sand bucks worth of clothes; a thousand bucks worth of arrangement and special bits. What do they want us to do, eat daggers and swallow fire at the same time."

And all the time it was going through my head: *We flopped. They didn't like us; we didn't go. God, what an egg we dropped. What happened? How can a thing like this happen?*

With that, too, was the kind of sickness that only a million busted dreams can give you.

THEN NAT came back. He let me rant and rave and then he told me quietly: "I know what's wrong. The whole act is too tight. It needs loosening. Next week I'll have Looney go over it with you kids and loosen everything up, spread it a little. It'll be fine, then."

"Oh, sure," I said. "That's fine. That's tremendous. Meanwhile, we stink up the business for five more shows. If they don't throw us out before we can finish."

"Don't be stupid," Nat said. "It wasn't that bad, believe me. The crowd in one of these bush-country joints is always apathetic."

"Apathetic? They were sit-

ting on their hands."

"I know, I know," he said. "Just don't worry about it. Maybe the crowd for the next show will be better."

It wasn't. It was worse. Franny and I were both unnerved, too. We fluffed steps; we made it almost look like a burlesque. I never could figure why the crowd didn't break out laughing. Yet we were working our guts out. Maybe that was it, maybe we were trying too hard. I just don't know. It was one of those things.

After the last show that Friday night, Franny and I really hit bottom. When you do that there's no place else to go; you've got to start up again. So we did. Gradually we became more optimistic. We kept telling each other the things that Nat had told us and when we finally went to sleep we were feeling pretty good once again; we had some confidence back.

The next morning, Saturday, the roof fell in. First Nat called us and told me the club had cancelled for that night. They said we hadn't made it, we needed more polish and they couldn't take a chance with us on a Saturday night.

It was in their contract that they could do that. Nat told me, it wasn't as bad as it sounded, that he still had faith in us and that kind of thing. I thanked him and hung up.

Then I told Franny. I told her about the cancellation. Then I said: "Look, doll, I don't care what happened, what anybody says. We haven't flopped. We'll make it. We're still going to be the biggest, the greatest."

It was all fine talk. The thing was, though, we were down to our last hundred bucks, not counting what we had coming for that one night's work.

Later I went out to bring us back some breakfast. On the way I hit the out of town newsstand and bought a Tampa paper. I looked through it while sitting in the Automat. And this was our day all right. There it was. In yesterday's paper:

**LOCAL WOMAN FOUND
BEATEN TO DEATH;
STEPSON SOUGHT**

APPARENTLY it was an early edition paper and the account wasn't too detailed. I read it as though I was reading about somebody else; somebody I didn't even know.

It didn't hit me at all when I first read it, about how some of the neighbors began to complain about a foul odor coming from the house and the police were called and how they broke in and found Mrs. Amy Vaughn, who had apparently been dead about ten days, as a result of a vicious, bestial beating. It looked funny seeing Momma's full name in print like that and the number and street where our house was located. The last paragraph of the story said that police were searching for Donald A. Vaughn, stepson of the victim, who had not been seen in town, nor returned to his job, since the approximate time of Mrs. Vaughn's death.

On the way back to the hotel, I tried to think what to do. It seemed that Franny and I should run somewhere and hide or something. I should have been scared spitless, but somehow I wasn't. I don't know what I was. I was nothing, I guess.

When I first got back to our room, I didn't say anything to Franny. I wanted to think, first. Yet I didn't seem to be able to think. All that kept going through my head was: *This is it; this is the way it ends. The bouncing of the ball,*

the spinning of the wheel, whatever it is decides these things.

Once, years ago in a sand lot game, I'd been conked by a pitched ball. For a fraction of a second I saw the ball coming at me and knew it was going to hit me and knew it was going to hurt and yet there was nothing I could do about it. I remember that moment seemed like hours I was standing there waiting for the ball to hit. It was almost a relief when it happened. That's about the closest I can describe how this was.

I'd been back in the hotel about an hour when the phone rang. Panic ran through me, taking everything out of me, all my guts, the marrow from my bones, even. I could hardly finally get to the phone and pick it up. Then relief came when I heard Nat Suskin's rasping voice. But not for long.

"For God's sake, kiddo," he said. "Why didn't you tell me? Are you crazy? Are you out of your senses or what?"

"Tell you what, Nat?" I said. But I knew what.

"Oh, my God," he said. "A couple of babies like you two." I could hear then that he was

almost crying. "It can't possibly be true; there must be some mistake. Tell me, Don, that there's some mistake."

I still couldn't answer him.

Then he said: "Some cops were here. Detectives. They've been hitting every agent on the Stem. They had your picture. They said you were from Tampa, Florida and that you were wanted for killing a woman down there, your stepmother. I told them they were crazy. There's got to be some explanation. There is, isn't there, kid?" He was pleading with me.

I took a long, slow breath. "I'm afraid not, Nat. I'm sorry. I could tell you the whole thing but it wouldn't help and there isn't time. Are they coming here?"

"Maybe not right away," he said. "But soon. God help me, I lied for you because I just couldn't believe it, Don and I wanted a chance to talk with you first. I told them I didn't know where you were staying. They said it didn't really matter, they'd find you. They said they'd comb every hotel and rooming house on the island if they had to. They will, too. Don, kiddo, you'd better give yourself up. It'll be better, believe me. You can't get away. Maybe you'd get out of New

York, but you'd be forever running and some day, somewhere...."

"Yeah," I said. "Anyhow, you gave us a little time. Thanks, Nat. I wish I could say more. You've been real people to us. We would've made it with you, I know, if it wasn't for this, it—if... Well, I got to hang up. So long, Nat."

He started to say something else but I guess he was all choked up and couldn't. He hung up.

I WENT over then and sat down on the bed, next to Franny. I put my arms around her and held her hard against me and told her what had happened. She didn't say anything for awhile and then she said: "How long do you think it'll be, hon?"

I shrugged. "A couple of hours, maybe five or six. Who knows."

"What'll we do, just sit here and wait for them? Or shall we try to get away? I'll do whatever, you think best for us, honey."

I hugged her fiercely. "There is no best." And then I began to know the way it had to be. I said: "We've never got drunk together, you know

that? Not really drunk. Let's do that."

She said: "All right, Don," and then I called room service and had them send up a fifth of good liquor and some ice and ginger.

The trouble was, neither of us could get drunk. After several drinks my mind had never been so sharp. I started to think about everything that had happened to me, to us, and I wanted other people to know, too, people like Nat Suskin, so that maybe they could understand a little, anyhow; not sympathize or feel sorry for us; I didn't want that. Because what I did was bad, it was wrong and there's no changing that, what I did to Momma. But the rest of it wasn't, Franny and me, that wasn't bad, nor what we wanted. Probably what I'm trying to say is that except for that few minutes when I went berserk, I wasn't even bad, not like what the newspapers will probably say. And I want somebody to know.

So I started writing this, while Franny and I tried to get drunk, on hotel room stationary with the stinking, scratchy nib pen they give you in the rooms, page after crazy page

of it.

Now that I'm about finished, I know what we're going to do. I'm pretty sure I can talk Franny into it because what else is there, really? And maybe I am a little crazy at this point because we're going to make a production out of it; we're going to draw a crowd, the biggest crowd, that ever watched any act. We'll take our time and do it right on that ledge outside our hotel window.

But I'll have to stop writing, now; I'll have to hurry because no telling how much more time we have until the police get here.....

BELOW them the crowd squirmed and swarmed like some giant live thing pulsing and straining to burst a net enmeshing it; threatening at any moment to break through the chain of desperate police trying to hold them back from the area of the street right under the ledge.

Several old people had fainted but nobody paid any attention to them. They didn't fall; they were wedged too tightly into the throng.

A teen-ager in steel-studded black leather jacket was laughing so hard tears rolled on his cheeks. He kept mouthing some

obscenity over and over, hysterically, but nobody heard him.

Up on the ledge a cop crawled toward the entwined figures writhing in the spotlight glare. He was shouting: "Stop it! You can't do this! Cut it out, you crazy young sons of bitches! What's the matter with you?"

But they couldn't hear him. They didn't hear the terrible orgiastic roar now of the crowd below them, either. They heard only the working sounds of each other; not really hearing them, of course, yet aware of them, knowing them with every fibre of their being.

Then Don did hear Franny cry out against his ear and the next few seconds everything that was in him and of him and was him and always had been him and only him and yet was all other men, too, filled now to uncontrollable bursting.

He screamed: "Oh, my God! Oh, dear, crazy, wonderful God!"

At the same time he pushed against the side of the building with his left hand and rolled them both, easily and suddenly, completely over and off of the ledge.

Every male over ten years old has probably panted over this willowy blonde! Could she be a thief and a killer?

THE GOLDEN VIRGIN



by HARLAN ELLISON

ZAMIRA'S home was just this side of the mountains from Las Vegas. I drove all through the night, just the twin shafts of my headlight beams breaking the solid darkness of Nevada's Fairchild Desert.

I didn't quite know why I'd decided to drive to Fullmoon from Salt Lake City. I'd heard so much about the gorgeous Zamira and her estate, Fullmoon, that somehow it didn't seem right to arrive as hired-help—to be driven there in her

limousine.

Even though I'm an insurance investigator, I don't much like being tagged as a flunky. When they send Jerry Killian out to check a claim, they're sending their highest-paid agent, and it isn't good to let the customers think they're getting just another balding accountant. So I'd left the plane that had flown me in from New York, and hired a car.

Toward afternoon I saw the mountains looming up from the flat ochre of the plain. Nevada in the morning is something special, and under ordinary circumstances, I might have stopped to enjoy the sight.

But I had a three hundred thousand dollar robbery and murder to investigate, and scenery wasn't on my mind at that moment.

ZAMIRA had made her pile in films. Why I bother saying that is foolish. Every male over ten years old has probably seen that willowy blonde on a movie screen at one time or another. And panted over her, if he's healthy!

Her home showed she'd been

influenced by Hollywood. The damned thing sprawled out over two city blocks and had everything from an inlaid Arabic tile swimming pool to a completely-outfitted polo field. With ponies.

I swung in the long drive and tooled the rented Mercury through an acre of carefully-landscaped timber. The house towered up suddenly, and I put my foot on the brake in awe. If it had been built of solid gold, it couldn't have been more imposing. I won't try to describe it; wait till you see it in *Better Homes and Gardens*. The gardens were nice, too.

A doorman stepped off the huge front portico when I pulled up, immediately whisking the Mercury away to God knows where.

I introduced myself past a guard, a doorman second class, a butler, a personal secretary, and a few assorted hangers-on who looked slightly less important. I was finally shown into the living room.

It was a sunken one, and I stood on the top of the steps leading down to it, looking right into Zamira's face. The moment I saw her, I thought two things:

*What a fantastically beautiful creature,
and
Is she a thief and killer?*

SHE WAS more gorgeous than any woman I think I've ever seen. The color of her hair was like a morning sun, with just enough red in the blonde to make her a standout anywhere. She was as long-legged and blue-eyed as I'd seen her in *Night On Willow Beach* or *That Cambridge Woman*. There was something so unearthly beautiful about her, it was like watching a living dream walk toward me.

Many men have dreamed of being near Zamira, and I was living their dream. I was almost speechless; almost, but not quite. I don't like women. I've had my fill of them.

She was walking across the sunken living room toward me, her hand outstretched, and I knew what *she* was seeing. A little shrimp of a guy with a scar down the left side of his face, from the bottom of his eye to the corner of his mouth; a guy with watery grey eyes and a receding hair line; a guy just under five foot five. She was looking at Jerry Killian.

And Jerry Killian was looking at a woman who might have killed her house guest and stolen her own fantastic gold statuette—the Golden Virgin.

"Hello. Miss Zamira? I'm Jerold Killian, from Associated Insurance," I said, almost nastily. I decided being belligerent would be as good as politeness. I wasn't figuring on being here that long. I stepped down into the living-room. She was a good three inches taller than me, and I felt my face burn.

She didn't seem to notice, but took my hand. It was warm as a woman's hand should be, the one she extended.

Then the scar on my face began to itch.

I must have started in surprise, because she gave me an odd look, her lovely features drawing up in question. She didn't say anything, though, and I was glad of that.

"Hello, Mr. Killian. I've been expecting you. Won't you come in; Chief of Police Raines is just finishing up his investigations."

"I'll maybe have some of my own questions to ask," I snapped. She stared at me

coldly for a second, then looked over her shoulder in confusion. I didn't quite know why I was being so unpleasant. Perhaps it was because she was so beautiful and I knew a little character like me didn't have a chance with her. Perhaps it was something else. I don't know.

We started walking across the room, and she tried to start the conversation again, feeling her way as though she were afraid I'd jump at her again. "A terrible thing has happened, as you know, and I hope you'll forgive the way the house looks." She smiled at me warily, and her voice was frankly sincere. Too sincere, perhaps?

I muttered something low and noncommittal. If I hadn't been in this game for twelve years, gathering twelve years worth of cynicism—and if that scar of mine didn't have the habit of itching whenever something was cockeyed, I might have trusted her.

As much as I'll trust any damned woman.

THERE WERE two men in the living-room, sipping at drinks. "Police Chief Raines, Jerold Killian of Associated

Insurance," she introduced us. I shook his hand. He was an overweight, florid sort of fellow; looked like a good, competent cop.

I turned to the other fellow, just as he was rising to shake my hand. "This is my agent, Ralph Cobb. Ralph. Mr. Killian is here to investigate my claim," she said, amiably enough. Cobb pumped my arm a few times in that goddam false camaraderie fashion, and I tagged him at once. One of the thousands of tiny, basketball men that bounce through Hollywood's lower depths. I couldn't stomach him, at once.

"Won't you sit down," said Zamira. Slowly, without my knowing it, my eyes had been drawn back to her. She was all they'd billed her to be. I could see why she had been the cause of innumerable nightclub fights and divorces. I've known men who would have killed for a woman half what she was.

Had *she* killed?

I decided to try answering my own question by asking her one: "Do you have any idea who might have gotten away with the Virgin, Miss Zamira?"

She let a smile flicker across her face and said quickly,

"Why don't you call me Elsa, Mr. Killian? That's my first name, you know."

I nodded my head in acceptance and repeated my question. She pinched her lower lip and stammered, "I—I don't really know *who* it might have been! So many people were here that night. So many people I knew only vaguely."

"Why was that?" I asked, noticing Raines' annoyance. I was probably asking questions he'd already handled. So what? To hell with him; this was *my* check, not his. My company had three hundred thousand in it. All he had was a fat paunch.

"Well, with all the tourists drawn to the gambling in Las Vegas, and those horrible atomic bomb tests around here, a host of people from all over the world have been drawn to this area. They're following the money, I suppose, and, well, any number of questionable people might have been about. You understand, don't you?" She had a faint European accent—too faint to identify accurately—but her tone was thoughtful and honest. Was the woman a marvelous actress, too?

I softened my own tone.

"Yes, I understand perfectly."

We talked for another half hour, and I re-asked the same questions again and again, in different ways. She answered the same each time, as best she could. Sometimes she'd pause to think, usually she'd answer straightforwardly.

What had happened was fairly simple: the Golden Virgin was a solid gold statuette, about two feet high (a lot shorter than me, I thought, but if *I* disappeared. I wonder how many people would run around trying to find me!), which was supposedly from ancient Phoenicia. It had been insured over two years ago, when Zamira had been riding the crest of her popularity and had built Fullmoon as a retreat.

She'd never really exhibited it, but two nights before it had been placed in a glass case atop the big table in the living-room, for show during a dinner party. About two o'clock the next morning the party had broken up and all but two of the guests had gone home. They were Cobb and a bit player named Carol Bentley.

I'd remembered Bentley from his pictures in the papers. He'd been in any num-

ber of nightclub brawls and was quite the rake. One of the cleft-chin, charcoal-grey haired breed of muscle-chested lads. *Probably her lover*, I mused ruefully. *It's guys like me that get the leftovers after guys like Bentley get the Zamiras!*

Cobb and Bentley had taken guest rooms, and sometime around five-thirty Zamira had been awakened by a splintering of glass and a shot. She'd slipped on a robe and come downstairs to find Bentley with a bullet in his kisser and the Golden Virgin stolen. That was her story, and that was all she knew. Cobb's yarn was basically the same.

They had called the police, and they had come out almost immediately from Las Vegas. The gun had been unregistered, and clean of prints. That was the story, and there seemed no more anyone could find out. The Virgin was missing, Miss Zamira was distraught, and Associated was out three hundred thousand bucks.

JUST AS I was heading into the fourth repetition of the story, checking minor points, the butler came in, announcing dinner. Raines heaved himself off the sofa, setting his empty

glass down, and said he'd be back the next morning to clean things out of the way. Elsa Zamira asked him if he'd like to stay for dinner but Raines declined, thanked her and waddled out.

"Shall we go in, Mr. Killian?" she asked, smiling.

I indicated I'd follow her, but she took my arm, and I found myself walking into the dining room with her. Cobb followed at a reasonable distance, and I could imagine the glowering cloud on his face.

"Where were the servants that night?" I asked, pulling out a chair for her.

She looked up at me, and a faint light of annoyance seemed to be dying in her eyes. "Why, I let them go for the night. I do that once a week. It lets them get into town. We're rather secluded here."

"Yes, I know," I replied, sitting down across from her. I decided I'd been too much the bastard to the woman. She was trying to be pleasant to me, so I figured I'd be civil to her. "Don't these atomic tests bother you?" I began, making idle conversation. "They're only about a hundred miles West of here, aren't they? The testing grounds, I

mean?"

She gave a characteristic wave of her hand. One I'd grown used to seeing her use in her pictures. It signified annoyance and exasperation. "Good Lord, yes! All this talk about radiation and poisoning water, and all sorts of things; it scares me silly. Well," she admitted, "I've been thinking of moving out of Fullmoon for quite some time. I want to get back to the coast. This flying back and forth between pictures is a nuisance, really!"

I smiled, and laughed shortly. Then I looked at her carefully, and one of those investigators hunches I have once in a while hit me. This woman was putting on an act. Something was on her mind. The scar began to itch again for the second time since I'd entered Fullmoon.

I dug at my grapefruit with belligerence.

"Why do you dislike me, Mr. Killian?" she asked. It took me by surprise, and I didn't look up.

"What makes you think that, Miss Zamira?" I answered, the nasty tone back in my voice.

She didn't answer, and I didn't say anything more. She

should know how I hate women! She was too smart. She was the kind of woman I'd come to fear—*because* they were too smart. Yeah, something was phoney with this dame!

The dinner went badly.

I was wondering what results I'd get if I called her a liar and a murderess to her face.

WE SAID our goodnights at eleven o'clock, through the dregs of brandy cordials. Cobb rolled from side-to-side as he climbed the stairs out of sight. I looked at Elsa Zamira. "You're a strange fellow," she said.

"Yeah, strange," I replied, cynically, snorting a half-laugh.

"What makes you so bitter?" she asked. "Who hurt you?"

I felt myself grow red again, and the scar under my eye quivered as though it were a tic, not a scar. "Look, lady," I snapped, rising, "I'm just another lousy hired hand, see! I'm here to check on a bauble you've lost, and I'd appreciate it if you'd stick your nose the hell out of my business. I appreciate your hospitality, but

would you mind going the hell to bed!"

She stared at me silently for another moment, then turned quickly and went upstairs. I thought I heard a muted, "Good night," float down from upstairs, but I couldn't be sure.

I sank back into the easy chair, cupping the brandy snifter in a suddenly-shaking hand. Why had I jumped her like that? Was I so attracted to Elsa Zamira that I had to bark at her every time she spoke to me?

I sat there for another five minutes, considering what I knew for certain and what I guessed.

I'm an insurance investigator. I've been in the business twelve years, and I've picked up a few tricks. I can tell when someone has something on their mind. Elsa Zamira was one of those. She had something big on *her* mind—I wasn't sure, but it might be robbery and murder.

I was still in the dark, but that itching scar was starting to make me nervous for some light on the subject.

I ran a finger down the furrowed flesh. It was smooth and rolled, and it made my

thoughts of Elsa Zamira tie in with another girl, a long time ago. A girl with a beer can opener and a big hate for me. That had been the last girl for a long time. My work had taken my love from then on in.

Until today. Now I found the other girl's face slowly dimming, and the blue-eyed picture of Zamira taking its place. I was scared, and I kicked myself mentally. *You're a shrimp and an ugly, cynical little nothing, Killian, I prod-ded myself. If she has anything to do with you, it'll be to make you pass that claim through quicker!*

I felt myself sinking under with self-pity and self-hate, and it's at moments like that, when I want to cry. I pushed myself out of the chair, and started to go upstairs to bed. I wanted to pass this claim out and leave Zamira's house as quickly as I could.

I WAS passing Cobb's room, when I heard voices from inside. I slipped into the empty room next door and put my ear against the wall. There was only one reason I did it: the second I'd heard the voices—that scar had started in

again. I've never ignored a hunch that started with that scar-itch.

It was Zamira and Cobb. They were talking about me.

"Do you think he suspects anything?" Cobb was asking.

