

# THE EXECUTIONER

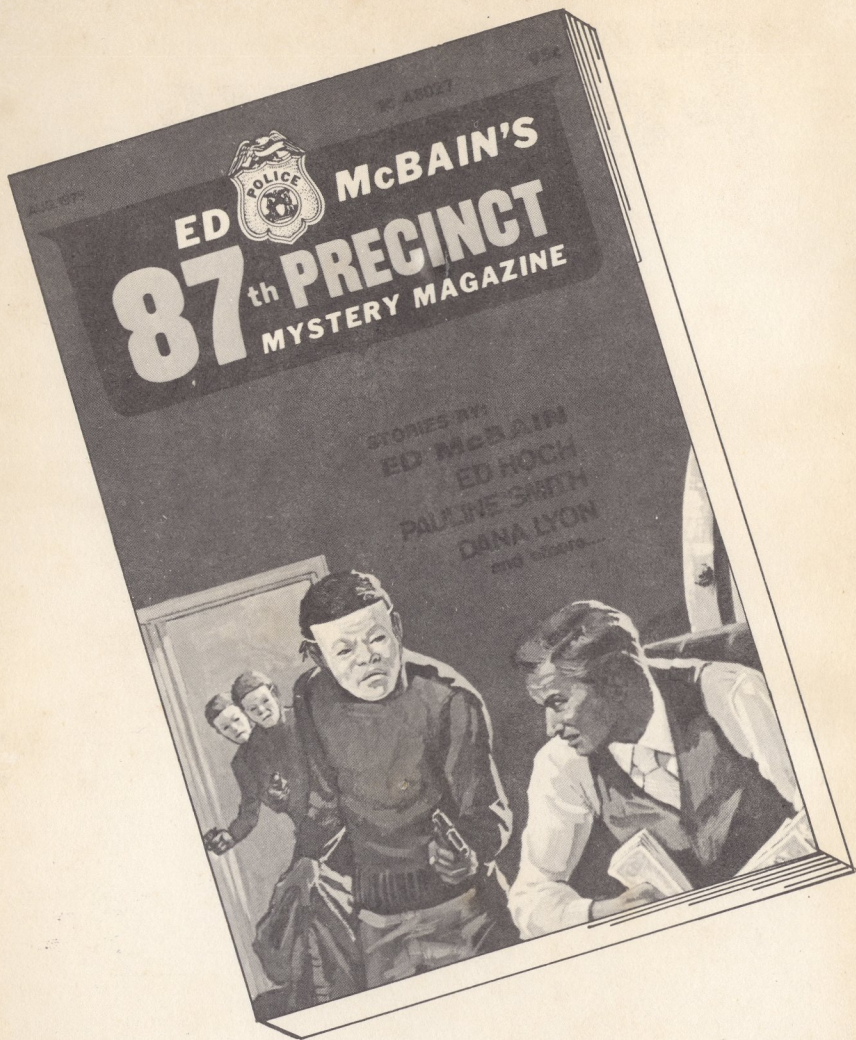
## MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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# THE EXECUTIONER MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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### THE EXECUTIONER MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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# THE BUSY CORPSE

*If the Mafia's framing you for a murder how do you turn the tables without winding up dead on one?*



by Stephen Mertz

LIEUTENANT HAL BROOKS opened the door at O'Dair's first knock and O'Dair, who was a private detective, sensed immediately that something was wrong.

Brooks' broad, black, sad face was sadder than usual. He glanced hurriedly up and down the corridor outside his apartment to make sure the other man was alone, then motioned his friend in with a quick nod of his head.

O'Dair stepped in and Brooks closed the door behind him, and O'Dair knew instantly what the problem was.

A dead man lay stretched out across the livingroom carpet.

"It's Benny Zito," Hal said, leaning back against the door. "He's an errand boy for Lew Morelli."

O'Dair had never met Zito,

but he knew the name. As for Morelli, he was a top aide to Don Vito Corona who in turn was the ranking capo mafiosa of the local Families.

O'Dair walked over and knelt beside the dead man. Benny Zito had been a lean, seedy-looking specimen, and he had died from three bullets in the lower back, any one of which would probably have done the trick.

A gun, a .38 caliber Police Special, lay a few feet away from the body, beside a couch. O'Dair nodded to it as he looked at Hal and rose to his feet.

"Yours?"

Brooks nodded glumly. "Yeah."

O'Dair crossed over and sat down on the couch. He reached for a cigarette and lit it.

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"It doesn't lood good," he admitted. "I guess we'll have to call off that Italian dinner down at Luigi's until we straighten this thing out."

Brooks blinked, made an exasperated gesture. "What the hell are you so calm about?" he demanded. "Can't you see what's happened?"

"Not really. You didn't kill him, did you?"

"No, of course not, but what difference does that make? The guy's dead and it's my gun that wasted him. Everyone knows I've been working on the Morelli thing. People could take this a lot of different ways."

"Tell me about it."

With a sigh, the black man sank into a chair across from his friend. "They doped me. Fifteen years on the force and I fell for a mickey."

"How?"

"My whiskey. I came home, fixed myself a drink and that was it. When I came to, there was Zito and the gun was in my