"Who can tell?" Zamira answered, laconically. She had a strange tone to her voice.

"What's the matter with you?" Cobb snapped at her.

"I just don't like all this. The idea wasn't a bad one to begin with, but why did Bentley have to go?" She was angry, and I could imagine her white fists clenched as she spoke to the slippery little agent.

"If he hadn't been prowling, trying to get into your bedroom; if he'd gone back to Vegas with the rest of them instead of hanging around here, he wouldn't be dead!" Cobb pointed out, a rasp in his voice.

I suddenly realized something. The instant I knew Bentley had not been her lover, a strange feeling came over me. I wasn't certain, but I was afraid I was falling in love with Elsa Zamira.

I felt guilty about listening, but this was what I'd been sent out here to find, and now that

I'd found it, I was drawn forward, forced to get everything they were saying.

But they were finishing. Cobb was saying, "You go on back to bed now. We'll keep the Virgin where it is till the heat is off, then we can get it melted down safely. Along with the insurance money, it'll clear all our debts in Vegas!"

She said something then; I didn't catch it.

I was tight in the chest. This lovely woman *was* a thief, and perhaps a murderess. At least a willing accomplice.

The world fell down a hole once more. *That's your luck, Jerry Killian*, I pitied myself.

I waited till Zamira had gone past, then I slipped into my own room.

In the dark I stood and bit my lip. Any ideas I'd had about Zamira and myself were dead once again. She was a thief, and I was an insurance agent. My job was to find the Golden Virgin and get her slapped behind bars.

But where was the Virgin?

THE MOONLIGHT filtering through the French windows cast long silver shadows across the bed. Zamira lay asleep, one slim, white arm

thrown across her face. The evening was warm and she had slipped the covers down. The press releases were on the level: *Zamira does sleep in the row*, I thought.

I dragged my eyes away from that silken body, most reluctantly, and looked around the room. I didn't quite know why I'd come in here. I told myself it was because I had to find the Virgin to pin anything on them. They'd hidden it somewhere around here, and I had to get it.

To put Zamira in prison. Or get her executed.

Is that what you want to do? I asked myself. *Oh, shut your goddam mouth!* I screamed at myself. *She's a murderess! She doesn't mean anything to you! She wouldn't even give you a tumble.* Then, illogically, the thought ran through my head, so typical of me when I'm in that kind of mood: *you're too short!*

I tore my mind off my thoughts, and started looking through the room. It was illogical, hunting then, and there, but somehow, I wanted to be there, right then.

I was riffling the huge closet, searching behind the rack of gowns when she called

me: "I was wondering when you'd come in, Mr. Killian."

I spun around. She was still lying in the same position, but the hand had dropped away from her eyes. It was now held out toward me. I felt my throat go dry on me, my knees become rubbery. This was invitation, and no chance for misinterpretation.

I stood up slowly and walked toward the bed. She was smiling. In the moonlight, I don't think any painter, no matter how great, could have captured that beauty. The woman was a flawless piece of art to begin with, but the shadowy lustre of the moonlight made her a goddess.

"What were you looking for in there, Mr. Killian?" she asked. Her eyes weren't mocking, just sincere, and a bit hurt. They were glittering.

"The—the Virgin?" I answered, not even knowing I'd given the answer as a tremulous question.

"Which one... Jerry?"

I couldn't stop myself. The constriction of my throat caught at me, and my thoughts pounded back and forth in my skull. Was it possible? Was it possible that this woman, this idol of millions, found me in-

teresting? She'd only known me a few hours, yet...

The idea of making love to Zamira was fantastic!

She raised both arms to me, then, and the muscles of her body tightened. I sat down on the edge of the bed. She ran slim, warm fingers over my arm.

I leaned down, my face close to hers. Her lips parted, but before I could bring mine down to hers, I heard myself saying, "Did you kill Bentley and steal the Virgin, Elsa?"

I felt her start and tighten nervously. She turned her head slightly, disturbing the golden cloud of her hair on the pillow. "Do you think I did, Jerry?" she asked.

I couldn't answer. "Does it matter, then?" she said. She seemed unconcerned at what I'd said.

Her arms slipped around my neck, smoothly. She pulled me down to her. The last thing I heard her say was, "Does it matter anyhow... Jerry?"

Right then, I wouldn't have cared if she'd been Lucretia Borgia!

BUT THE next morning was something different. I cared in a big way. Not only

had the woman stolen a statuette that would cost my company three hundred thousand dollars and murdered an innocent person in doing it, but she'd made me forget my job. Made me want to toss it up, just for one night of God-wonderful love with her.

I didn't know what to do.

I knew she'd done it. For God's sake, I'd heard them say they'd done it! But I couldn't prove it. I didn't have any real proof. The Virgin was hidden somewhere, and on an estate as big as Fullmoon, the chances of finding it were slim. Very slim.

I might have passed the claim through, forgotten what I'd heard, but for something that happened at breakfast.

"HOW DID you sleep, Mr. Killian?" inquired Cobb, a jellied smile pasted on his lips.

"All right, I suppose," I replied.

"And you?" inquired Zamira, looking at Cobb with a sharp expression.

"Fine, fine. Just fine!" answered Cobb, looking sorry he'd started the conversation. He subsided into his bowl of corn flakes, with a sigh and

an anxious spoon.

"How long can you stay, Jerry?" asked Zamira quietly.

I looked up quickly. I hadn't been at all sure the night before wasn't a dream—or a nightmare. I'd found a woman, and yet she was a killer. I didn't know what to do. If it had been a dream, things might have been easier.

"Not too long," I answered. "Perhaps I'd best get back tomorrow or the day after." I smiled across at her.

"Fine, fine!" boomed Cobb. "You two youngsters can get together and go visit Vegas. Perhaps you'll fall in love—who knows!" He was chuckling like an old granddaddy, and I dropped my spoon.

It hit me all at once. *They were making fun of me!* A woman like Zamira didn't need any sawed-off lover like myself. She had continents at her feet. There could only be one reason she was bothering with me. They were afraid I knew what I knew, and wanted me on their side.

She was willing to give me her body in compromise. I'd thought I wanted her love—but she'd only given me her body!

I full-fisted my napkin off

my lap and threw it into my cereal bowl. I shoved my chair back and started to leave.

"Jerry! Aren't you going to finish?" she said, worriedly.

"I'm not hungry!" I tossed back, as I went through the front door.

I WAITED out front till Raines showed up. I'd finally gotten things straightened out in my mind. For murder and robbery there were excuses. There are men who can forgive these things. For a while I'd been one of those men.

But there is no excusing being made a fool. They should have known better. A man can tolerate almost anything but being shown he is a clown when tempted by a beautiful face!

That's when he'll stop at nothing to get revenge!

I'd decided I was going to get Elsa Zamira if it took me the next ten thousand years. But I didn't think it would. By the time Raines pulled up in front, I had an idea formed—from bitterness and anger—and wanted to pull it off.

I took the police chief aside and asked him if he could get me something. He said he

could if I needed it, but what for? I told him, I needed it and just to trust me.

"How soon can I have the thing?" I asked.

"Just as soon as I can get a man into town to find one. Why?" He was worried. He didn't like me. I'd been unnecessarily rude to Zamira the night before, and he didn't care for me one bit.

I put him off with a gesture, re-asserted Associated's interest in the case, and said, "I think I can take this case up for you this morning, if you let me play it my way."

He looked down at me and scratched the back of his fat neck, giving me an argument, not knowing what I had in mind. I argued a little longer, and a little better, and finally he gave in, dispatching the other cop with him into town to locate what I'd asked for.

I told him I'd drive him into town in my Mercury, and we went in to take our leave of Miss Zamira and her Fullmoon.

"I'm sorry I can't stay longer, Elsa," I said, holding her warm hands in my own. We stood outside the front door, at the edge of the portico. The morning sun high-

lighted her golden hair.

There were tears at the corners of her eyes, and I didn't know whether to pull her to me and kiss her, or smash that gorgeous face. But I was too far into this thing, now. I had to go through with it. I knew I would, anyhow.

She shouldn't have made a fool of me!

"I'm sorry, too, Jerry. Perhaps you can come back again sometime. *Soon.*"

I played my part well. She never suspected, which was just the way I wanted it. "Perhaps someday. I'll put through the clearance on that claim, of course. You'll get your check in a week or so." She thanked me, gave me a brief kiss on the cheek—for which she didn't have to bed—drawing an astonished look from Raines, and said goodbye.

She'd let me make love to her, and she'd thought it would wipe out any suspicions I'd had. She was wrong—so wrong.

WE DROVE away from Fullmoon, and Raines kept looking over at me strangely.

"You're the first man I've ever seen that woman really

sorry to have leave, Killian," he said. He seemed concerned. I looked over at him quickly, just as he said, "She loves you, Killian." The way he said it, made me think of steel rending. Raines was a victim of the Zamira charm, too. I felt sorry, sorry, sorry for him. I knew just how he felt!

We drove into the next town, and found the cop Raines had sent after my gadget.

I took the hook-in mike, then started giving the Chief instructions. I could see he didn't like this whole business, particularly my telling him what to do next, but I'd promised results, and they were up against a brick wall otherwise, so he was willing to gamble.

"Now in about two hours, I want your men to be all set up in roadblocks across the highway from Las Vegas. When Zamira and Cobb come through, stop her and hold her. Check the stuff in the car—you'll find the Golden Virgin."

"How do you know?" he asked belligerently.

"Just bet that I know, Raines," I snapped. "I don't play if I don't know how to

win," I added.

"Well you'd better, Killian," he replied with an unpleasant tone in his voice. "I don't like you, Killian. You know that. I don't like the way you operate, and I don't like the way you treat people. So you'd better come up with a winner, or I'll make sure you're really *out!*"

I grinned at him nastily, hopped back into the Mercury and roared out of town, back toward Fullmoon.

I LEFT the car a half-mile down the road and walked the rest of the way to the estate. I came in with the house blocking me off from anyone's sight, and in a few minutes was at the window.

I'd made sure it was unlocked before I'd left the first time that morning.

Without any noise—a small man can be quieter than you think—I slipped inside. The radio was on a bookshelf.

I hooked in the trick microphone, cutting it into the radio speaker. I hid the trailing wire behind the bookcase and threw the mike out the window. Then I had to do some fast acrobatics. I turned on the radio—loud!—and dove out the

window. I was on my feet, and had the window slammed shut before the radio had warmed enough to send the blast throughtout the house.

I unwound the rest of the wire, taking me around the corner of the house, and listened for any decrease in volume. I heard high-heels tapping on the inlaid oak floor, and the music from the radio started to die away. Then I cut in, using a deeper voice, blanking out the music, and beginning, "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a special..."

I GOT there a few minutes after it happened, and Raines told me later what had occurred.

Zamira had come barreling down the highway, going at least ninety-five in her souped-up sportster. When she'd seen the road-block, Raines said, he could see her eyes get big and white. Then Cobb had tried to grab the wheel away from her. She'd tried to slow, but he made her try to run the barricade!

The car piled into the blockade, Zamira lost control of the wheel—hell, at ninety-five who could have held it?—and

roared off the highway, onto the desert.

The wheels had sunk into the soft sand, and she'd turned over, still doing a good eighty per. By the time we could get near the car, close enough behind wet tarpaulins, close enough for me to burn my arms and face dragging Zamira from the wreckage, they were both pretty far gone.

They dragged Cobb out and laid him down on the sand. I didn't know what to do with Zamira. I was going crazy! The fire had burned off her hair, her face was black and blistered. I found myself rocking back and forth, with her head in my lap, crying like a child.

Raines told me later—though I didn't hear her—she'd spoken my name before she'd died.

After they took her and Cobb away, and I'd sunk into the encircling arm of Raines, I stared at the car. It seemed to be a symbol. No phoenix would rise from those flames. After a while the fire died away and I could see the Golden Virgin, lying amidst the wreckage, slowly melting into a puddle of golden beauty.

RAINES sat across from me in the diner, nursing a thick coffee mug. His eyes were very sad, and very solemn. "Want to tell me what you did, just for the record, Killian? What made her do it? She was in the clear all the way; we couldn't have pinned a thing on her!"

I wiped at my eyes and leaned back. The burns on my hands still hurt, even through the ointments, but I hardly felt it. I'd just come back from the morgue, and seen what was left of Elsa Zamira. If I'd known she would have wound up that way, I'd never have done it. I'd have thrown *myself* into a fire first!

"If you check," I said, quietly, "you'll find they were in debt quite heavily. In Vegas. Fullmoon was probably in hock already, and they were getting desperate." I choked up, then, and Raines carried the story on.

"They planned to steal the Virgin, but Bentley heard them breaking the glass, setting up the deal, and came downstairs. One of them shot him, then they called us. They hid the Virgin, figuring to get both the insurance and the value from the statuette itself, later.

Right?" I nodded.

He was looking at me strangely again.

"But what made her break and run, Killian?" he asked, doggedly. His tone was hard.

"I gave her a spot announcement on the radio with that hook-in mike. She had to get away from Fullmoon quickly, and took the most valuable things she had." I couldn't talk much more, I knew. I hoped he was through asking questions.

He had just one more.

"What did the announcement say, Killian?"

I frowned again, the picture of Zamira coming to me. First Zamira in Fullmoon, then Zamira in her bed with the moonlight washing her, then Zamira in the morgue. I slammed my face into my palms.

"*What did the announcement say, Killian!*" Raines snapped.

"I reported they'd miscalculated at the testing grounds. She thought they'd exploded an A-bomb just over the mountains. She was terrified of the things, and got away as fast as she could."

He stood up, shoving the table away from him. The coffee mug teetered and fell,

spilling its contents all over the floor. "How would I know she'd try to run the barricade?" I asked him, and I felt my throat choking again.

"No way, Killian," he answered. But he said it so cold, I knew what he was thinking.

"She was a murderess!" I almost screamed.

"Yeah, murderess," he answered, staring at me with ice in his eyes. "She loved you, Killian."

"No, no! No, she didn't! She was making a fool of me because I'm small and ugly

and she had..."

He looked down at me, and I could read all the things that were on his face. "You're a sick boy, Killian," he said.

"The job got done, didn't it?" I said, half in defense.

He looked at me, and the words came out slowly, an eternity between them. "Yeah, done," he said.

He walked away. I heard the screen door slam.

It was all right for him to pity me. He, at least, could walk away from it.

THE END

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SIXTH KILL



by NORMAN STRUBER

THE BLONDE dressed quickly and stood before the mirrored bureau coloring her face with lipstick and powder. He propped himself up in the bed and watched her approvingly, smiling contentment at having his money's worth

for once. The girl snapped her pocketbook shut, slipped into a jacket and sauntered over to him. A subtle glint of satisfaction shone in her eyes, too.

"It's been fun, Al," she said, smiling down at him sul-

trily.

"It was expensive."

"Complaining?"

"I haven't got the strength," he chuckled lightly.

She stood there admiring his physique for a moment, one hand propped on her hip, a proud expression on her face, then she turned and swayed full hips at him as she walked to the door. "Look me up when you're passing this way again, Al," she tossed over her shoulder.

"I'll do that."

She opened the door, paused and glanced back at him. "Just ask the room clerk for me. I'll be around."

He nodded. "Okay."

"The others are hardly worth your time."

"I know."

She waved and closed the door softly behind her. As soon as she'd left he reached over to the night table and lifted the phone off the hook.

"Yes, sir?" the voice answered.

"Bring me a bottle of beer."

"Just one?"

"Just one."

"Right away, sir."

He hung up and went to the bathroom and showered. He was dressing when the knock

sounded on the door. "Come in," he called.

The pimply-faced room clerk entered and set the tray with the beer down on the bureau, surprised and visibly delighted as he was handed a dollar bill and told to keep the change. "Thanks very much, Mr. Himble." He grinned sheepishly, knowingly. "Was... was everything all right, sir?"

"Just fine," he said, pouring himself a glass of beer and quenching his dryness.

The clerk stood there, his eyes searching the room awkwardly. "Uh... will that be all, Mr. Himble?"

"That's all."

The youth went to the door, hesitated and looked at him questioningly, watching him as he took his shirt off the chair and put it on.

"Anything wrong, sonny?"

"Well, no, sir. I mean, I was just wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"Uh... the girl I was wondering why she's gone already."

"She was paid, if that's what's you're worried about."

"Then everything was...?"

"I have to leave now."

"Oh. Oh, I see. Well, I'm

sorry to hear that, Mr. Himble. I hope you'll be coming back to Lakeside again, soon."

"Why?"

"Well, I..."

"So you can collect your twenty percent?"

The youth's face reddened as his hand fumbled for the doorknob behind him. "Uh... well... good night, sir."

He smiled as the clerk closed the door, walking over to the bureau and putting on his tie. He was big and had to stoop a few inches in order to watch himself in the mirror. He combed his thick, wavy hair, still smiling, unconsciously appraising his rugged, handsome features.

After he'd finished dressing he removed all his clothes from the bureau drawers and packed them in his suitcase. He took the newspaper off the chair to wrap around his spare shoes packing them on top of the other clothing. The bold headlines on the front page caught his eye and he read with mild interest: *MAD-DOG KILLER STRIKES AGAIN*. The sub-headline went on: *FIFTH VICTIM OF BRUTAL STABBING FOUND IN DITCH NEAR U.S. 19, LAKESIDE*.

...have been no solid clues, leaving Lakeside and State Police baffled as to the identity of the knife-wielding killer. Unable to establish a plausible motive for the wanton murders, police believe the killer may be a psychopath with an obsession to kill. All local residents are warned...

He stopped reading, wrapped the shoes, packed them and snapped the suitcase closed. Lighting a cigarette, he went over and picked up the phone again.

"Yes, sir?" the room clerk answered.

"I want long distance. I'll pay for it on my way out."

"Yes, sir."

He waited and soon the operator clicked on. "Long distance," she sang.

"I want to call person to person to Mrs. Lawrence Cartwright in Tampa. The number is 4-3269."

"Your number, please?"

"Lakeside 9567."

"Thank you, sir. Hold on please."

The phone clicked a few times and in a little while he heard the phone buzz on the other end of the line.

"Hello," the woman's voice answered.

"Hello, Diane. How are you?"

"Larry, darling! It's so good to hear your voice! I was worried about you. You haven't called since..."

"I've been very busy, Diane."

"Oh. I suppose that's good...but the children and I miss you so much, Larry. When...when do you think..."

"I'll be home in a day or two. I'll call again."

"Wonderful! I'll tell the children. Where are you now, Larry?"

"La...Lanesville. One of my accounts..."

"Lanesville? Where's that?"

"Oh, it's..."

"Sounds like a real hick town."

"Yes. It is."

"Poor darling. You probably don't know what to do with yourself evenings."

"Well, I read a lot and..."

"Larry, dear?"

"Yes?"

"Do you miss us as much as we miss you?"

"Of course, Diane."

"I'm glad. I've been thinking a lot about that argument we had before you left, and I..."

"I have to hang up now, Diane."

"But you just..."

"I'm calling from the home of this new account. I don't want to overdo it."

"Oh...well, take care of yourself, darling."

"I will. Goodbye, Diane."

"Good ... goodbye, Larry."

HE HUNG up and stood there for a moment with his hand resting on the receiver. Suddenly remembering that he'd forgotten something, he went to the bathroom. The pearl-handled razor was laying on the glass shelf above the sink, where he'd left it. He washed and dried the blade carefully, then went back and picked up the suitcase, dropping the closed razor in the side pocket of his suit jacket. He went around to the motel office, paid the phone bill, then got into his car and headed south on U.S. 19. Three miles down he was forced to stop at a police road bloc. Calmly, he eased the car forward and pulled up beside one of the state troopers. He blinked as the searchlight flashed across his face.

"License and registration,

please," the trooper said.

He took them out of his wallet and handed them to the trooper. "What's wrong, officer?"

"Don't you read the papers, buddie?"

"I've been traveling all day."

The trooper examined the license forms under his flashlight. "There's a killer on the loose," he said without looking up.

"Oh...oh, yes. I *did* read something about it. I forgot for the moment. He's still on the prowl, eh?"

"That's right," the trooper answered walking to the rear of the car and checking the license plates. He came back shortly and asked, "Do you have some other identification?"

He laughed. "Do I look like some crazy killer?"

"I wouldn't know. I never saw one. If you'll show me some other ident..."

"Sure, sure." He began removing some other papers from his wallet. "What would you like, officer? Elks membership card, Naval Reserve, Democratic club...?"

"Let's see what you have."

He handed six cards to the

trooper and watched the young officer's face with casual amusement. "Okay, sir," the trooper said after examining the cards, returning them to him with the driver's license and car registration. He pocketed the papers and the wallet, smiling a little. "Say, what does this killer look like, anyway?" he asked.

"We don't know yet."

"Hell of a thing. What are you stopping cars for if you don't even know what the guy looks like?"

The trooper looked annoyed. "Do we butt into your business, buddie?"

He smiled. "Just wanted to know if you had a description, so's I could be on the lookout. You know."

"The only people who know what the killer looks like are dead."

"That's a happy thought."

"You'll have to move along now," the trooper said impatiently. "There's cars behind you."

"Sure." He released the handbrake and moved ahead slowly. "Good night, officer."

It was 10 P.M. and twenty miles further when he pulled off the highway and stopped in front of a diner. He went

inside and sat at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee, black. As he'd come in, his eyes were quick to notice the girl sitting alone in a booth diagonal to him, and now, sipping the coffee he turned part ways to get a better look at her. She had jet black hair that glistened, and hung almost to her shoulders, sharply contrasting the alabaster white of her face. She held a cup to her deep red lips, looking up at him with quick eyes that glittered like rare emeralds. She smiled at him nervously as she set the cup down.

He returned the smile and casually lighted a cigarette. His eyes scanned her nyloned legs under the table, admiringly, then slowly, unobtrusively, he got up and walked over to her. The few other people in the diner went about their eating disinterestedly.

He slid into the seat opposite the girl, entranced by the perfect regality of her face, the bright, rare quality of her green eyes. Her long lashes fluttered downward momentarily, but she did not protest the intrusion.

"Hello," he said quietly, smiling as pleasantly as he could.

She looked up slowly. "How...how do you do?" Her voice had a gentle ringing quality about it.

"My name is, Al."

She smiled and flushed somewhat, started to speak, then hesitated.

"Shall I try to guess your name?" he grinned. "I'll bet it's Suzanne, or Claudette, or Gabrielle, or maybe..."

"Michele," she offered softly.

He grinned broadly. "I was in the right country, wasn't I?"

She nodded. "My...mother and father were French."

"Mm-huh."

"Are you French?" she asked.

"No. I'm a mixture of a dozen or more varieties." He watched her face and added, "Sort of a bastard, you might say."

Pink colored her high cheeks for an instant, then her mouth flicked into a smile as she picked up her coffee. It was then that his eyes left her face briefly and noticed the small leather suitcase on the seat beside her.

"Traveling?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Alone?"

She nodded.

"Driving?"

"I...I don't have a car."

He smiled wittingly. "Hitchhiking your way, huh?"

She set the cup down, nodding embarrassment.

"I'm on my way South. I'd be glad to give you a lift if you're headed that way."

She looked up at him. "I... I don't know."

"Don't know if you're going South?"

"I...I don't know if I should go with you."

He laughed abortively. "I look harmless enough, don't I?"

"Well, I..."

"Oh, come on," he coaxed. "We can both use some company."

She looked down hesitantly, her lips trembling a little, and then she said. "All...all right."

"Good," he exulted.

He paid for their coffees and carried her bag out to the car. She slid into the front seat as he opened the door for her and then went around back and put her bag in the trunk.

"Why did you do that," she asked as he got in behind the wheel.

He started the car and

backed around, pulled onto the highway, thinking. "Do what?"

"My suitcase. Why did you put it in the trunk?"

"Oh, *that*," he laughed. "Isn't that the usual place for luggage?"

After a moment she said. "Yes. I suppose so. My mother and father always used to put their luggage in the trunk."

"There. You see? Then it's all right, isn't it?"

"Yes." She glanced over at him from her position tight against the door. "I...I haven't seen my mother and father for a long time. A very long time. It must be more than two months now."

"Going to visit them?"

"No. They're dead."

He clucked his tongue. "That's too bad."

"They were killed near here. On the highway."

"That so?" he said shrugging his jaw.

"Yes."

He looked over at her, his eyes quickly moving up from her curving legs to the firm cones of her breasts. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"A...a little."

"Now, that's silly," he chuckled. "Do I look like the

kind of a guy who'd take advantage of a girl?"

She didn't answer.

"Come on, Michele," he said reaching for her hand. "Don't be like that. Move closer."

She pulled the opened coat around herself demurely, then quietly, she moved closer to him, her eyes fastened to his face.

"Oh, you can do better than that," he grinned, putting his arm around her and gently pulling her closer. Her thigh pressed against his leg and he felt the delicate warmth of her perfume. His hand tightened around her shoulder as he drove with one arm, holding his speed down to fifty.

"Now, isn't this much better, Michele?"

"My...my father used to hold me like this...when...when I was a little girl."

He tried to hold back his laughter. "No father ever held his daughter like this, kid."

Her eyes searched his face, puzzled. "It...it was a very long time ago. When I was a little girl. Then they...they were killed. My mother and father were..."

"So you told me." He saw the dirt side road then, lead-

ing off into the forest. He slowed the car carefully and casually turned off the highway. The girl stiffened in his arm. "Wh...where are we going?"

He traveled a few hundred feet up the road then swerved off into the brush. He set the handbrake and switched off the lights, turned and put his other arm around her. "We can talk here," he said smoothly. "It was a little awkward the other way."

Her eyes widened abruptly, staring up at him, flashing brightly in the moonlight. "What are you going to do?"

He cupped both hands around her face. "There, there now, Michele. Just relax, honey. No one's going to hurt you." He grinned and brought his mouth close to hers. "You're a pretty little thing. You know? Real pretty. Those eyes. I swear I've never seen eyes like..."

"I want to go home. I want my mother and father."

"Oh, come on. Knock it off, will you? You're old enough to..."

"They were killed. A reckless driver ran into them and they were killed.

"Ahh, for Christ's sa..."

Her eyes flashed up at him, widening like huge green saucers, owlike, staring unblinking. "You killed them, didn't you?"

"Huh?"

"You were driving the car that killed them weren't you? Back there, near the diner. *You* killed them. You and the others. You and the other reckless drivers."

He let go of her faece suddenly and gaped at her, bewildered. "What others?" he asked, his throat tightening, his body stiffening, in the shadows not seeing the way her hand moved slowly toward her coat pocket.

"They tried to deny it, but *I* knew," she told him, her voice beginning to rasp, her breath quickening, her face quivering. "You'll try to deny it, too, but it won't do you

any good."

"Wh...what the hell are you talking about...?"

"Stop it!" she screamed suddenly. "Stop it! Don't deny it! You killed them! You and the others!"

"I..."

The knife moved quickly from the darkness and lunged into his chest, choking off the words in his throat. He gasped and fell back, blood spurting around the knife, his hands reaching for her weakly.

"You...you...the killer... the..."

She grunted as she pulled the knife out of his chest and plunged it in again...and again, screaming, "You killed them! You killed them!"

He heard nothing now.

THE END

Vince looked at her shapely figure, shoulder length blonde hair and angular, pretty face as she whispered, "I'm going to give you the kind of loving you've only heard about!"

YOU WORRY TOO MUCH



by BRAM NORTON

ONLY ONE of the two women was worth a second look. The blonde. She walked beside her companion on long, shapely legs, and the jersey material of her dress clung tightly to her small round hips, which rolled deliciously with

each step. The other woman was heavy set, shapeless, and shambled along in a flat-footed, graceless shuffle. Dusk was just beginning to fall when they turned the corner of 42nd Street and headed north on Fifth Avenue. "Do you want

to go over it again and make sure everything is clear?" the heavy-set woman said.

The blonde glared at her companion with a look that started at the heavy, muscular legs, and ended at the splotchy face with its line of blackheads across the bridge of the nose. "You look ridiculous."

"Never mind how I look. Have you got everything straight?"

"We've been over it ten times already."

"I know. But this is no candy store or drug store job. This is big-league stuff. If there's thirty thousand dollars up there, I don't want any slip-ups."

The blonde tossed her head. "You worry too damn much. That's why you're a flop. You don't have the guts for anything big. Didn't you learn anything during that stretch up the river?"

"Look, for your own good, lay off me, Dale."

At 45th Street, they started across without waiting for the light to change. The heavy set woman grabbed the blonde's arm and pulled her back as a car bore down on them. "How many times do I have to tell you to watch when you cross the street? You get hit by a car

and the whole caper is out the window."

"Relax. I saw the car," the blonde said.

A little farther on, they stopped in front of a shop window. Studying their reflections in the glass, the blonde straightened her jacket, and the heavy set woman retied the belt of a tweed coat. The blonde shifted her attention to the reflection of the tweed coated figure. "That get-up is a sample. If this job worries you so much, why don't you just heist a gas station instead of getting dressed up like that."

"I didn't tell you what to wear. C'mon, let's go."

They started north again. "You sure nobody's gonna be home?" the heavy-set woman said.

Dale suppressed a gesture of exasperation. "Look, for the last time, my roommate Jenny is their maid. They definitely are not going to be home tonight, the money is going to be there, and the key will fit. It's a perfect match to Jenny's key, and she doesn't know I had it made. Okay?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should break the lock so it won't look so much like an inside job. If the cops quiz Jenny, she'll finger you in a minute.

Maybe we should break the lock."

"Maybe you'd like to call the whole thing off! Look, you know how I feel about you. It's eating me up inside to see you like this. The place is a set up, the easiest thing we've ever been on. I can smell that money right now, except every time you open your face, the smell gets mixed up a little bit with the smell of cops. Jenny is a nice kid, but they don't come any dumber."

"I worry about those dumb ones, Dale."

"You worry too much about everything. They won't suspect her because you know where she'll be tonight? At a party with a perfect alibi. And if they give her the routine questioning, and she tells them I'm her roommate, so what? I'm clean."

"That's why you don't have to worry," the heavy set woman said. "I've been in stir already. I'd kill myself or anybody else if I had to do another stretch."

"Look dearie, if this is too rich for your blood, just turn around and walk the other way. I'll do it alone."

THE HEAVY set woman did not reply. They had reached the corner of Fifty Eighth

Street. They skirted the Plaza and started west on Central Park South. The blonde was in exceptionally good spirits. "This is the greatest," she said. "We can hang around in Columbus Circle as long as we want without looking suspicious, and watch for the coast to be clear a half mile away. I gotta hand it to you."

The heavy set woman smiled at the compliment. "Don't forget your roommate. If Jenny just didn't happen to be the maid up there, where would we be?"

"That's more like it," Dale said. "It's so perfect, nothing can go wrong."

"A guy once told me if nothing can go wrong, be extra careful. If it's 'oo perfect, one little monkey wrench can upset the whole operation."

"So you're trying to think of monkey wrenches."

"So I'm trying to think of monkey wrenches."

They walked the remaining blocks to Columbus Circle in silence. The neon lights fronting the Circle had come on, and small knots of people stood in the glare of the garish lights. As usual, the street philosophers were talking on their favorite subjects. "What'll it be?" the blonde asked. "The evils

of drink; repent and be saved; what's wrong with this country that a little Communism couldn't cure; or would you care to look at the moon through the telescope that man has set up?" She indicated each suggestion with a nod of her head.

The heavy-set woman pointed out a group. "Let's listen to Holy Joe."

"Yeah, that'll give us the view we want." They sauntered over and took their places at the edge of the small group.

"Up there," the blonde whispered. They both stared and focused their eyes on a point above and behind the speaker. It was a lit pent-house window over on the other side of the park, and it shone like a beacon against the darkening sky.

A short while later, the square hole of light in the sky disappeared as if covered by a gigantic hand. The two women, only one of whom was worth a second look, disengaged themselves from the group. "Now once around the Circle, and we're off," the heavy set woman said.

They mingled with the crowd and strolled past the other speech makers, and the man with the big telescope who charged a quarter to look at the

moon. The blonde reached for the hand of the heavy set woman and squeezed it. "Now for Chrissake," the blonde said; "Don't talk to anybody and don't arouse too much attention. Remember how you're dressed. *You're supposed to be a woman.*"

"I'll remember."

"And Vince, after it's over, when we get back to your place with all that dough, you know what's gonna happen?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna take these clothes off and get into pants again."

"What I mean is in between the time you take off the dress and put on the pants."

Vince looked at her shapely figure, shoulder length blonde hair and angular, pretty face. He managed what he thought was a smile, but turned out to be a leer even under the veil of the matronly hat. "I'll bite."

"I'm going to give you the kind of loving you've only heard about. Then maybe you won't worry so much before the next job we go on."

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't, but I accept your offer."

THEY HAD come back to the 59th Street entrance of the Circle. "Okay, Dale, I'll see you back at the apart-

ment," Vince said. "Just stick to the way we planned it. Don't ad lib, whatever you do. And once you give me the signal, don't hang around. Get out of there fast. Is there anything else you want to go over? Have you got everything straight?"

"Here we go again."

"All right, all right! You know it all. Just don't louse it up."

Dale turned to leave. "You worry too much," she said. He watched her disappear in the crowd on Central Park South before going back to the Circle to wait.

The speech maker was really going strong. For the umpteenth time he was promising salvation to his listeners if only they would repent their sins. Vince's attention, however, was riveted to a patch of blackness above and behind the speaker. He glanced at a huge clock atop a nearby building. "She should have been there by this time," he thought, "Something must have gone wrong." The speaker had started calling upon members of the audience to recite their sins and repent. "I'll have to move. Dammit, why doesn't she hurry."

Just then the patch of darkness was perforated by a rectangle of light. It gave Vince a

momentary start. The light in the window flickered out, and in an instant came on again. This was the signal they had agreed on. When the light went out again, he headed for Fifth Avenue.

Everything was going according to plan, and Vince began to feel better. "Maybe Dale is right," he thought. "Maybe I do worry too much." All he had to do now was to go up to the pent house where the door would be open, take the money and scam. He was feeling better and better as he turned up Fifth Avenue.

After a few blocks, he turned into a side street, and ducked into the service entrance of one of the houses that fronted the park. The corridor was empty. He began to feel foolish for having decided to wear women's clothing. It was an added precaution in case he was seen entering or leaving the building. "With my record, I can't be too careful," he thought. The door of the self-service elevator slid open silently. He got in and punched a button up near the top of the panel. When the door opened at his floor, he breathed a sigh of relief. Nobody had seen him in the elevator. He headed for the staircase to

walk the remaining flights to the pent house. "It always pays off when you case a joint properly," he thought.

AS HE CAME abreast of one of the doors in the corridor, it opened. A man and woman in evening clothes came out. The man turned to lock the door as Vince walked by. He dared not look behind him for fear they would be staring at him. At a turn in the corridor, he stopped and flattened himself against the wall. He heard them talking quietly at the guest elevator. The conversation was not loud enough for him to make out what was being said. He did hear the elevator door open, and the operator say, "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Ellsworth." Only when the door closed and the car started down, did he move. It was the first hitch in the plan, but Vince consoled himself with the thought that there was nothing suspicious about a heavy set woman in a corridor. He didn't feel quite as foolish in the disguise now.

Three floors up, Vince stood in front of the door of the penthouse apartment. Trying the knob, he found the door open. He stepped inside and closed the door. Something was

wrong! His heart pounded in his ears, as he waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. There was someone standing in a corner of the room. He was poised between flight and attack when a familiar voice said, "Vince?" It was Dale.

As the numbness of panic subsided, the first thing he became aware of was the dripping of perspiration in his armpits. And then he felt his anger mounting. "What the hell are you trying to do, scare me to death?"

"I had to come back. I forgot my purse."

"Oh, Christ!" He could still taste the sour bile in his throat. "Of all the stupid, hair-brained stunts. If you thought that beating I gave you last month was something, wait till we get out of here."

"But nobody saw me. What difference does it make?"

"You doubled the risk of being seen. All you had to do was keep you wits about you, but it was too much to ask. Of all the stupid bitches..." In his rage he sputtered into incoherence.

"Why don't you yell a little louder? Maybe the neighbors will drop in to see what the trouble is."

Vince lowered his voice but

it still trembled with rage. "Two of the neighbors saw me in the hall. Did you meet anybody?"

"Not a soul."

Vince digested this for a moment. "I hope you're that lucky when you leave this time. If only you hadn't left your purse."

"Look, we're not going to solve the problem arguing about it here."

Muttering under his breath, Vince eased over to a table lamp and turned it on. "All right, let's find the dough and get out of here," he said.

"Now you're talking. It's probably in the desk."

The desk drawers were locked. Vince picked up a heavy letter opener and pried a drawer open. There was no money. As he applied the letter opener to another drawer, a thought struck him. "You didn't leave any of your fingerprints around did you?"

"You're worrying again. Just get the damned drawer open."

"I've got plenty of reason to worry with you around. A simple little thing and—*will you look at this!*" The drawer had snapped open and the money lay piled in neat little stacks inside. His anger forgotten, Vince

scooped the money up and started to stuff it inside his pockets. "See how easy it was," Dale said.

"We're not out of it yet, Baby. Kill that light." In darkness once again, he felt the bulges in his pockets. He realized that he would have to wait at least fifteen minutes in the dark apartment until Dale cleared the neighborhood, but the feel of the money allayed any anger. "All right Dale, get out of here. I'll follow you in about fifteen minutes." She moved over to him, put her arms around his waist and pushed her body up against his. Undulating her hips, she said, "Tell me you're not angry any more."

"Who could be angry with all this dough?"

"Vince, remember what I said about when we get back to your place?"

His pulse was starting to race. "If you keep up what you're doing now, I won't wait until we get back."

"How about just a little kiss before I go?"

"There's no such thing as a little kiss. Besides, you'll muss my make-up," Vince said.

"You and that corny get up."

"I won't be wearing it later. Now get going." He slapped

her gently on her rounded hips and steered her to the door.

ALONE IN the darkness, he waited for the time to pass. After a few moments, he figured that Dale was out of the building and began thinking of his own getaway. But just then he heard a sound that started the sweat dripping in his armpits again. There was a key turning in the lock! His first thought was that it was Dale coming back, but why would she use the key? She had left the door unlocked. He stood petrified while the key scratched in the lock, first locking it and then unlocking it. The door swung open revealing a woman's figure silhouetted in the light coming through. And then the room was flooded with light as the woman snapped the light switch. It was Jenny, Dale's roommate!

Later it was hard for Vince to remember exactly what happened. His body had seemed to act independent of his brain. When the light came on he dived for Jenny. His hat came off as they hit the floor. In the scuffle, she recognized him and distinctly uttered his name. Then her nails found his face and clawed at it, and his brain exploded in a shower of sky-

rockets. In the fight, her skirt had worked up around her waist and all he could think was, "*More, more, hurt me again!*" She almost succeeded in getting away but he grabbed for her and got his arms around one bare thigh. And then she was kicking and clawing again, and it wasn't painful any more. He remembered the ripping sound as he tore at her clothes, and how the tatters came away from her body like bandages from a putrefying lesion. Her bare breasts jerked spasmodically with her efforts, and her body was damp with perspiration. He had to get her to hold still. His gloved hands found her throat and held on to it. And then the room drifted away in a fiery glow. He was in water, clinging to a raft tossed by the sea, as a storm raged around him. He whimpered as semi-unconsciousness came.

Suddenly everything came back into focus. He staggered back drunkenly. In the harsh glare of the light, Jenny lay twisted and still on the floor, like a child's discarded doll. All he could think of was to run, but he forced himself to logical action. There was no indication that anybody in the building had heard. It might still be all right. He retrieved his hat and

straightened his clothes. Making sure that he had left nothing around, he turned off the light. In the bathroom, he found some face powder. He covered the scratches on his face with it and patted his pockets. The money was still there. When he was satisfied that his appearance would not betray him, he prepared to leave. On an impulse he went to the window. The park lay beneath him dark and quiet. The patch of light at the corner of the park was Columbus Circle. He could see it very clearly, even to the telescope that was pointed up in his direction. With growing horror, he fastened his attention on the telescope. "Damn it, it's pointed right up here," he thought. Suppose somebody had seen. The police might be speeding to the apartment right at this minute. The time to leave was now, and fast.

He stepped over the body on the floor and opened the door. The naked flesh shone eerily in the half light from the hall. Vince closed the door and headed for the stairs. He rejected the idea of taking the elevator as too risky. It seemed he would never get to the bottom as he ran down the stairs. At any minute he expected to hear

footsteps on the stairs above or below him, and voices yelling for him to stop. He arrived safely on the street and with a sigh of relief, noted that it was deserted. He headed east to the Lexington Avenue subway.

LATER, he stood in front of an old brownstone house on the edge of Greenwich Village. He had approached it obliquely to see if there were any cops around. Inside, the hall was dimly lit by a small, naked bulb overhead, and was painted a dull, nameless brown color which seemed to give back the smell of boiled cabbage. He had moved in a week before, and tomorrow he would move out thus severing any connection with his residence at the time of the crime. It was a perfect base of operations. Several prostitutes maintained quarters in the house, and anybody, including a heavy set man dressed as a woman, could appear in the hall without any questions being asked. Two flights up, he opened his door. The lights were on, and the sound of running water in the shower came through the bathroom door. He poked his head into the bathroom. Through the dirty plastic shower curtain, he could just distinguish Dale's high, perky

breasts, and her long legs. "Dale," he called. She separated the curtain and showed him her even, white teeth in a broad smile. "Be right out, Millionaire."

Vince removed the money from his pockets and shucked out of coat, skirt, and jacket. He was examining his face in the mirror over the bureau when Dale came out of the bathroom. She wore nothing but a towel tied sarong fashion around her breasts and hips. "Here I come, Lover," she said. "Hold on to your bridge work." Then she saw his face. "Vince, what went wrong?"

"If you hadn't come back, I could have left before anything went wrong."

"Look, save that for later. Tell me how bad it is."

"It couldn't be worse. Jenny came up to the apartment while I was there."

"Is she—, what did you do?"

"She's dead."

Dale took the news without a bat of her heavy lidded eyes. "Well, we didn't figure on murder. Wasn't there any other way? Couldn't you have just conked her over the head in the dark?"

"She turned the light on and recognized me before I had a chance." Vince hesitated, won-

dering whether to tell her the rest. "Dale, you're going to read about it in the papers anyway. There's more about Jenny."

"How much more could there be? About the only thing more you could have done was rape her."

VINCE'S silence was more eloquent an answer than words. This time Dale's reaction was prompt. She slapped her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Oh, no! Of all the idiots. What's the matter, don't I give you enough?"

"I don't know how it happened. One minute we were fighting on the floor, and the next—. It was something I had to do. I didn't even realize what was going on until after it was all over."

"I was just thinking of how you put the blast on me for coming back to the apartment. If that worried you, how do you feel now?"

"Look, if you hadn't come back, I'd have been gone by the time Jenny got there. Always remember that."

A new thought occurred to Dale. Picking up the female garments he had discarded, she shook them under his nose. "What was the idea of these?"

When they examine Jenny's body, they're sure gonna know it wasn't a woman who robbed the apartment."

"There's something else that really worries me."

"Oh brother, this ought to be good."

"Remember that telescope in Columbus Circle? Just before I left I looked out the window. That telescope was pointed right up at me."

"And this worries you? You commit a rape, a murder, and a robbery, and all you're worried about is a lousy telescope in Columbus Circle. I give up. Do me a favor and don't try to think of any more monkey wrenches. You wouldn't know one if it hit you on the head."

The events of the evening had taken their toll on Vince. He did not feel like arguing. "I look at it this way. The only one who could connect us with the job was Jenny. With her out of the way, we're in the clear. Think of it that way. So what if they know it was a man up there. That couple in the hall can only describe a woman."

Dale thought about this for a minute. "Okay. Maybe you got a point there. Now for chrisake stop worrying about the telescope. Even if it was

focussed on the apartment, how much could anyone see?"

"I wish I knew."

Dale shivered in the towel. "I kind of lost my taste for sex. I'm gonna get dressed, and then we'll count the money."

Later, they were sitting at the table over two glasses of beer. The money was stacked in two piles, one in front of each of them. Dale was riffling a stack like a card player, but Vince was lost in thought. "Dale," he said, "About that telescope in Columbus Circle."

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Look, how'd you like to take a trip up there again?"

"What's on your mind?"

"I just want to take a look through the telescope," he said.

"Christ, you can dream them up. I don't know what you think you're going to see."

"I'd sure like to find out."

"I'm getting to the point where I don't care what you do. I'm gonna stay here and curl up with my share of the money."

"It's still early. Don't you want to go out at all?"

"Yeah, but not to look into a telescope."

"Tell you what," Vince said. "We'll go to Columbus Circle and afterwards we'll go out and have a ball. We owe ourselves

a celebration.”

“Well okay, but I’m still not so hot on the telescope.”

A SHORT while later they were out on the street hailing a taxi. They picked one up in front of the brownstone house and told the driver to go to Columbus Circle. Each sat lost in thought on the way up-town.

On arriving, they paid the driver and stood once more in the flow of people that eddied around the various speakers. The light in the window across the park burned brightly, almost urgently Vince thought. “Well, everybody knows now. I say we get out of here,” Dale said.

“And I say as long as we’re here, let’s take a fast look through the telescope.”

“What the hell for? If you were able to see the telescope from that window, so will the cops. They may be on their way over here to ask questions.”

“It’ll just take a minute. C’mon, I’ll feel a lot better if I can’t see into the apartment.”

“All right, get it over with. One of these days you’re going to worry yourself to death.”

The man eyed them speculatively as they approached.

“Look at the mountains of the moon?” he said. Vince pressed a quarter into the outstretched hand, and put his eye to the eye-piece of the telescope. A curved segment of brilliant green light cut across the upper half of the field. “That prominence in the upper left hand corner is the mountain *Tycho*,” the man said. Vince straightened up. “Can I move the ‘scope and look around?” he asked.

“Why not?” The man loosened a set screw. “Now just swing it gently.” Using one eye to line it up, Vince trained the telescope on the lighted window on the other side of the park. The apparent closeness of it in the field startled him, but all he could see was the window. The angle made it impossible to see into the room!

Just then, he felt Dale’s arm nudge him in the side, and heard a deep voice say, “Okay, let’s go.” At almost the same instant he saw the policeman, they were running. He had hold of Dale’s hand and was pulling her along with him in the direction of the park. The policeman and the owner of the telescope looked at each other and shrugged, while several people turned to watch the fleeing figures. At the same mo-

ment Vince and Dale started to run, a bus had turned into the Circle from Broadway. They did not see it until it was too late. Running directly into its path, they appeared for an instant in the glare of the headlights. A woman screamed and there was a sickening screech of brakes as they disappeared under the wheels.

Later, the officer whose duty it was to clear Columbus Circle every night, was talking to the desk sergeant at the station house. "All I did was tell the telescope guy it was time to close up shop, and these two characters took off like the devil was after them."

"How are they doing, Pete?" the desk sergeant said.

"The woman was killed, but the man will pull through."

"There may not be any connection with that rape, murder and burglary thing over on Fifth Avenue, but I think you did a smart thing to tell the chief. Homicide is on the case now."

"It was just a hunch," Pete said. "But when I looked through the scope and saw the guy was looking at the window of the murder room, I figured I'd better tell somebody."

"Homicide thought that was interesting enough to ask a few

questions. They found the hackie who brought them up to the Circle. He was able to give the address where he picked the two up. The detectives are down there now."

Pete was leafing through some reports. "According to the report, the Ellsworth couple described a heavy set woman. The description sure doesn't tally with the woman who was killed. Probably has no bearing at all."

"Maybe yes, and maybe no," the desk sergeant said. "Read what the Ellsworths said."

"Let's see. . . 'As we left our apartment a heavy set woman with broad shoulders and muscular legs passed us in the corridor. She wore a tan tweed coat, brown hat and veil, and low brown shoes.' I still don't get the connection."

"To me, that sounds like the description of a man in woman's clothing."

An understanding look came over Pete's face. "Yeah, now I get it. The homicide detail is down there looking for the clothes the Ellsworths described and the money."

"The way I figure it, he was the worrying type. He probably would have gotten away with it if he hadn't come back to look through the telescope."

An axe fiend on the rampage... Three gruesome murders in twenty-four hours but only the dead could point out the killer!

INSPECTOR FLEMING'S LAST CASE



by EDWARD D. HOCH

THE RAIN was still falling when James Mitchell came out of the subway. It was a damp, cold rain that penetrated even through his topcoat and sent chills deep into his bones. He started coughing again as soon as it hit him,

and he paused to blow his nose and curse the weather.

It had been raining off and on for nearly a week now, soaking the piles of autumn leaves that lined the streets and sending half of his office staff home with colds. If this

one of his got any worse. he'd be out tomorrow, too. Then what would they do with the piles of back orders on his desk? Well, it wouldn't be his worry. He coughed once more and started down the long block to his house.

Darkness came early these nights. Already the street lights were being turned on, and one might have thought it was midnight from the look of the sky. He glanced down at the damp newspaper under his arm, with its black headlines about the axe murder over on Smith Street. That was just three blocks away. At least the neighborhood would have some excitement for a change....

"Pardon me...."

"What?" he turned to look at the man who had stepped from the shadows next to him. "You startled me."

"I'm sorry," the man said softly.

James Mitchell peered at the man through the darkness and tried to remember where he had seen him before. Somewhere, during the past few days....

He tried to turn away, but the man grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute, Mr. Mitchell."

"What?" He was startled by the sound of his name. "What do you want?"

And then James Mitchell saw the axe, and he knew what the man wanted.

He saw it go up and then start its downward swing. There was just time for him to throw his hands in front of his face.

The first blow of the axe tore at his fingers. He never really felt the second blow....

*

"Really Fleming, you must be reasonable about this," the Police Commissioner was saying.

Inspector Arnold Fleming moved in his chair and tried to understand the words he was hearing. It couldn't be, really. He must have misunderstood the Commissioner.

"Retire? You want me to retire from the Police Department?" Was that really what the Commissioner had said?

"Fleming, you're sixty-seven now. That's already two years over the retirement age. And the new administration has decided to make retirement of city employees mandatory at the age of sixty-five."

"But....but I've been on the force all my life. I don't know what I'd do if...."

The Commissioner avoided Fleming's eyes as he thumbed through some papers on his desk. "I'm sorry, Fleming. There's nothing more to be said. Prepare to turn over all your active investigations to Carter."

The haze in front of Fleming's eyes cleared for a moment. "But what about the two axe murders yesterday? Do you want me to give that up, too? This may be the beginning of another Jack-the-Ripper thing."

The Commissioner's frown deepened. "Let's hope not. What have you got on it so far?"

"Nothing. Nothing except an old woman named Sadie Kratch and a middle-aged business man named James Mitchell. Both murdered in the same way, with an axe, within a few blocks of each other, yesterday. Mitchell got it on the way home from the office yesterday evening, and the old woman on the front porch of her house, early yesterday morning."

The man behind the desk grunted. "No connection between them?"

"None, except they lived near each other. The old woman lived alone and was apparently a drug addict; Mitchell had a wife and child."

"Well, I think Carter will be able to handle the investigation all right. Tell him the facts and...."

The private phone on the Commissioner's desk purred, and he snatched it up with a heavy fist. "Hello?"

He listened in silence for a moment and then hung up. Tiny beads of sweat were beginning to appear on his forehead, and Fleming wondered if it was warm in the room despite his occasional chills.

The Commissioner wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"They've found another one," he said quietly. "It looks like you were right."

Inspector Fleming looked at him. "Another one?"

"Another body. Another body with its head chopped open by an axe. Another body like the other two...."

"I'll go right away," Fleming said.

"Wait...."

"Yes, Commissioner?"

"Fleming, you're the best man we've got, and it looks like I'm going to need you

now. Forget about that retirement business until this fellow's caught."

"You mean you want me to stay on the case?"

"Yes, and by God, get him before he kills another one."

"I'll try," Inspector Fleming said quietly....

*

SO THIS was to be his last case, he thought, as he looked down at the wet grass that formed a cushion for the third of the axe killer's victims. He remembered the first one quite well, as though it were yesterday. It had been a payroll holdup downtown, and he'd nabbed the two stickup men within an hour. They'd had his picture on the front page of the paper, and he'd gotten a promotion.

How long ago was that? He was only a beat cop then, nearly forty-five years ago. It had been a long time, a long life.

But what was there now? Not the things other men had. Not the wife he'd wanted but never found. Not the children to comfort you when there was nothing else. The Police Department had been his whole life, and now they were

taking it away. Just one more case, and it would be all over.

Maybe it would be better if that were his body in the tall wet grass, mashed and bloody, instead of....

"Tony DeLuca. He's a small-time hoodlum. Used to hang around the Fey Club. I don't get it, Arnold. I just don't get it at all."

Fleming was silent. Carter was the only man in the department who called him by his first name. Carter was a good detective, but not too experienced for a case like this.

"What don't you get, boy?" Fleming finally said.

"What's there to connect an old woman, a married business man and a cheap hoodlum, even in the mind of a crazy man?"

"Perhaps nothing. Perhaps they were nearest when he got the urge."

"But he went to the old woman's house. At seven in the morning! He got her out of bed and killed her on the front porch. He wanted her, and no one else."

"You're right there," Fleming sighed. They were taking the body away now, to the morgue, where they'd cut it open to find the cause of death. Fleming laughed at

that. The head had almost been split in two, and they would cut him open to find out how he died....

"It's funny, though," Carter was saying, half to himself, "these nuts usually wait a while between killings. Even the Ripper or the Cleveland Butcher didn't kill three within twenty-four hours. It's not even a full moon or anything."

Fleming looked toward the noonday sky and felt the light drizzle against his face. No one in this city had seen the moon or the sun for a good many days.

"Well, Carter, check the usual places. Find out if any of them had any enemies...."

"I'll bet this DeLuca had plenty."

"Probably. Did he live around here?"

"No. On the other side of town. But the Fey Club is nearby, and he always hung out in this section of town."

"So we have all three victims living in or frequenting an area of about one mile square. That may mean something, Carter."

"I'll see what I can find out. We'll comb the neighborhood."

"Good." They walked back to the street.

"You going back to headquarters, Arnold?"

"Hardly. You probably know this is to be my last case before my retirement. I'm staying on the job."

"But this rain.... There's a lot of germs going around. Half the people in town have got colds or coughs or something. Do you think you should stay out in it, at your age?"

"At my age?" Fleming flared up. "At my age men run for President, and climb mountains, and lead armies. But I'm being retired, because I'm too old!"

"I'm sorry, Arnold. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"I'm staying on this case till the end—till we capture this madman, or till I drop over from trying."

"All right, Arnold."

"And remember...."

"Yes?"

Fleming watched the morgue wagon roll down the street ahead of them. "Remember, we have to get him before there's another one. Who-

ever he is, we can't let him kill again...."

*

WHILE CARTER began a roundup of known psychopaths, Fleming drove over to the tiny cottage-like house that had been the home of Sadie Kratch, the axe killer's first victim.

The house was deserted now, except for the cop Fleming had left on guard. Sadie Kratch had spent her last years alone, and she had died alone there on the front porch, except for a blood-spattered killer who had found his first victim....

The rooms where the old woman had spent her last days were nothing. Bare, dirty walls, cluttered closets, dirty dishes.... Perhaps Sadie Kratch was better off dead. She'd taken drugs shortly before her death, but he found no trace of them in the tiny house.

The medicine cabinet, with a mirror cracked down the middle, yielded only a half-empty bottle of cough medicine from a neighborhood drug store. The prescription had been filled three days earlier, according to the date on the label. Fleming dropped the

bottle into his raincoat pocket and went back out to the car. He had to start someplace, and this was as good as any.

WAGNER'S DRUG was the kind of place he knew it would be. Small, quiet, neighborly, with a window display showing the history of medicine through the ages. Inside, there was Mr. Wagner himself, with white coat and tired smile, waiting expectantly for the next customer.

"Good afternoon, sir. Anything I can do for you?"

Fleming showed his badge and the bottle of cough medicine. Mr. Wagner began to turn pale with the citizen's eternal fear of police.

"What... what do you want?"

"Just some information. You filled this prescription for Sadie Kratch three days ago?"

The druggist took the bottle and studied it for a moment before replying. "That's correct. I remember now, I was just getting ready to close when she came in. She was coughing something awful."

"Who was her doctor?"

"Oh, Sadie couldn't afford a regular doctor. Whenever she wasn't feeling good, she went up to the city hospital, to the

out-patient department. They'd give her something to fix her up, or else send her to me."

"Did you know she was taking narcotics?"

"Sadie? No, I can't believe it."

"Well, she took some shortly before she was murdered, anyhow. We found some morphine in her."

"Poor Sadie," Mr. Wagner said and shook his head sadly. "Poor old Sadie...."

*

NO, SADIE KRATCH had no enemies. No friends, but no enemies, either. It had taken Fleming all afternoon and ten more interviews with neighbors and shopkeepers to establish that. He was tired by the time he finished, tired and cold and wet.

All afternoon the rain had kept coming down, not hard, but with that irritating drizzle that seemed like it would never let up. How many days was it now? Seven. Seven days with hardly a break in this miserable rain.

It was nearly supper time when he stopped the car in front of the funeral parlor where James Mitchell rested

in peace. Last night at just about this time he had been alive and happy. Now, he was dead, and his future fame would be only in the true crime magazines, where he would be known as the killer's second victim.

Fleming went in, and looked around until he found Mrs. Mitchell, a young, good-looking woman, who seemed somehow very small and helpless in the black dress she wore.

"Mrs. Mitchell, I'm very sorry to bother you again...."

"That's....that's all right, Inspector. Anything I can do to help...."

"Mrs. Mitchell, I want you to keep a special watch for strangers. Oh, I know the newspaper stories will attract a lot of the curious, but there's a chance the killer might come, too. I'm going to leave a man here with you, just in case...."

"Anything you say, Inspector. Anything to find the man who did this to Jim...."

Fleming nodded and went over to say a brief prayer before the sealed coffin. Then he left the funeral home and drove back to Headquarters....

The Commissioner was there, and Carter, and a dozen more. They were listening to Fleming as he stood before a wall map of the city.

"These three pins show the scenes of the three murders. You'll note that all the killings took place on the east side of the river, and all within the same general area."

"Do you have any leads yet?" the Commissioner asked.

"Nothing yet, sir. But it won't be long."

"I hope not. The papers are screaming for action."

The papers were always screaming for action, Fleming thought. He passed a hand over his forehead. His head was beginning to ache, and he felt very tired. Maybe he was getting old, after all.

"What I can't figure out," Carter said, "is how the killer could walk through the streets, even at night, covered with bloodstains. And he couldn't have killed them like that without getting some blood on him."

Fleming closed his eyes and thought about it. Finally he said, "All he had to do was wear one of those plastic rain-coats that all the stores sell. The rain would have washed the blood right off."

"Yeah," Carter said. "I guess you're right."

The Commissioner smiled. "He's always right. We're going to hate to lose him after this case."

Fleming went into his office and closed the door behind him. Yes, they'd hate to lose him. Then Carter and the Commissioner could sweat the cases out between them, while he did nothing all day but rest and relax. . . .

He stretched out on his couch for a few minutes to think about it, to think about a life without the clatter of teletypes and the screech of sirens in the night. But even as he thought, he knew there could never be such a life for him. He had been a man-hunter for forty-five years, and he couldn't stop now. After the axe murders, there would be other crimes to be solved. They would need him. Didn't they understand that? They would need him. . . .

"Fleming, wake up!"

"I'm not asleep, Carter. Only resting my eyes. What is it?"

"One of those nuts we pulled in just confessed to the murders."

Fleming grunted. "Let's go see him."

His name was Ralph. Even he didn't know what his last name was. Fleming had seen him around town from time to time, selling newspapers or doing odd jobs. He was big, well over six feet, with strong, powerful hands.

"Tell us about it again, Ralph. Tell us again."

"I killed them, I tell you. I killed them all." He clutched his big hands together as he talked.

Fleming left the room and returned in a minute with a long kitchen knife. "Is this the knife you used, Ralph?"

"Yes, yes, that's it. I killed them all with that."

Carter sighed and followed Fleming from the room....

*

"THERE'S always a dozen nuts ready to confess after every murder, Carter," Fleming told him. "That doesn't mean you have to believe them all."

"I know. I just thought maybe...."

"Well, hold him for examination. In the meantime, have you got any other ideas?"

"One, Arnold, but I don't know what you'll think of it."

Fleming sighed. The head-

ache was getting worse. "Let's hear it, anyway."

"Well, suppose that this Mrs. Mitchell was having an affair with another man. Suppose they decided to get rid of her husband without directing suspicion toward themselves."

"You mean the first and third murders would be necessary only to hide the real motive for the second murder?"

"Yes. I read something like that in a book once."

Fleming smiled slightly. "I read the same one. Christie, I believe. Well, personally I have strong doubts that Mrs. Mitchell is anyone who would plot to kill her husband in such a brutal way, but if you can find another man in the picture, I might listen to you."

"Good. I'll give it a try, anyhow, Arnold."

Fleming watched him walk quickly away, full of that usual youthful drive, the ability to overcome the fantastic odds, that had once been the mark of Arnold Fleming as well. Carter was in many ways much like a son to him. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad giving the department to Carter....

But then what would he do,

when the long nights rolled in across the river....

And the world was silent except for the clatter of the teletype and the screeching of the sirens....

What would he do....?

*

THE FEY CLUB was alive with midnight activity when Fleming pushed open the door and stood looking over the line of men and women at the bar. A few familiar faces nodded toward him and then turned to whisper among themselves.

The Fey Club had been Tony DeLuca's hangout. Why? Fleming had heard there was a singer here....

The lights dimmed, even as the thought crossed his mind, and then a sudden flickering pink spotlight picked out the girl leaning against the white piano....

"....the....n i g h t....is mine...."

The voice, the voice of a thousand night clubs from Broadway to Frisco, sang out across the crowded room. It was not a good voice, but it had that quality, that thing about it that excited younger men and disturbed even Flem-

ing. This, then, was Rhonda Roberts, the girl in Tony DeLuca's life.

And possibly the girl in his death, as well?

Fleming watched, bewitched, for twenty minutes, as the spotlight wove a fabric of beauty around her face, her body, her silken legs. She never moved from that spot, and when the light would drop away from her entirely, there was a feeling that the voice must have been coming from another world.

Then, suddenly, it was over, and the house lights grew bright again. Fleming stayed to watch part of the next act, a young negro playing something very fast on a set of silver drums. Then he walked backstage to the dressing rooms.

She was just finished changing when he knocked on the open door and stepped inside.

"Well? What do you want, pop?"

"Police. I have a few questions."

"About Tony?"

"That's right."

"He was a bum."

"I understood you two were friendly."

She slipped a dressing gown over the brief pink costume

she'd changed to, and lit a cigarette. "That was a long time ago, believe me. He was a joker that just wouldn't give up trying, that's all."

"He have any enemies?"

"Yeah. Me."

"You kill him?"

"With a hatchet? Are you kidding? What do you think I am, a damn Indian or something? I'd have shot him. Right between the eyes."

"You don't go with your voice, Miss Roberts."

"What?"

"I heard you sing out there. I was expecting something quite different."

That shut her up for a minute while she thought over his remark and its meaning. Finally she gave up and said, "Well, he was no good, anyway."

"He ever give you any presents?"

"Tony?" she laughed. "The only thing he ever gave me was this cold I've got. He was just a cheap punk, always hanging around, always bothering me. I'm glad he's dead."

Fleming nodded in sympathy. Somehow, Rhonda Roberts reminded him of another girl he'd once known, a girl he'd almost married. At the time he'd been glad he hadn't,

but now sometimes when the nights were long and lonely he wished it had turned out differently.

He said goodbye to Tony DeLuca's ex-girl friend and left the Fey Club's smoky haze for the foggy dampness of the outside world....

*

THREE people....

An old woman, a married man, and a young hoodlum, all with their skulls split open.

Three pins on a map of the city....

Had it just happened that way? Had they just been the first persons he'd seen, or did the madman find some link between them?

"Nothing on Mitchell's wife. I checked all the neighbors, everything. If she was playing around with another guy, she was keeping it mighty quiet."

"Don't worry about it, Carter. I never thought too much of that idea, anyway." Fleming lifted himself from his chair and stared out the window at the gloomy mist. "Isn't this rain ever going to stop, Carter?"

"I guess not, Arnold."

Fleming sighed and looked away. His head was still hurting him....

"Have you been getting enough sleep, Arnold?"

"No, damn it! Do you expect me to sleep with this thing going on? How do we know he wasn't out again last night, with his axe?"

The teletype came to life then, and Carter walked over to read it. "Here's something...."

Fleming joined him and they read it together. **BODY OF MAN FOUND IN ROOM OF STAR HOTEL, APPARENT HOMICIDE.**

"Do you think....?"

"No," Fleming said, "not in a hotel room. The others were all outside. And besides, it's on the wrong side of the river."

"We'd better get down there, anyway."

"Yeah."

They drove across town to the Star Hotel, one of the best in the city. Already there was a crowd in the lobby, and they had to fight their way through to the elevator.

Upstairs, Fleming took one look at the cops' faces and knew what they would find inside.

The man's name had been

Harold Rothman. He was a salesman for an electric switch company. He had been in town only four days. He'd been dead about twelve hours when the chambermaid found him, and there was no doubt that he was the fourth victim of the axe murderer....

"You were right, Arnold," Carter told him, sometime later. "I checked the calls he'd made while he was in town. One of them was in the same section as the other murders."

Fleming grunted and went back to studying the map. "But of course now, Carter, the problem is somewhat different. Before there was always the possibility that our killer had picked people at random, striking whoever happened to be near. But now he has entered a hotel room, murdered this man, and escaped past dozens of people with an axe probably hidden under his coat. Why did he take such a chance, when the streets and alleys and parks of the city offer him thousands of victims?"

"Yeah, that does seem off-base for a regular nut."

"It means that he didn't kill these four people at random, Carter. It means that he had a motive all along, something

that linked these people, at least in his twisted mind."

"But this last one, Rothman. He'd never been here before. And he only got in town four days ago."

"But during those days he visited this section of the city," Fleming pointed at the map. "And he must have met the killer."

CARTER produced a list from his pocket. "Here's everything he did, as near as I can check. He flew in from New York four days ago, checked into the Star. Was seen at the hotel bar that night. Next morning stopped by the hotel physician to get something for a cold. Made three calls the rest of the day, the last one being in our area here. Spent that night in the bar, too. Made four calls the next day, and phoned New York. That night went to two night clubs, but not to the Fey Club, in case you're wondering. Yesterday made three more calls, returning to the hotel around six. Shortly after that, the killer apparently visited his room."

Fleming grunted. "Did you find any clues in the room?"

"Just some traces of the dead man's blood in the show-

er. As you suspected, the killer had to wash it off his raincoat before he left the room."

"Yeah.... But that puts us no nearer to him than before. And soon it'll be night again."

Carter lit a cigarette and stood looking at the map with its four red pins.

Fleming walked to the window and gazed out at the rain. Wouldn't it ever stop? Suppose it didn't, he wondered. Suppose it rained forever....

Old woman, business man, hoodlum, salesman....

Kratch, Mitchell, DeLuca, Rothman....

He looked out at the rain again....

"You know, Carter, those four did have one thing in common." But Carter had gone. He was alone in his office.

He sat down to think about it. The more he thought about it the more fantastic it seemed. His head was beginning to hurt again. This damn dampness....

He put on his raincoat and went downstairs and walked across the street to the morgue. Doc Adams was just starting the autopsy on Harold Rothman.

"Find anything, doc?"

"Nothing yet, except that

he was killed with an axe, and I guess you know that."

Fleming leaned against the wall as the doctor worked. It was not a pretty thing to watch. "This the first axe killing you've examined, doc?"

"Yeah. The other three were on Doctor Perry's side of the river."

"Tell me, doc, have you had any natural deaths around the same section this week?"

"Sure, plenty of 'em. People die every day. Now stop asking me questions while I'm working."

"Okay, doc." Fleming moved toward the door. "I was especially interested in a death that maybe wasn't quite natural...."

The doc didn't answer for nearly a minute, and Fleming started out the door.

"Well, I suppose that one on First Street wasn't really natural."

"Which one was that?"

"The girl that died from an overdose of morphine...."

*

IT WAS shortly after six that evening when Fleming knocked on the door of an apartment on Smith Street, just a few doors away from

Sadie Kratch's house. He was back now, back where it had all started.

Maybe he should have told Carter or the Commissioner. Maybe he shouldn't have come here alone....

But this was his last case.... And this would be the end of it, something to remember when there was nothing else.

When there was nothing else....

The door opened, slowly, and he faced the killer, the man who had murdered Sadie Kratch, and James Mitchell, and Tony DeLuca, and Harold Rothman....

They had been just names to Fleming, just as their killer was just a name. Names at the end of a lifetime of this sort of thing. He had not been scared when he captured the two holdup men on that day forty-five years ago. And he was not scared now.

Even when he saw the axe rise in front of him and begin its slow, deadly arc....

He simply brushed it aside with his arm, and, surprisingly, there was no resistance. The axe clattered to the floor, and the killer of four people sat down in a chair and began to cry....

Sometime, for everyone, there is an end. And for the murderer sometime there must be an end to the killing....

Fleming looked at the man in the chair, still clad in his white druggist's coat, and felt a little sorry. "Yes, Mr. Wagner," he said quietly, "I know why you killed all those people...."

*

"....you killed them, Mr. Wager, because they were going to die anyway, because you had made a mistake, the single mistake that every man is entitled to. But the mistake that would have meant the end, for all time, of your profession as a druggist.

"That's what I noticed first, of course. That all four of them had a cold when they died. And I began thinking about the cough medicine in Sadie Kratch's house and the cough medicine that the killer might have removed from Harold Rothman's hotel room.

"I thought about the morphine in the old woman, when none was found in the house, and then I learned about the morphine death a few days ago in the same neighborhood....

"The rest wasn't too hard to imagine. A lot of people in town had colds, a lot of them called their doctors. And quite a few got prescriptions for cough medicine. So during the past few days, five people came to you for cough medicine. And that was where you made the mistake. You gave them morphine instead of the milder codeine that most cough medicines contain. Morphine's good for a cough, too, but not in the amount you put in the medicine.

"The first to die from it was a young girl, and when you saw it in the papers it scared you. You realized you'd made a mistake, and you were afraid the other four would die too, or at least get sick from it. The death of the girl had somehow passed more or less unnoticed, but a series of morphine deaths would be quickly traced to you.

"So you had to kill the other four, because by confessing your mistake in time to save them, you'd have ruined yourself for life. Your profession was more important than a few lives. It was everything to you.

"And somehow I understand it. I understand what was in your mind better than anyone else could....

"Because it's in my mind, too...."

"Why the axe? I suppose that was some fantastic bit of misdirection to keep attention away from the body, from the stomach, where traces of the morphine could be quickly found. But actually only the old woman took enough for us to notice. Or perhaps you didn't make the same mistake with the other three after all...."

"My head is aching again. It's taken me a long time to find you...."

"You tried to make us think it was the work of an insane fiend, but I know you aren't mad...."

"You just wanted to keep your job."

"Like I do...."

"Because you know when I bring you in, I'm all through. They're going to retire me then, like an old horse."

"There isn't anything else for me, but they're going to retire me and this is my last case...."

"Inspector Fleming's Last Case...."

"Perhaps that's what the newspapers will call it."

"Perhaps...."

"My head aches."

"You killed four people to keep your job....four people...."

"But this doesn't have to be the end, does it? I'm the only one who knows...."

"Suppose the axe fiend kept on killing...."

"Then I couldn't retire. Then they'd keep me. Then...."

"Suppose you were to die, Mr. Wagner, the way the others did. Suppose I were to pick up the axe like this and...."

"Suppose...."

THE END

He knew the heat was on . . . that a "pick-up" on him had gone out to all chief cities,

GARBAGE GRAVY



by JASE WARD

SHORTLY after the third quarter ended the ticket takers left their posts. Danny had waited them out. Not from choice. Inside the stadium he would have had more opportunity to select a good prospect. But the sad fact was that

in spite of his affluent front—brown snap brim, natty brown suit and two tone shoes—his cash assets totaled two pennies. Last night when he had been tipped that the police had caught up with his lottery racket he had taken no fool

chances. He had left the appetizing dinner the waiter had just set before him and scrambled out of Chicago with just what he was wearing and what money was in his pockets at the time. The money had bought a bus ticket here to Pointview a little mid-Iowa city. And here he was stranded.

He knew the heat would be on enough that a "pick-up" on him had gone out to all chief cities. However, here in the land of black mud he felt temporarily safe. And this football crowd held promise. With any luck he'd eat tonight.

Giving the ticket boys time to become absorbed in the game he sauntered inside. A chunky character in a trenchcoat loitered by the ramp. Danny spotted him for a dick and was surprised to find the species so far out in the hinterland. Oh, well. It had been some years since he had had to practise his early profession but he felt he was as clever as ever. If he couldn't operate right under the eye of any country sleuth he deserved a stretch.

When the jubilant crowd came surging through the exits a few minutes later he was a part of it. With smooth ef-

ficiency he allowed himself to be jostled against a blatant drunk who was boasting of his winnings. As he edged away with the proceeds of the contact he rather thought Trenchcoat was observing him. But it didn't worry him, really. The delicate technique which had lifted the drunk's wallet was too good to be seen, he was sure. Especially in this friendly, if chilly, October dusk.

Outside the gate he walked toward a little cafe, a block away and the nearest building to the stadium entrance. Back of it, close to the stadium wall, was a thick hedge. Danny had made careful note of all this beforehand. Objects, such as wallets, could be quickly disposed of in the hedge tangle.

As he came to the opening between wall and hedge he sneaked a back glance. Dark was coming on fast but he thought he could make out Trenchcoat still lounging near the gate. Maybe it was just a feeling, that the dick's gaze was toward him. Maybe. But he would not risk it. No corncrib Alcatraz for Danny.

He sidled off the walk and along behind the hedge, intending to cross past the rear of the cafe and come out on

the other side. On the way he would dispose of the wallet. He opened it now as he walked along. Five lovely century notes, abbetted by a few small fry, smiled at him in the faint light. He extracted just a five, for immediate needs. The balance he would leave on deposit in the hedge, as a precaution in case a conference with the lawboy was coming up.

He suddenly sprang back as he almost stumbled over the young punk who was crouching behind the bushy screen. "Hi-jack! Cornered and helpless!

But the punk just turned a mournful face to him and said, "I'm goin' back in, jist the same!"

Danny let out a breath of relief. He'd flushed a screwball but apparently a harmless one. However, he had no desire to expand the acquaintance.

"Well, why not?" he said and started past.

The punk rose suddenly and stood in his way. "Look," the kid said pleadingly, "Mike jist left but he might come back. But if you was to go in with me it'd look like we was together and he couldn't throw customers out. You could take jist coffee or something,

couldn't you? I jist got to see Pearl. Got to!"

Here, Danny thought swiftly, was a tie-in he could use. When that drunk raised his squawk, due any minute, Danny would be the first suspect in that officer's book. So what better pose for Danny than to be found practically on the stadium grounds innocently chumming with a local? Of course, with the punk hanging onto him he couldn't tuck the wallet in the hedge, but if occasion came up he could slip it into the kid's pocket—temporarily and unknown to the kid.

He took the boy's arm. "Okay, we go see Pearl. What's your name?"

"Billy. I worked in there. Till today. Mike fired me and said never come back. Well, I'll show him!"

THEY WENT around the hedge and into the little cafe. Inside, Danny needed but one glance to place Pearl in the same league with Billy. Heavy featured, slow witted, unkempt. The relieving feature of her appearance was her white apron... Not many smudges were on it, a degree of neatness imposed by Mike, no doubt.

"Gosh, Billy!" Pearl gushed. "You did have the guts to come back! Well, Mike's gone for tonight. . . . Coffee? And you, Mister?" She was alone on shift.

"A steak," Danny replied. "No big hurry. Billy wants to gab. But pretty soon I'll want the biggest, thickest—"

He paused as a sharp notion struck him. If the dick did show up he'd probably be just dumb enough to see what was on Billy, too. The wallet had better be stashed someplace.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll go back to the kitchen and pick out my steak while you kids smooch. I'll give you two minutes alone. Okay?"

Pearl giggled. "Now that's sure nice, Mister. Go right ahead."

Danny rounded the counter and pushed through the bathing doors. In contrast to the reasonably presentable counter room the kitchen was a slovenly mess. Greasy, stack-up dishes, smeared dishcloths, cockroaches skittering boldly across the unswept, unmopped floor. Starved though he was he wondered if he would get his steak down.

However, he was alert to see that Pearl's sloppiness was a

factor made to order for his purpose. The garbage can was only half full. No danger of Pearl emptying it tonight. Not any. He quickly extracted the money and dropped the wallet in the hot coal-range fire. Then he rolled the bills and gingerly slid them down the inside of the can, well under the clutter of lettuce leaves, potato parings and coffee grounds. He was whistling cheerfully when he returned to the counter room.

"Time's up!" he announced, grinning as the lovers broke their clinch. "Start the steak, Pearl."

Unhurriedly but without pausing he crossed the room to the door.

"You can help Pearl, Billy," he said. "I'll loaf around outside till soup's on." He had decided that if a go with the cop was coming up he wanted it private, now. Those two drips mustn't have any reason to suspicion him.

He was standing idly on the edge of the porch lighting a cigarette when Trenchcoat's sturdy figure appeared and turned in toward the cafe.

"Good evening," Danny said pleasantly.

Trenchcoat looked at him in mild surprise. "Evening," he

returned without expression. He surveyed Danny a minute, then said, "You at the game?"

Danny laughed. "Just barely. The friend I was to meet at the gate didn't show. I finally went in just in time to watch that last drive. That boy Tucker is some ball toter."

"Yeah. As you come out you didn't happen to bump into anyone?"

Danny smiled. "In that jam? I bumped into fifty, I guess. Why?"

Trenchcoat held out his hand, showing a badge. "Police detective," he said. "There was a guy at the game had his roll lifted. Five, six hundred bucks. He was pretty lit up. Could of lost it. I seen you brush the guy, though, kinda. I wouldn't take you for a hater, that's right. But—"

Danny helped him. "Look, officer. I don't know much about crooks' working methods. But it seems that if one had finagled himself into that kind of money he'd be a little weak up topside to stick around so close to where he got it."

"Yeah. But it could be smart too. Feller dressed ritzy like you, a cop don't figure him for penny ante stuff. Big time, maybe, but not a snatch-

er. Only this guy was yellin' to the world how he'd cleaned up big on the game. Made him a kinda mark for even a crook of top rating."

Danny affected a serious expression. "I see," he said, frowning to get just the right shade of injury showing. "Is there some way I could show you that I'm only a harmless visitor to your little city?"

"Well, you're probably okay. But a harmless visitor wouldn't mind a frisk."

DANNY FOUND himself revising his opinion of his cops. On various occasions he'd had the works from top operatives in big cities from coast to coast and they all had this same streak of polite doggedness.

It provoked a disquieting thought. He had damn well better be out of Pointview tonight. By morning at the latest even the Pointview police would have the dope on him. Then—another round with Trenchcoat and stripes for Danny.

Still, he reflected, there was no call for getting the jitters. He'd breeze past this dick for now, all right. Within an hour he'd have bought a clunker at the used car lot beyond

stadium and be wheeling west.

"Well," he said slowly to Trenchcoat, careful to not overact, "it's humiliating. But I realize your position. Certainly you may search me."

The detective was courteous but thorough. Seemingly satisfied at last, he took off with a mumbled apology in which Danny detected a measure of reluctance.

Billy called Danny in to his steak. It was his first meal since noon the day before and for a few minutes he went at it ravenously. He was thinking rapidly. Trenchcoat was on his mind. There was no time for dallying. Soon he must leave Pearl and Billy to their torrid tasting and get into the kitchen again.

In the midst of this calculation a remark of Pearl's brought his head up with a jolt.

"Well," she sighed to Billy, "I got to go out and wash up enough dishes for Mike to start off with in the morning. But it won't take two shakes. Then we'll lock up and go home."

Damn! Danny had assumed she'd be open for hours yet. Here was a neat roadblock to his plan.

He thought of carrying his dishes out himself and making

himself a further good Joe by cleaning them. Scraping his plate over the garbage can should give him the seconds he needed. But Pearl might be standing where she could see. And that lunk Billy, too. It was an awkward spot. His thoughts were savage as Pearly disappeared.

Billy moved over to the stool next to him and leaned close.

"If I had five hundred smacks, you know what?" he said in low confidence. "Mike wants to sell for that. Me and Pearl could run this dump fine."

Danny's first reaction was quick annoyance. Then suddenly a brightening thought flashed into his mind.

He smiled and said quietly, "Well, Billy, maybe you've found a sucker. I like what I've seen of Pointview. What's more, I like what I've seen of you and Pearl." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Now, for the present, what I'm going to tell you is strictly hush-hush. Just you and me. Right?"

"Sure! Sure!" Billy's mouth was open in eager expectancy.

"Well, it happens that I'm looking for things to invest money in and in my book there's no safer risk than two

hustling youngsters. At the same time, I'm a businessman, you understand. I look a deal over from every angle before I let loose of a dollar—but of course you understand that."

"Why, sure." Billy nodded quickly to show the extent of his savvy.

"Fine. So now here's what we do. I want to give the place a good looking over. Check on equipment and supplies—things like that. But we don't want Pearl to know what we have in mind yet because she'd ask questions. Then we'd have to tell her our plan. Well, she'd be knocked pretty low if it turned out I didn't think the joint was worth the chips. See? So we're going to work a harmless little trick on her."

BILLY LOOKED steadfastly at him for some seconds. "Pearl don't like tricks played on her, Mister." His tone was close to resentment.

"No, no, Billy, you don't understand," Danny hastened to mollify, baffled for the moment. "Let's say, instead of a trick, we'll be trying to do something nice for her as a surprise."

"Well, I—well, yeah, I reckon that's okay. What is it?"

"A simple thing, really. I'll slip in and make my inspection after you take Pearl home. That is, if you can fix the catch on the back door for me. Can you? Without her tumbling? She's sharp."

Billy's study of him was longer this time.

"Yeah," he replied slowly at last, "I reckon I could. I help her close lots of times. But—" Billy's plain honesty was whispering caution.

Danny was too adept to press. The boy must make up his own mind—under adroit handling by Danny.

He smiled. "I see. I hadn't thought how it might appear to you. Let's just forget the whole thing, shall we? Best of luck to you and Pearl, anyway."

His apparent dismissal so easily of a matter so weighty to Billy was having its subtle effect. Billy's thin face was twisted in deep thought for a moment.

Then the kid said, briefing the situation aloud, "Of course Pearl takes the *money* home. I guess nobody could take anything worth a damn. Few can goods and a little stale bread, maybe. And then I guess it wouldn't be nobody in the kind of clothes you got. . . . Yeah, I reckon it'd be all right. Un-

less," he said questioningly, "I made you kinda sore, maybe?"

Danny patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Why, not a bit, Billy! In fact I think more of you than ever as a business risk. You've shown that you're careful. So we're set. If I find things as I expect to—and I'm pretty sure I will—I'll meet you here in the morning with the money. That suit you?"

Billy's glowing face was his endorsement.

Pearl came and Danny tossed his lone five shot on the counter.

"Change is yours, Pearl," he said with the grand carelessness of a nightclub souse. "Two bucks is a short tip for such a good meal. Goodnight, kids!"

Shortly he was stationed behind a billboard across the way. A guy needed a topcoat for this business, he reflected. But it wouldn't be long. Ten, fifteen minutes at the outside. He speculated on the kind of buy he'd find at the carlot. Two or three hundred should land something that would serve.

Pearl was taking longer than he expected. Time ran on for a good half hour as, teeth chattering, he paced back and forth between the board's

braces. And worry began. Maybe Billy couldn't deliver. Maybe Pearl had pumped him. Her brain was only a cut above Billy's but she'd balk at leaving her boss' door open for a stranger.

He thought bitterly of the two buck tip he'd wasted on her. Put himself back to two pennies again. The damned slochy slob! To think of a dame of her calibre being the cause of him getting nabbed in this whistle stop! Afoot he would be, of course. With a car he could take country roads and get clear. Of all the rotten luck! The rotten, rotten—

THE CAFE lights went off and stopped his tirade. He saw the pair come out and disappear up the street. When they were well gone he approached the rear of the cafe by a roundabout way. With a final cautions glance about him he stepped onto the back stoop and tried the door. It was unlocked. Tension eased. He smiled. Billy was a good boy. Goodbye, Trenchcoat! Goodbye, bastille!

A single dim bulb burned in the counter room. Enough light came in over the batwings for him to see. As he closed the door he noticed a paper

pinned just above the latch but gave it no attention at the time. He went eagerly to the garbage can and thrust his arm in. He came up muttering hot curses.

The can was empty.

He stood for a moment uncertainly. Then he saw the sheet of paper on the door again. He stepped over and snatched it angrily.

Crouching to catch the stingy light from under the batwings he read the scrawl: Mac me and Pearl got the money some place we never would of thought of that you'd be surprized where. So we won't need your jack but you sure are a good Joe and when you go out be sure and set the lock.

Danny's deep frustration demoralized his wits. Crossed by a pair of stooges too silly to know he'd used them! And damn them! Sure, they didn't know how that dough got in the garbage. But they did know it wasn't theirs. Why, they were nothing but clumsy crooks! Low, bumbling characters!

At last alertness invaded his mood of outrage and warned him that the time to cuss Billy and Pearl would be after he had cleared Pointview—if and when. He buttoned his coat, turned up his collar and stepped out—to have Trenchcoat's flashlight stab him in the face.

THE END

A HARD-RIDING KILLER WITH A LIGHTNING-FAST DRAW MEETS HIS MATCH IN A GIRL WITH SMOULDERING EYES IN...

WHISPERING SLADE'S LAST GUNFIGHT
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WATCH FOR IT ON YOUR NEWSSTAND! ON SALE NOVEMBER 15th.

Henry was on his way to thrash a man within an inch of his life! Only to find that his hand had lost it's kill...

THE BEFOREHAND CORPSE



by JAY CARROLL

HENRY BARRETT was not a handsome man. There was a certain stubborn honesty in the thick, jutting brows and jutting chin, but his features were plain. His build was blocky, like a Mack truck, and the deep rings under his

eyes dipped far down into the freckles that bridged his nose. His face and shape and feet spelled cop—which he was, and proud of it. Not many men would have worked up to detective sergeant on the robbery squad in six short years on the

force.

He was on his way to thrash a man within an inch of his life.

Ramming the key into the lock of his own front door, he stopped suddenly. His trained eye told him that somebody had tried to force that lock. This was the job of an amateur—probably some kid in the neighborhood who knew br^{at}. Henry and his wife worked and this was his week c. the day shift. He thought no more about it.

The front door slammed behind him. He went straight to the kitchen, took the car keys off the nail where Margaret had left them this morning when she came back from her weekend at Yorktown—or wherever it was she had gone with Lester Banks.

At the garage he paused again. The same bungling, amateurish job had been done on the padlock there. He doubted that the would-be burglar had been able to force either lock, but it was not for lack of trying. Henry had no time for it now.

Throwing himself into the light green, Chevrolet coupe, he backed out quickly and headed toward the apartment

hotel where Lester Banks lived. It was going to be a fight with no Marquis of Queensberry rules. No questions asked. No. "Where were you going when I saw you with my wife Friday night?" Just a flat statement: "You'd better fight good. Banks. I'm going to beat you to a pulp." After which he would wade in.

Sure he was carrying his gun, the Special .38 he always carried. But he guessed his fists would get him in enough trouble at headquarters. He wouldn't give the guy a chance to say in his complaint that Detective Sergeant Barrett had pulled his gun. He didn't expect to leave Banks in any shape to register a complaint tonight, anyway. A man, he figured, has to live with himself. If the Chief thought thrashing Lester Banks was improper conduct for a cop—too bad!

Of a sudden he realized he was speeding beyond reason. And there was no sense in it. Every traffic light on the way had conspired to turn red as he approached, forcing him to bear down on the brakes and screech the tires on the pavement.

Watching through the rear

view mirror to avoid embarrassment, he noticed a peculiar thing. Every time he stopped for those lights, a car behind slowed down—as though the driver didn't want to get too close. It wasn't a police car; it was a light green job like his, like Paul Carpenter's, Margaret's boss. Light green was a popular color in Richmond. It maddened him and gave him the jitters at the same time.

He started making turns, first right, then left. He had to persuade himself his imagination was playing tricks on him. What reason did anyone have to follow him? But every turn he made, the following car turned, too, always keeping a sufficient distance between them that he could not identify the driver. He took a stern grip on his nerves.

Pulling off Brook Road, he turned into a street barren of houses which he knew would lead him to the city dump. He pressed down on the accelerator. The little Chevvie shot ahead. At first he gained distance. Then the pursuing car put on a burst of speed, too. When he came to the edge of the dump, he took one of the narrow, rutted dumping roads

on which there would be no turning around for the other car once he blocked the road. Halfway in, he slammed on the brakes and leaped out, the Special .38 in his hand.

The other driver had seen through the trick. He was not even close, and his car was rapidly backing toward the concrete pavement and safety. Henry knew he couldn't catch him. Furious, he pumped a couple of shots at the other's tires, but the shots were wild, fired at extreme range of the Special .38. The other car sped off without even a bullet hole to mark the occasion.

Henry watched him out of sight. Then, pulse pounding, he got behind the wheel, commenced backing his own car out. Even before he cleared the dump proper to a point where he could turn around, the steering wheel began to pull. There was the maddening thump-thump of a flat. Checking the tire, he found a six-inch spike imbedded deeply in the tread. He hadn't remembered the tread of that tire being so badly worn.

WEARILY, he raised the trunk to get at the spare and tools. The breath whistled

out between his teeth; the pound of his heartbeat jatted his whole frame; his lungs were collapsed for want of air. Hunched grotesquely in the narrow compartment was the body of Lester Banks, the man he was on his way to thrash. There were welts and contusions on his head. He had taken one hell of a beating with something approximating a baseball bat. But the staring eyes, the thin, waxy lips were recognizable.

Pushing the body far enough to one side that he could reach the spare, he changed the tire, his movements mechanical, his eyes unseeing. Maybe those attempts to break into the apartment, the garage were not so amateurish after all. If he had caught the individual who was following him, if he had been able to put only one slug in the car, he would have been a lot closer to putting his finger on the murderer. Then he wondered if he wanted to put the finger on the murderer. Then he wondered if he wanted to put the finger on anybody. He couldn't feel sorry that Banks was dead.

Thinking it over, he began to worry. The person following

him could have been Margaret herself. She could have borrowed Carpenter's car to come tell him she had done murder. She could have lost her nerve when she had to follow him. He could have been shooting at his own wife. He shrugged off the thought impatiently.

Margaret was no murderer. He knew her too well to believe it. Thursday night she had to go to Yorktown over the weekend to do secretarial work for Paul Carpenter or his wife, Faith, at their country place. Nothing suspicious there. During the summer she averaged a couple weekends a month at the Carpenter's place. Did her good to get away from Richmond.

What worried Henry was the barrier he had felt between his wife and himself ever since their marriage twelve months before. Something wrong. Something he couldn't put his finger on. He had tried once to find out. He had said, "Honey, is something eating you? I mean, are you sorry you married me? Maybe something I do irritates you."

When she had shook her head, he had consoled himself that he never was any good at getting the things in his heart

into words. He figured he had let her down somehow, and she was too good a sport to tell him about it.

He remembered how he had saved up and bought her a big box of candy. When it didn't seem to make much difference, he had tried it again. He had got her a half dozen roses and wished with all his heart he'd had the money to buy her a whole dozen. But all the little remembrances hadn't changed things one iota.

Then Friday night—when Margaret was supposedly on her way to Yorktown—he had passed her. He'd recognized her. And the man on the seat with her had been Lester Banks, a parasite who lived off women. Henry suspected blackmail, but he couldn't prove it. And as far as blackmail was concerned, Margaret wouldn't be involved. She had never done a shady thing in her life.

AND NOW somebody had done a too thorough job on beating Lester Banks. Shaking a little, he realized he might have done it himself in his fury, except that somebody had got there beforehand...

Carpenter? He didn't like

him anyway. Too overbearing. Too pompous. Banks had gone to Yorktown, hadn't he? And the condition of the corpse indicated a man's work, or a very strong woman's. But the chance that Carpenter even knew Lester Banks was slim. There was more to this than met the eye—chiefly that the murderer had left some business unfinished. Else why was he trailing him so cautiously? Nor could he forget that along with several hundred others Carpenter drove a Chevie exactly like his.

Henry took a final, searching look at the corpse. Everything in his pockets had been hurriedly removed; the linings of his trouser pockets were inside out. But in his clenched hands were a few sprigs of an asparagus-like stuff that Henry could not identify. The way they were held, it almost seemed they might have been placed there after death. Yet the significance escaped him. Placing one of the sprigs in his pocket, he dropped the cover to the trunk and drove thoughtfully home.

A good cop, his conscience told him, would have taken the body straight to headquarters, let homicide take over. He

couldn't do it. Almost certainly, Margaret was in some way involved. He had to know where she stood before he made any report to headquarters.

He was almost gentle as he faced Margaret. She was a little taller than the average, but the top of her head still only came to his shoulder. Her hair was blonde, and her blue eyes were the kind that always made Henry feel weak when she smiled. She had the sort of figure that doesn't need a girdle or a corset or a foundation or anything else to hold its shape.

The heat of the range had flushed her face. She was pitifully innocent-looking as she turned toward him, the unasked questions in her eyes. He fumbled for words, and his voice sounded strange. He went to the point far more abruptly than he willed. "I've been worried there was something wrong between us. Always had the feeling you were—holding back." He stumbled on, feeling the misery flood his face. "Friday night I saw you with Lester Banks. I wasn't spying," he added hastily. "We just happened to pass." He paused. "Lester

Banks was—a sort of gigolo. I—I was going to work him over with my fists this afternoon—only—I found him dead in the back of our car."

Margaret sat down with infinite weariness and put her small hands over her face. He saw her body shake with great sobs, was tempted sorely to go to her and comfort her. He held himself back rigidly.

She said, "Lester Banks has been blackmailing me for the whole year we've been married. I couldn't stand it any more. Friday night I let him ride with me to Yorktown expressly that I could tell him I wouldn't pay any more. He get very ugly—"

"Blackmailing—you?" The shock was almost more than he could stand. The one thing he had been sure of was that it wasn't blackmail. If she had killed him, it had to be self-defense. He'd hire the best lawyer in Richmond. He'd get her off. Afterwards, he could resign from the force, and they would go away somewhere and start all over.

She raised tear-stained eyes to his. "My father was sent to prison for embezzlement," she whispered. "Lester Banks knew—"

Relief flooded into his heart, into his brain, releasing the weight that had loaded him down for months past. He went to her then, put his arms around her protectively. "You think I care what your father did? I married *you!*"

Again the great sobs shook her, tearing at his heart, constricting his throat until he could not breathe. She said, "I—I thought—you—being on the force—if I had told you before we were married—"

"It makes no difference. They'll be trying you for murder. We've got to beat it—"

Her eyes were more stricken than ever. "I didn't kill him, Hank. I let him out at Yorktown and swore I was going to tell you everything. He threatened me, yes, but I think he was a coward." She paused. "I don't even know why he went to Yorktown. I never saw him after I let him out of the car. I stayed the whole time on Mr. Carpenter's place. I—I didn't even get outside. I was helping Faith Carpenter get out invitations for a party."

Never for an instant did he think of doubting her. If Margaret said she didn't do it, that was enough for him. The

important thing was, somebody had tried, might still be trying, to frame Margaret for the murder of Lester Banks. He pulled her to her feet. "We've got to see Carpenter—now. I want you along."

HURRYING down the walkway with Margaret, he stopped suddenly. A strange woman was driving off from the curb in his car. He jerked the Special .38 from its holster, took careful aim at the tire. This time he did not miss. The car slewed into the curb and stopped abruptly, air whistling out of the riddled tire. "Keep out of the way," he warned Margaret tensely. "She may be dangerous." He walked stiff-legged toward the car.

The woman got out, making no attempt to run away, possibly influenced by the pistol he held ready. She was in her late twenties, attractively dressed, her hair a lovely shade somewhere between red and gold. She had it fixed in such a way as to make the most of its beauty. Her eyes were green, slanting the smallest bit to give her a vaguely Oriental look. And when his eyes swept downward, he got a shock.

She was not a big woman, but her shoulders were wide, like a man's. The curves in her arms and legs were not curves at all. They were muscles, rippling under her skin as she moved. This woman, he thought swiftly, had the strength to have killed Lester Banks. He watched her narrowly. "Your name, please?" he snapped.

"Edith McGregor." Her voice was warm. "I think there has been some mistake. Would you mind telling me who you are and why you shot at me?"

"Police," he said grimly, producing his badge. "I shot at you because you were stealing my car. Now—"

"Your car? You must be mistaken." Her voice was calm and assured. "This car belongs to a friend of mine. I was picking it up—"

Walking to the front of the car, staring at the strange numbers on the license plate, Henry felt suddenly foolish. Yet this was the car he had driven out of his own garage, had parked in front of the house. His mind flashed back to the incident on the dump, when he had changed the tire. In spite of his shock, he remembered that the tire he had changed seemed strangely worn.

For the life of him he could not recall whether the jack had been his or not.

He turned to Margaret who had come up quickly. "When you parked the car in Yorktown, did you leave the keys in it?"

She nodded. "I always do—in case they want to move it—"

"It isn't our car," he interrupted, turning back to Edith McGregor. "Did you ever hear of a man named Lester Banks?"

"He was a friend," she answered readily, and he thought the color in her cheeks was heightened. "He had nothing to do with your shooting at—"

"But he does. You see, he's dead—murdered." He watched every move.

The girl put a hand across her mouth as if to stifle a scream. "He can't be dead." Her rich voice was suddenly thin and reedy. "We were going to be married." The color drained from her face. She leaned heavily against the fender. "Where is he—Lester?"

Henry motioned toward the trunk. "In there. Probably has been ever since he was murdered over the weekend in

Yorktown."

She shook her head dazedly. "That couldn't be. Lester called me this morning to tell me he couldn't keep our date tonight."

Henry swore to himself, vowing never to switch to the homicide squad. Dealing with a straightforward gunman who wanted only to get the swag and get away was one thing. But working on a murder where nothing added up, where it was possible your own wife was involved, was something else. From the time he had found the body, he had wanted to think Paul Carpenter did it. And every time he uncovered something new, it pointed first to Carpenter and then away—toward some nebulous individual who did strange things for no apparent reason at all.

IT HAD TO be Carpenter, he told himself furiously. Without asking, he was sure this was Carpenter's car. But if Carpenter had forced locks, had finally got the body into the trunk of his own car, parked in the Barrett garage, why hadn't he switched cars then? What crazy reason had he had for following Henry so

discreetly this afternoon?

Turning back to the girl, he said tiredly, "I assume this is Paul Carpenter's car. Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Probably at his home. He asked me to pick up his car—"

"What's Paul Carpenter to you?"

Her eyes grew defensive. "We're friends. That's all."

He asked Edith McGregor for the address of her apartment, and she gave it unhesitatingly. He said to Margaret, "Call the garage and ask them to send out and fix the flat on this car." He removed the key to the trunk from the ring. "Tell them I want it delivered to Miss McGregor's apartment. And Margaret—you'd better stay here after all. I'll send for you if I need you. Miss McGregor and I will take a taxi to her place."

Edith McGregor's apartment was attractively furnished, though small. The rugs on the floor, the worn furniture, the tasteful arrangement had an air of middle class respectability. Yet the girl seemed more than just a business woman having an affair with one or more men. He said, "When was the last time you

saw Lester Banks?"

"Friday afternoon. He said he was going to Yorktown on business and would see me to-night."

"Did you quarrel with him?"

She hung her head. "What difference does it make? I didn't kill him. My neighbors will tell you I haven't been gone from the house more than an hour any time today."

Remembering the shrubbery in his pocket which he had removed from the dead man's hands, he pulled it out. "Ever see this stuff before? Know what it is?"

She scrutinized it a long time. "I know what it is," she said low-voiced. "It's Scotch broom. It's—the family flower of the McGregor family. I didn't know it grew in this country. Where did you find it?"

"I found it in Lester Banks' hands," he bit out. "If he was trying to show who his murderer was—"

Her face flamed. She jumped up from the chair, flexing her hands like a man. "I didn't kill him, I tell you. You haven't a shred of motive, evidence or fact to connect me—" Her voice crackled

or in staccato bursts, but Henry was no longer listening.

The pieces began to fit magically together. Scotch broom! Evidence that the corpse had been beaten to death! There was still the matter of proof. He said, "Think hard now. Are you sure Lester Banks called you this morning? Are you sure he called you at all?"

"I'm positive." Her voice was tired and frayed at the edges. "He was in a hurry and very formal. 'Can't see you tonight, Edith,' he said. 'I'll explain later.' He usually calls me—Princess."

THEN A key rattled in the lock. The door swung inward. Paul Carpenter walked in heavily. "Did you get the car—" Seeing Henry, his eyes darkened. "What are you doing here?"

Henry was tense, expectant. He wanted desperately to know if there was more to Carpenter's irritation than mere pomposity. "Trying to find out who killed Lester Banks, who put him in the trunk of *your* car, who was following me this afternoon? Maybe you have some of the answers."

Carpenter mopped the beads

of perspiration from his face. His mouth was an uncompromising, petulant slit in his face. He sat down heavily. "Maybe I have," he said softly. "Your wife was late getting to work this morning. She seemed upset all day. She took my car to drive back to Yorktown this morning—ostensibly by mistake. I think you'd better ask Margaret what she knows."

Henry felt the sickness in his stomach again. Margaret, Margaret! She had good reason to kill Lester Banks. Was she still holding back? Had she trusted him enough to tell him the whole story? Why did suspicion keep pointing at her? He had to believe her. He had to force Carpenter or Edith McGregor into making the one slip that would give the murderer away. He remembered suddenly he was forgetting the Scotch broom.

He whirled on the older man. "Why do you keep harping on 'this morning?' Was Banks killed this morning? How do you know? I have reason to believe—"

The other's voice was intended to be soothing, but it jarred Henry to his toes. "My dear young man, you are over-

wrought—"

Then the cursed doorbell was ringing, and the garage man was delivering the car and would Mr. Barrett please come down so he could show him where it was parked. Henry said, "Will you join me?"

"A little time to cool off might do you good," answered Carpenter, eyes hard. "I'll still be here when you finish your business."

Henry walked to the street with the man, and the man pointed out the car, parked adjacent to an identical Chevrolet coupe. The garage man said, "Sure looks like you been drivin' around on either the dump or somebody's ash pile. Them tires got enough cinders in the treads to pave a backyard."

Without a word Henry walked to the other car, checked the license this time to be sure it was his, then examined the tires. Cinders were packed tightly into the treads. His own car had been the one that followed him this afternoon. The murderer had to be Carpenter, Edith McGregor—or his own wife. The old doubts returned to plague him, and he thrust them aside impatiently.

He re-entered the apartment confidently—which was a mistake. As he went through the door a sledgehammer blow landed squarely on his skull; the sky exploded in his head. A warmish trickle coursed down his cheek and into the corner of his mouth. It was nauseously sweet to the taste. His knees buckled slowly. The worn carpet bounced up to meet him. He wasn't out. He was like prize fighter who lies in the ring and hears the referee count to ten and can do nothing about it.

Desperate, he forced his mind out of the dreamy, billowing haze. Which one of them had hit him? Why? Obviously, because the murderer felt he knew too much. A heavy foot kicked into his rear, reminding him his attacker was also desperate. He lay there perfectly still. The count hadn't got to ten—yet.

From far off he could hear the measured beat of Carpenter's pompous voice. He strained his ears to hear. "Of course I didn't kill Lester Banks," he heard, "but I'll not be railroaded by this Barrett. Lester was killed sometime this morning—probably by his wife. Looks as though he's

working with her to frame me. A man has to protect himself, Edith. I'm leaving here—"

Then he heard the girl's voice, even farther away. He strained every muscle. She said in a voice barely audible, "I'm not sure it was Lester who called this morning, Paul—"

That was what he needed. Everything fit perfectly except that one thing. But having the information wouldn't help him now—unless.... He opened one eye cautiously on a blurred hazy world in which Carpenter's feet were the most prominent item, not more than a foot from his head. If the older man had a gun, if he were standing over him undecided, going for the Special .38 would be a fatal mistake. He had already made one bad one. Another would be deadly....

HE BROUGHT his arm around in a wide arc. He felt his hand connect with the bone and sinew of Carpenter's ankles. Jerking sharply with all the strength of his arm, he felt the ankles give and move toward him. His pent-up breath sighed out his relief. There was the roaring crash of a gun

from somewhere above him, the more solid sound of the heavy man's bulk thudding down to the floor.

From his prone position Henry launched himself at Carpenter's middle, his arms groping wildly for Carpenter's gun. His hand closed over metal; he jerked sharply, and the hot gun came away in his fingers. Dropping it quickly, he moved up to straddle the other.

But as he did so, the older man lashed out viciously with his feet. A heavily shod foot caught Henry below the eye, ripping the tender skin, sending stabs of pain through the whole side of his face. He could feel the eye begin to puff closed, the blood gush out. How much punishment, he wondered, can a man take and keep on fighting. Before he could recover, the other foot crashed hard against his jaw. Shaking off the numbness, he realized he must get himself out of range of those flailing feet. He dove headlong at the other, landing on his chest, pinning Carpenter's legs safely to the floor.

"You've got no case against me," older man snarled.

Henry eyed him through

blood-tinged haze. "I've got the murderer, Carpenter. You! You and Banks had a fight at Yorktown. Probably you wanted him to give up Edith McGregor. You actually beat him to death. Then you put him in the trunk of your car, intending to dispose of the body later. But when Margaret got your car by mistake this morning, that made things serious.

"First you tried to break in and get the keys to swap cars. Then you tried to force the padlock on the garage. When that failed, you called up Edith McGregor and said you were Banks, hoping if everything else went wrong—which it did—you'd have an alibi for Yorktown. You knew what time I'd get home, and you were waiting. You followed me, hoping to swap cars as soon as I parked. I assume you have a duplicate set of keys. But when I took a shot at you, you got scared. You asked Miss McGregor—"

"Supposition," Carpenter snapped. "A neat story, but fictional—to cover up for your own wife. You know Banks was killed this morning—"

"On the contrary," Henry

replied grimly. "I know he was killed in Yorktown. During the Revolutionary War Cornwallis' ammunition was shipped from Scotland. The cannon balls came shipped in Scotch broom. Wherever the British unpacked their cannon balls, the broom took root. It grows all over Yorktown. You and Banks fought near some of it. He must have tried to pull himself to his feet at the last."

Carpenter lunged upward with maniacal fury, catching Henry unprepared. Still groggy, he remembered from bitter experience that the older man was much harder than he looked. He reached backward for the gun, could not find it, lost his balance. In the split second the action took Carpenter thrust himself to his feet.

Henry did the only possible thing. Moving his legs like pistons, he butted forward with

his head, caught the older man in his flabby stomach. All Carpenter's breath and fight whooshed out simultaneously.

Taking his own dizzy time, Henry picked up the gun, and when he had it, the other was still on the floor, his shoulders slumped. "All right," he whispered. "I'll take my medicine." His voice rose with the fury of frustration. "If I had it to do over, I'd still kill him."

Henry leaned against the battered desk, felt the strength seep back into his body. He nodded to Edith McGregor. "You can call the police. Ask for Homicide. Tell them—Barrett's already here—with the body *and* the murderer."

Suddenly, he wanted to get home—to Margaret, tell her he'd known all the time she couldn't have done it. Maybe this time he could say the things in his heart.

THE END

He plunged through the door, pulling the detective after him, and both men disappeared into the darkness... of death!

HANDCUFFED



by CLARK HOWARD

“KIND of odd, isn’t it,” the Chief asked. He was sitting at his desk, signing an extradition form in triplicate. “I mean about the Chicago Department only sending one man down here to pick up Sloan. He’s a pretty mean boy.”

“I can handle him,” said MacNeil flatly.

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything like that,” said the Chief quickly. “It’s just that with his long record and all, I figured he’d rate two or three guards.”

“One man’s enough,” said

MacNeil in the same flat tone.

"Well, you're the doctor," said the Chief. He rose from his desk and walked across the room to the door. "I'll have him sent over." MacNeil nodded and the Chief left the room.

When the Chief had gone, he stood up from the chair in front of the desk and walked over to the window. He looked out on the misty rain that was falling on metropolitan New Orleans. He wondered indifferently if it were raining in Chicago. The sight of the city drenched in rain made him shudder suddenly. He turned from the window and walked back across the office. At the desk he reached out and took a cigarette from the Chief's pack. He lighted it and stood motionless as he inhaled deeply.

MacNeil was a tall man, broad-shouldered and hard, looking much larger than he really was in the bulky raincoat he was wearing. His facial features were blunt, looking mostly stern but sometimes mean. He was thirty-four years old, had been on the Force for thirteen years, had been a detective for six years, a Sergeant for four. He ate, slept, and lived police work. It was his business, his profession; it was all

he knew. And he did a good job of it for one reason; he had developed a vicious hatred for criminals. Not just one type of criminal in particular, but all criminals in general. He could expel as much hatred for a petty stick-up man as he could for a big time gangster. A kid caught stealing nickels off a newsstand would get no more sympathy from MacNeil than a sex offender brought in for the third time. With him, a spade was a spade. First offense, second offense, third offense, it made no difference to MacNeil. An offense was an offense, a crime was a crime, and that was it. All in all, it might be rightly said that MacNeil was a cop's cop.

He looked around quickly as the door opened. The Chief walked in, followed by two uniformed policemen, each one holding one arm of the handcuffed man who stood between them. They stopped just inside the door.

"Well, here he is," said the Chief.

MacNeil walked over to the prisoner. Jerry Sloan, he thought. Just the same as he always was. Same good looks, wavy hair, cocky walk. Same easy way of wearing three-hun-

dred dollar suits and thirty dollar neckties. Had it really been seventeen years since they were in high school together?

"Hello, Mac," said Sloan with a grin.

"Hello, thief," answered MacNeil, his face tightening at Sloan's tone of familiarity.

Sloan's grin vanished and his lips curled into a sneer. That's more like it, thought MacNeil. That's the way you should be, punk. "Take the cuffs off," he said to one of the guards. The Chief looked at him oddly. MacNeil caught the look and said, "I've got my own." He pulled back his raincoat and took a pair of silver handcuffs from his suitcoat pocket. The guard unlocked Sloan's hands and MacNeil stepped over and snapped one bracelet on Sloan's right wrist. The other end he locked to his own left wrist.

"All set," he asked the Chief.

"He's all yours," said the Chief, handing the detective a white envelope containing a copy of extradition papers. "There's a car out front to drive you to the station."

"Thanks for the co-operation, Chief," said MacNeil.

"It was a pleasure. Good luck to you."

THE DETECTIVE and his prisoner walked out of the building and got into the back seat of the waiting police car. The driver eased away from the curb and they drove slowly through the downpour. There was silence in the car for a few blocks, then Sloan spoke.

"What's all this 'thief' business you were pulling back there, Mac," he asked. The policeman sitting next to the driver glanced around slightly. His notice of Sloan's friendly tone irritated MacNeil. "Jesus, Mac," continued Sloan, "we've known each other for..." MacNeil's sharp voice cut into him quickly.

"Shut up, punk," he said, suddenly mad. "When I want you to talk to me, I'll let you know! Until then, keep your mouth shut! Understand?" There was nothing else said until the car pulled up in front of the depot.

"Thanks, Officers," said MacNeil as he and Sloan stepped out into the pouring rain. They hurried quickly inside and walked to the ticket window. "My name's MacNeil," the detective said to the clerk. "I have a compartment reserved on the Limited to Chicago." The clerk fingered through a file and took out

a small brown envelope. "Here you are," he said. "Car five, compartment nine. They're boarding now at Gate Six." MacNeil nodded. They turned and walked through the waiting room toward Gate Six. Along the way, several people glanced curiously at the handcuffs that held the two men together.

When they got to the gate, MacNeil stopped a redcap and handed him a baggage check. "I've got a suitcase in the check room," he said. "Car five, compartment nine, on the Limited. The redcap hurried away. The two men passed through the gate and boarded the train. As they entered the compartment, Sloan said, "How about my stuff? They took some suits and things out of my room when they picked me up." MacNeil looked at him disgustedly.

"We don't extradite personal property," he said sarcastically, "just people."

He locked the compartment door behind them, then took a key from his inside coat pocket and released the handcuff from his wrist. "Over there," he said, pointing to the couch that would convert into a lower berth. Sloan sat down, MacNeil

took off his raincoat and hung it on the door, then hung his suitcoat over it. He faced Sloan and very casually drew his thirty-eight revolver from the holster under his left arm. He slid the weapon easily into his trouser pocket.

"What's the matter, Mac," asked Sloan with a sly grin. "Afraid I'll jump you?"

"You haven't got guts enough, Jerry."

"Well, you do remember my right name after all, don't you?" He spoke in a mocking tone.

"You want to take off your coat before I chain you back up," asked MacNeil with a mockery of his own. Sloan's eyes flashed anger. He didn't like being handcuffed and MacNeil knew it.

"There's no need for that, Mac," he said hotly. "I won't try anything with you." MacNeil smiled at his prisoner.

"No, you won't." He walked over and locked Sloan's left wrist in the empty bracelet.

There was a knock at the compartment door. MacNeil opened it and saw the redcap with his suitcase. He took the bag without letting the man in and gave him a half-dollar. Then he closed the door and

relocked it.

AFTER A few minutes the train began to move. It crawled slowly out of the station and, a little while later, out of the city. Soon they were speeding northward through Mississippi. It continued to rain, sometimes in torrents and other times lightly. MacNeil sat in a lounge chair tilted back against the compartment wall. His feet were planted lightly on his upturned suitcase. His tie was loosened, his collar open and he sat with his arms folded across his chest. Sloan stared idly out the window at the rain and the red clay and the passing telephone poles. For awhile he counted the poles but when this began to give him a headache he stopped. He began to hum quietly to himself but soon tired of this also. Finally he laid his head back and tried to sleep. He found this difficult, partly because of the motion of the train and partly because he could not get entirely comfortable with his hands cuffed so closely together. He opened his eyes and lighted a cigarette. While he smoked, he stared at MacNeil. He stared for a long time. Presently the detective looked over at him.

"What's on your mind,

punk," he asked. "Getting itchy?" Sloan smiled.

"Not me, Mac," he answered. "I got no worries." MacNeil grunted and shifted his eyes. A few moments passed before Sloan spoke again.

"Mac."

"Yeah?"

"You ever run across Shirley any more?" MacNeil's face tightened into a scowl.

"What do you care? You were through with her a long time ago. After you ruined her."

"What do you mean, ruined her," said Sloan hotly. "I did more for that kid than anybody, for Christ's sakes. I bought her clothes, taught her how to talk, took her all over the country. Somebody should have ruined me that way." MacNeil eyed him coldly.

"And then you dumped her." he said calmly.

"Well, what the hell, you didn't expect me to keep her around forever, did you? What was I suppose to do?"

"You should have let her alone in the first place," said MacNeil, his voice rising. "You and your big ideas. Going to be a big deal, a big racketeer, and carry a rod! She was doing just fine until you came along with your big talk! And she'd still

be doing just fine if you'd have let her alone!"

"Sure, she'd have ended up with you, living in some two-bit flat and eating hamburgers for supper on a lousy Sergeant's pay."

"That's better than where she is now," said MacNeil softly, his eyes staring out the window into space. Sloan looked at him thoughtfully, wondering.

"What do you mean, Mac," he asked quietly. MacNeil did not answer. Sloan's eyes narrowed. He stood up quickly and stepped toward MacNeil.

"I asked you what you. . ."

THE DETECTIVE leaped from his chair and drove a smashing right fist against Sloan's mouth. The handcuffed man slammed back against the wall. MacNeil took one step forward and hit him hard just below the belt. Sloan doubled up and fell to his knees. As he started to pitch forward on his face, the big cop reached down and grabbed him by the lapels of his coat. He dragged him to his feet and shoved him roughly back onto the couch, sitting down beside him and keeping a firm grip on the coat. He began to spit out words vehemently.

"You're in custody, punk!

You should know better than to move without being told!" He was beginning to break out in a sweat now and reached up to wipe his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

"You want to hear about Shirley, punk? All right, I'll tell you all about her. I'll start with the time you stepped out of the picture. after you filled her with big ideas and easy living and then dumped her, she didn't know any other way to live so she tried to keep it up. For that, she had to have somebody to take your place. She drifted from one cheap hood to another, dropping down a notch or two each time. Finally she was nothing but just another tramp. I tried to help her but she wouldn't let me. She hit the bot. om. At least I thought it was the bottom. I didn't think she could get any lower but she ffound a way. She got on the junk, got to be a regular main-liner, scars on both arms. She got it so she took to the street. Pretty soon she was such a pig that nobody would look at her. She got hauled into the tank one night and she cracked up, really blew her top. You should have seen her, Jerry. You should have seen the results of your big ideas. That was the end of

her, for good and all. Know where she is now?"

Sloan pressed himself back against the seat, cringing at MacNeil's words. His face was pale, twisted in torment as he listened. He felt MacNeil's grip tighten on his collar.

"She's downstate in the monkey hospital," continued the detective. "They keep 'em in cages down there. All she's got to do all day is try to climb the walls. That's what you did, punk. That's the whole story. Now live with it!"

He released Sloan and walked back to his chair. Sloan turned his face toward the window. It was getting dark outside. He closed his eyes. Shirley, Shirley, Shirley. I'm sorry, Shirley, I'm sorry. I didn't know anything like that was going to happen. I figured you were too level headed, too smart. I should have checked up on you once in a while. I would have found out and I could have helped you. I could have straightened you out, Shirley. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry.

He opened his eyes and turned toward the detective. "You loved her, Mac?"

MacNeil looked at him but did not answer at once. He

thought of the girl as he had known her in high school. And a few years later. When she had seen him in his uniform for the first time. Laughing and happy like a little girl. And they had gone to a little restaurant to celebrate. After that, she had let him come up to her apartment. It had been wonderful. And then she dropped out of sight for awhile. The next time he saw her was one night when he was sitting in a patrol car parked in the night club district. She was wearing silver fox and coming out of the Chez with Jerry Sloan, racketeer. He followed them to a North Shore apartment and waited for her to come out. He waited all night. She did not come out.

HE SAW her a few times alone after that but always when he tried to talk to her about her life she would cut him off. 'It's my life,' she would say. 'I know what I'm doing. Besides, Jerry will take care of me.' Yeah, he took care of you, all right. There was a four-year period when he didn't see or hear from her. Then her name started turning up on the police blotter. Drunk and disorderly. Soliciting on the street. Finally, possession of narcotics.

Sentenced to the State Hospital for the cure and her mind snapped. Now she wears a loose housecoat with no belt and soft-soled shoes with no laces and the State will take care of her until the day she dies. I hope to God it's soon.

"Yes, I loved her," he said bitterly. "I loved her so much I'm no good without her. But I'll go on living and hating guys like you and making enemies and someday some punk will get lucky and blast me good. Then maybe I'll find some peace."

I know what you mean, thought Sloan. I'll never have any peace of mind again, not now, not knowing what I caused. When I get back, they're going to put me away for ten years, at least. That old watchman was slugged in the warehouse robbery. He nearly died. I'll never beat this rap. Ten years I'll be sitting in a cell with nothing to do but remember her as she was and think of her now, the way she is. The way I made her. Ten years. Good God!

There was a knock at the door. MacNeil opened it. The porter smiled. "Last call for dinner, gentlemen," he said. MacNeil nodded and closed the door. He put on his suitcoat

and straightened his tie.

"Come on, punk," he said to Sloan. "The law says I have to feed you."

Sloan stood up and MacNeil unlocked the handcuff from his right wrist and snapped it onto his own left wrist. Sloan was silent, his face showing plainly that he was in deep thought. MacNeil opened the door and they left the compartment.

They walked slowly through the cars, Sloan first, MacNeil following. The dining car was at the rear of the train. They passed through the chair coaches. No one noticed the handcuffs.

As they stepped out onto the vestibule between two cars, Sloan stopped.

"What's the idea," snapped MacNeil, instantly alerted.

"Wait a minute, Mac," said Sloan. "Please. Just a minute." He stepped aside, out of the doorway, and leaned against the passenger exit.

"What you said before, Mac, about not being able to find any peace until some guy blasted you kind of stuck with me. How do you think it's going to be for me, rotting away down in the Joint with nothing to do but think about her. I couldn't

take it, Mac. I'd go crazy, just like she did."

"I hope you do," said MacNeil coldly.

"And how about you? You were right, you know. It's going to get worse and worse until it's so bad you'll use your gun on yourself. You won't be able to take it, either, Mac."

"What are you getting at, punk?"

"I've got a way out, Mac. For both of us."

"How?" He looked at Sloan suspiciously. Sloan smiled.

"Easy," he said. Behind him, his free hand was fumbling silently with the door latch. There was a click and he knew that the door was unlocked.

MacNeil heard the sound, too, and jerked viciously on the cuffs, pulling Sloan away from the door.

The door flew open and cold wind poured in, bringing with it the roar of the rails beneath. Outside, the darkness sped by at one-hundred and thirty miles an hour.

MacNeil was panic-stricken by the sudden noise. He groped in his trouser pocket for his gun.

Jerry Sloan laughed aloud.

"Too late, Mac," he said.

Then he plunged through the door, pulling the detective after him, and both men disappeared into the blackness.

THE END

He had often heard the rule, "If you want to go around with a married woman, make sure that you can go a-Round with her husband!" Resentment ripped through him for it seemed that all pretty dames were married to guys that could finish him off!

IT'S GETTING MESSY



by FRANK SNOW

HE HAD made the rule up himself; for himself. Never mess with a married woman. Too many complications, too much danger of winding up with a broken head. He was thinking of the rule now. There were a lot of

married women here tonight; he'd have to take it easy—watch the drinks. At two o'clock in the morning the local Elk's social was in full swing. Boistrous male conversation mingled with hilarious feminine squeals. The odor of

stale beer, human perspiration, plus a dozen different brands of perfume fought to offset one another. Andy Burris was annoyed and irritated. It was just as he figured it would be.

He had arrived a half-hour ago to make a token appearance. He was, after all, an officer of the club. Handsome, perfectly groomed, he stood at the end of the bar, hoping the smile painted on his face was a pleasant one. At 38, he was getting hard to please, bored with crowds.

Restlessly, his eyes roved over the crowded room, singling out the women. He noted the slight glaze in their eyes, the alcoholic flush of their cheeks, the signs of perspiration on their clothes and faces. A bunch of wilted flowers, he thought. Then he saw her. She stood by the side of the juke box; slim, clean-cut, wholesome. His breath caught in his throat. The varicolored lights of the juke box played over her, sheathing her in mystical allure.

She moved her left hand, and his eyes caught the twinkle of reflected light. Resentment ripped through him. She would be married. All the

pretty ones were. Plucked from the vine before good men, men like himself, who waited till they were substantially set in life could take their pick. Disgusted, he began edging away from the bar, getting ready to make an unobtrusive exit.

"Hey, Andy. Andy Burris! Where you been? I been looking for you." Andy winced as the short, stocky young man weaved his way toward him.

"Hello, Joe." He forced a smile. "Having a good time?"

"Good time, heck. I'm getting pie-eyed." The young man's voice rose in volume, he lurched forward and draped his arm around Andy's shoulder. "Hey, fellas! Here's Andy Burris, good old Andy. Best darn foreman Gregory Steel's got."

Andy's smile turned sickly. He attempted to extricate himself. "Well, I've got to get going, Joe, I..."

"You can't go yet. You got a have a drink with me. C'mon, I got a bottle at my table. And the little woman—you never met her yet. C'mon, you got a meet her."

There was no help for it: he allowed himself to be dragged to a table in the rear of the

room.

"Hey, Ann. Here's my foreman, good old Andy. Give him a drink. Give him two drinks. Heck, let's get him drunk!"

"Mr. Burris, how are you?" She was the girl he had seen at the juke box. Seen close at hand like this she was even more perfect than he had thought before. Relaxed facial contours formed a perfect oval. Her hair was an intense black, her eyes, blue, a soft clear blue. And her figure was adequate—no more and no less. No flaring curves, no flaunting projections—just adequate.

HE WAS stunned and revolted. What gross miscarriage of fate had teamed this little goddess to that homely little punk? He detested the man. Had detested him from the first day the man had come to work under him as a tool and die apprentice. For a long time now Joe Merko's pushing friendliness, his unabashed, insistent begging for extra overtime had rubbed him the wrong way.

"My but you're pretty." Andy automatically used what he called his well-modulated voice; it was a tone lower than

his ordinary speaking voice. "How in the world did Joe ever win a lovely little thing like you?"

"Huh"—she blinked her eyes—"my goodness, it's the first time I've been complimented in years."

"My"—Andy's sigh was exaggerated. "Why is it I've never had the luck to meet someone as beautiful as you?"

"Oh, please! Mr. Burris"—she burst into infectious laughter—"I've heard all about you—what a big ladies man you are."

"Just gossip, just malicious gossip." But he had to grin, and the grin erased some of the tired cynicism from his bland features. "I'll bet Joe told you that—now where is he?" He turned his head and saw him on the part of the floor reserved for dancing. Joe had a big buxum blonde for a partner. Andy had heard about the blonde. She was a divorcee and was talked about. He turned to Ann. "Would you care to dance?"

"I'd like to, but I'm not much good at it," she said. She wasn't, but because she was light and pliable, it didn't matter to Andy. He felt masterful and protective as he

guided her through the steps of a rumba.

"My, if I could only dance like you," she murmured. "That's easy," he said. "Just get Joe to invite me up to the house some night and I'll teach you." Her eyes sparkled. "Would you?"

They ended the dance near Joe and the blonde. Joe had a wrestler's hold on the blonde and was attempting to kiss her. Contempt sizzled through Andy. "It looks like you're going to lose your husband, Ann," he said.

"Oh, Joe gets that way once in a blue moon." He was amazed to see that she remained in a humorous mood. "I think it's because he stays too close to the house and me. Then"—she wrinkled her nose—"when we do attend an affair like this he goes wild."

They wound up the evening together. For Andy it meant being bracketed with the blonde. He ignored her as much as possible concentrating his attentions on Ann. Here was a girl that made him feel alive and spirited. Here was a girl that was worthy of his attentions.

The blonde's name was Sue, and she was more than a little high. She seemed inor-

dinately proud of the mass of flesh on her chest. "You can look but don't touch!" She kept saying that continually in a high alcoholic giggle as Joe made repeated passes at it. Andy's contempt for both of them increased as his admiration for Ann soared. What delicate tack she displayed! Why, almost she seemed genuinely amused at her husband's boorish behavior.

It was up to Andy to see that Sue got home. At the apartment house she directed him to she invited him up for a nightcap. He refused, but when she became noisily insistent, he complied reluctantly. He hated scenes.

IT WAS A walk-up apartment and she needed help negotiating two flights of stairs. When he guided her to her door, she insisted he come in. As soon as the door closed, she turned and pressed against him, her large wet lips seeking his own. For a moment he responded, then felt the massive, strapped-in flesh of her. He pushed her away. "How about that drink, Sue," he said.

"Right away, Andy. As soon as I get this damn girdle off." She weaved toward an-

other room, separating her dress from her slip as she went. In a moment she called, "Hey, Andy, gimme a hand with this damn thing, will you?"

He hesitated, then stole towards the door leading to the hall, opened it softly and slipped out. No thank you, he said to himself. I've had quite enough of overstuffed blondes. From now on it's going to be grade A stuff or nothing.

He got into his car, started the powerful motor and eased away. The car was only one of his assets. He had money in the bank, bonds, and some property. It wasn't always like that. Everything he had, he had earned. A childhood that featured his parents quarreling incessantly over the little money they had had formed an implacable resolve in him. The resolve had been to be well set in life before he himself married. As a young man he could have had his pick of the prettier girls. But he wasn't ready then; he wasn't going to make the same mistake his father had. When the need for woman companionship got to be too compelling, he always chose someone he knew he couldn't pos-

sibly fall in love with.

Well, now he was set; now he was ready. And now he was faced with the bitter acknowledgement that there just wasn't too much to pick from any more.

During the past few years he had avoided all contact with married couples. Principally because they bored him, especially if they had children. But now he found himself accepting Joe's frequent invitations to come up to the house for a few drinks. He just couldn't get enough of watching Ann's lithe figure moving near him. He just couldn't help thinking of how much he could do for her—if she was his.

At times his thoughts frightened him; he had avoided this kind of thing for so long. But the situation here was so different. She was such a perfect picture of gentle femininity. It was wrong, all wrong, her being mated to this crude ox of a man.

For the pleasure of being near Ann he had a price to pay. It came in the form of putting up with Joe's possessive friendship in the shop. And it meant giving him all the overtime he could handle.

Despite union seniority rules, Andy was able to do this. There were subtle ways to get around rules.

But it irritated him, this posing as Joe's friend. Even here in the man's own house he had a hard time masking his dislike. There was a grin on his face, but his eyes were hooded when he asked, "Ann, how did you ever marry this homely guy?"

"Go ahead and tell him, Ann." Joe, his moon-like face thinned a little by the extra hours he was putting in at the shop, was tired but happy. "It's not good looks, it's personality that counts, right?"

THEY WERE in the parlor, relaxing after supper. Ann, who had just handed a drink to Andy, turned and went to her husband. "Andy, how dare you call my Joe homely. He's not homely, he's cute." She passed her hand through his hair, ruffling it.

Joe reached out, grasped his wife by the midriff and pulled her over the high arm of the sofa into his lap. As her dress swirled up and fell back to her hips, Andy saw the white of her slip, the whiter flesh of her thighs. Hunger, so intense that

his teeth gritted together, pulsed through him. The oaf—the stupid oaf, he thought. He grinned, pretending indifference. Then anger fused with desire. Irrevocably, his mind was made up. He'd get her away from this stupid moron if it was the last thing he did.

He saw her roll off her husband's lap onto the soft carpet on the floor. Then she was rising hastily, her face flushed, her hands pulling frantically at her slip and dress. "Joe, what will Andy think?" she gasped.

"That old wolf—you'll have to show him more than your panties to get him excited." He reached out and slapped his wife smartly across the rump. Andy winced when she yelped.

"Joe, you dope," she cried, "now you woke the baby up."

The baby—it was a two year old girl. Andy had been stunned when he first learned of her existence. He recalled his former aversion to messing with married women because of the inevitable complications. Well, the child would be a complication all right. But, on the other hand, where could he find someone as desirable as

Ann without complications.

Before the week was over he told Joe he had confidential information that a certain department on the night shift had been assigned special work. It would mean a higher rate of pay plus unlimited overtime. When Joe pleaded for a transfer, he quickly arranged it.

Ironically, it was Joe himself who kept insisting he visit Ann. As he put it—to keep her from getting too lonely.

He made the most of the opportunity. In teaching Ann how to dance he purposely held her too closely. One night he stopped dancing entirely, just held her pressed against himself. When he felt the surging warmth of her body responding to his, he moved his hands possessively, lower, lower. Abruptly, trembling with quick panic, she tore away from him.

"You must really love your husband." His voice was bitter.

"Oh, Andy, it hasn't anything to do with love," she protested. "It's just being married, having a family, and—and just being decent, I guess."

Later that night, pacing his

hotel room floor, Andy came to the conclusion that although Ann didn't love her husband, marriage for her had become a habit and a duty. Being essentially honest, she would continue being loyal and fair as long as her husband was. Well, it was up to him to show her what a perfect stinker her husband really was.

THE NEXT day, after the completion of his shift, he waited in the plant until Joe showed up for the night shift. "My car is tied up in a garage for a few hours," he told him. "How's chances of borrowing yours?"

"Sure, go ahead. It's parked in the lot across from gate 2. Always keep it there. There's an extra key in one of those metallic holders under the front bumper. Just reach your hand in—can't miss it."

"Fine, thanks pal." He engaged Joe in shop talk for a few minutes, then said. "Say, I picked up Sue Bencke last night." When Joe looked blank, he continued. "You remember—the blonde you made such a play for a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh, her. Say that's a well-stacked babe, all right. How'd

you do?"

Andy grimaced. "Not so hot. She kept talking about you all night. Man—you sure must have made an impression on her."

"No kidding!" Joe's voice registered glee. "Say, I got a call that babe one of these nights."

Recalling the conversation a few hours later, Andy smiled grimly. Well, I'll just make that little call for you, friend Joe. He entered a phone booth in his hotel lobby and began dialing.

"Sue?" he asked. "Sue Bencke?" When a feminine voice answered in the affirmative, he lowered his voice. "This is Joe—Joe Merko—remember me?"

"Joe Merko?" Her voice held doubt.

"Yeah, Joe Merko—you remember—the Elk's social?"

"Oh, yes." She laughed now. "How are you, Joe?"

"Say, I been meaning to call you up. We had a lot of fun that night. How about going out with me some night—we'll have a load of laughs."

"Well, I don't know—you're a married man."

"So what? You saw my wife—who could have fun

with her? You and me—we're the same types. We can really have a time." When she appeared weakening, Andy, promising to call again, hastily terminated the conversation.

He kept the promise. For a week he called her every night gradually making his conversation more tantalizing, more intimate. When it came time to set a date for a meeting he would grow evasive, leaving the woman on the other end of the line in a state of fevered expectation.

He had purposely stayed away from Ann for a few nights and the need to see her had grown increasingly difficult to control. Well, tonight he would see her—tonight he would weave her into his plans.

Ann ushered him into the parlor, a warm smile on her lips. "You haven't been around for a while, Andy—the girl friends keeping you that busy?"

"Not exactly." Andy shrugged. "I—well, I've been sort of wrestling with a problem. The problem is"—he hesitated, her face was so fresh, so innocently serene.

"Just a minute, Andy, I'll get you a drink," Ann said. He

recalled the exotic shapeliness of her bare thighs as she struggled in her husband's lap, and his hesitation vanished.

"Okay." She handed him the drink. "Now what's the problem?"

"Well, I just found out a good friend of mine—married—is having an affair with another woman. Now, the problem is, should I tell his wife or not."

"But, no. Of course not. Why should you get involved and lose a friend."

"I thought of that," Andy said. "But think of it this way. This affair is just beginning. Now, if I tell the wife and she calls or sees this other woman and threatens her off—well, the affair will be over before it gets too messy."

"I don't know," Ann looked doubtful. "Maybe you have something there."

She plugged in a small portable radio. At the sound of music she thrust out her arms. "Let's dance," she said. He went to her, his heart pounding. Contact with her body jolted the blood to his head. His hands tightened. Then, just in time, he steeled himself to caution. She looked up at him, her eyes untrou-

bled. "Holding me too close, huh?" she said.

The next evening he entered the phone booth in his hotel lobby. When he finished dialing, he put his handkerchief over the mouthpiece. "Is Joe Merko there?" He made his voice as gruff as possible.

Ann's voice answered. "No, this is his wife speaking. Joe is at work."

"His wife! Well, lady, you just tell that no-good husband of yours to lay off my girl friend or I'll tear his block off—you hear!"

"Now just a minute"—Ann's voice was startled—"what are you talking about?"

"Never mind—just tell that louse to lay off Sue Bencke, that's all." He slammed the receiver down savagely.

He left the phone booth breathing heavily, wet with perspiration. He needed a drink—bad. He entered the hotel bar, wearily straddled a stool and ordered a whiskey. Doubt and a lurking fear assailed him. Now it's going to get messy. Maybe I should have stuck to my rule about not messing with married women. He thought of the ease with which he could get any number of the single women

he knew to go out with him. Then, subconsciously, he compared them with Ann. He winced. After the fourth whiskey his agitation subsided. He looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar. He was proud of that face. I deserve the best, he thought. And Ann is the best.

THE NEXT day, on his return from work he found a note in his cubicle at the hotel desk. The message read that he was to call Mrs. Ann Merko as soon as possible.

"Andy, this is Ann. I've got to ask you something." Her voice was taut, heavy with strain. "Last night—that married man you were talking about—it couldn't be Joe?"

"Ann—you sound upset," he hedged. "I can hardly understand what you're saying. Is Joe there?"

"No, Joe went to work. Oh, Andy, somebody called me last night and said Joe was fooling around with Sue Bencke. But I just can't believe it. Not Joe, it's impossible."

"Look, Ann, just take it easy. I'll be over tonight and we'll talk it over."

Excitement rode him but he braked it forcibly. He took a

leisurely shower, dressed carefully and slowly, then went out to eat. Then, his pace accelerating, he got his car and drove it to within a block of the building where Sue Bencke had an apartment. From there he hailed a taxi and had it take him to the steel plant. He found Joe's five-year old sedan exactly where he said it would be. He detached the key from under the bumper and drove the car away. Carefully he negotiated the three miles to Sue Bencke's apartment. He left the car in front of the place. Then, in his own car once more, he drove to Ann's house.

Even before he mounted the porch steps, she had the door open for him. "I've been waiting for you." Her face was pale, her smile bleak. He followed her into the house. "Don't look so tragic, Ann. It can't be that bad."

"I don't know. Nothing like this has happened to me before. I told Joe about the man who called and he said it was somebody's idea of a joke. It's—it's unbelievable—don't you think so?" She looked at him hopefully.

"Well, now." He spoke slowly, carefully. "You're tak-

ing the whole thing too seriously. Especially for this day and age. Why it's a common thing—husband's playing around—divorces."

"Andy, what are you trying to tell me?"

He got up and paced the floor. She looked at him apprehensively, her eyes growing very large. "Well, I wasn't going to say anything, but as long as it's gone this far"—he paused, biting his lip.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Well, you understand it's nothing that I've seen personally. It's just talk."

"Then it was Joe you were talking about last night!" She jumped to her feet. "I don't believe it. Not Joe—Joe couldn't do anything like that."

FOR A moment the agitated rise and fall of her chest fascinated him. He wet his lips. "I'm afraid you'll have to believe it. Why, just tonight I heard that Joe was taking off from work to see her."

"No! I don't believe it. Joe is at work. I'll prove it." She walked with fierce strides across the room and reached for the phone. His hand was on top of hers when it clasped the instrument. "Hold it, Ann.

What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to call the plant," she said.

"You're making a mistake. If he's not there, and you his wife calls, they'll want to know where he is. It could cost him his job." He was speaking rapidly now. "I know of a better way. Let's take a ride past Sue Bencke's apartment. If his car is there, he's guilty. If not, he's in the clear. What do you say?"

"All right." Her face set in stubborn lines. "I'll get the girl next door to mind the baby."

He drove slowly, conscious of her uneven breathing. When he stopped for a red light, he glanced at her. She held herself rigidly, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. He turned the corner of the street where he had left Joe's car. It was still there. He pulled up to it and stopped, letting the motor idle. When he heard her gasping, choking effort to hold back a sob, he pulled away. A block further on he pulled to the curb, stopped the car, and took her in his arms.

She was sobbing freely now, her head buried in his shoulder. The agony of hunger was too intense now; it clashed and

overrode his habitual caution. Her hair; dark, silken strong—one of his hands convulsively dug into it. Her body; warm, quivering, helpless—his other hand pressed fiercely against her back.

Sharp, searing pain broke his hold, rationalizing his senses. A sudden movement and his kneecap had cracked sharply against the steering post. He put his hand on his knee, massaging the needling pain away. She looked up at him, her face tear-streaked, her eyes fogged.

"Ann, don't take it so hard." He was tender now. "He's not worth it. Listen, you always thought I was kidding when I said you were wonderful. Well I'm not kidding now. You're wonderful and..."

She shook her head groggily. "Please take me home," she said.

HE WATCHED her with growing annoyance as she paced the parlor floor, her eyes bright, a spot of fevered high on each cheek. "You can't love him that much!" He spoke sharply.

"It's got nothing to do with love!" She walked up to him, hands clinched. "It's me—me,

myself. I'm a failure. Somehow I'm just not good enough."

"Stop it!" He grasped her by the shoulders. "You're twisting this thing all around. You're letting your pride get the best of you."

"It's me—it is me!" She tore out of his grasp. "I've been sleeping or something. Oh, I don't care for myself—but my child—I've failed her. That's the thing that's eating me."

She stood still for a moment, wringing her hands. "Maybe you're right Andy, about my pride I mean." She picked up the phone book. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm going to call Sue Bencke," she said.

He squirmed when she began dialing. Then he heard her voice, halting, raw with strain. She stopped talking and he leaned forward, but failed to make out the voice on the other end of the line. He watched her face, saw it blanch as if struck. Then, as she continued to listen, spurts of ugly color blotched and mottled it. Suddenly she slammed the receiver into the cradle. For moments she stood there, trembling violently, unable to speak.

Finally, he asked, "What did she say, Ann?"

"She told me if I was too dumb to hold my husband not to come crying to her about it."

As he was leaving, he pulled her into his arms. "Ann, no matter what happens, I'll be waiting for you. Call me, call me anytime you want me."

He returned Joe's car to the Gregory Steel Company's parking lot and returned to his hotel room. Sleep was out of the question, the memory of her defenseless body lying in his arms was too vivid. Perhaps she'd call tonight. But the night passed, then a couple of days with no call from her. He grew restless, tight with worry.

It was Joe who finally called, not Ann. Andy, who had just finished dressing for the evening, it was a Saturday night and he had nowhere to go, had been staring moodily out of his hotel window. He approached the phone warily.

"Andy, this is Joe. Seen Ann tonight?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, she's been acting kind of nutty all week. I left the house for about a half-hour and when I come back

she's gone. Left the baby with a neighbor. I'm getting worried."

"Oh? But why call me, Joe?"

"Well, she's been mentioning you all week. We been arguing like crazy over nothing and she's been saying she could always go to you for help. That's why I called."

"Yeah, she's been accusing me of playing around with that Bencke dame. At first I thought it was some kind of a joke so I kidded her along—said I was. Then when she started to go into hysterics, I couldn't get it into her head that the whole thing just never happened. Boy, she's really driving me batty."

"Oh," Andy fidgeted. "I dor't see what I can do."

"Hey, hold on for a minute. Don't hang up, will you? Boy, what a time Ann's been giving me. Claims she talked to the Bencke dame and the babe admits going with me. You never saw Ann like this. She's been threatening to shoot the babe to teach her a lesson. Hey, I just thought of something. Hang on for a minute, will you?"

It wasn't hard to figure. Ann had probably gone to have it

out with the Bencke woman. Well, maybe this would settle the affair in his favor. If the Bencke woman got as nasty as he'd heard she could get. . . . He'd better get over there, ready to comfort Ann.

Then Joe's voice was shrieking into his ear. "The gun—my gun is gone!"

"Gun? What gun—you fool!"

"The souvenir I brought back from the other side. A German Luger. My God, you don't think. . . ."

HE SLAMMED the receiver into place. For a moment he stood paralyzed with shock. Ann with a gun! Impossible. The picture was too ludicrous. Then he was on his way out of the room, striding rapidly across the hotel lobby. There was a cab on the corner, he hesitated briefly, then hailed it.

He sat on the edge of the seat biting his lip. When the cab reached its destination, he got out and walked rapidly into the building.

Damn these walk-up apartments! He was laboring for breath as he made the turn for the third floor. He reached the landing and stopped. Fif-

teen feet away was the door of Sue Bencke's apartment. Ann's back was towards him, he heard her bitter voice flay the woman before her with angry denunciations. Sue Bencke stood with her hands on her hips, her face flushed, her eyes glaring.

The curt smacking sound cracked in the narrow hallway. Sue Bencke's palm had contacted viciously with Ann's cheek. He started forward, enraged at the woman's callousness. Then he saw the gun in Ann's hand as it came out of her coat pocket.

"Ann!" He grasped her by the shoulders, spun her around. A sharp searing pain stabbed into his stomach, a burst of sound clogged his eardrums. Both women screamed. The shrill cries slapped against his head, sent him staggering backwards. *There was too much confusion here—he was hurt and he wanted to be alone.* A gooey substance was covering the hands he had pressed against his stomach. *Messy, just as I thought, messy as hell.* He wavered, then plunged head first down the stairway.

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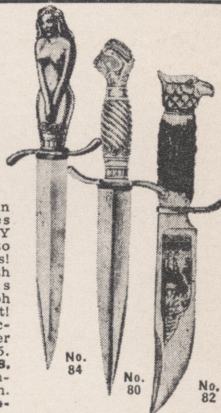
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| 5. Standing on the Corner | 13. Sweet Old Fashion Girl |
| 6. On the Street Where You Live | 14. Allegheny Moon |
| 7. Born to Be With You | 15. My Prayer |
| 8. Be-Bop-A-Lula | 16. Tell Me Why |
| | 17. Hot Dog, Buddy Buddy |
| | 18. Portuguese Washer Woman |

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| 1. Wonderful Saviour | 11. Got So Many Million Years |
| 2. Have a Little Talk With Jesus | 12. Counting My Blessings |
| 3. It Takes A Lot of Loving | 13. I Love The Hymn They Sang At Mother's Grave |
| 4. I Want To Be Ready | 14. The Blood That Stained The Old Rugged Cross |
| 5. Supper Time | 15. Everlasting Joy |
| 6. I'll Always Have Someone To Turn To | 16. Wait A Little Longer Please Jesus |
| 7. God Understands | 17. 'Til The Last Leaf Shall Fall |
| 8. God Bless God | 18. I'm Building A Mansion |
| 9. Don't Judge Your Neighbor | |
| 10. If We Forget God | |

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| 4. Eat Drink and Be Merry | 12. Tell Me |
| 5. These Hands | 13. Beautiful Lies |
| 6. Seasons of My Heart | 14. I've Lived A Lot in My Time |
| 7. Yes I Know Why | 15. You're Free to Go |
| 8. I Don't Believe You've Met My Baby | 16. Lonely Side of Town |
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| 3. Buffalo Gal | 9. Red River Valley |
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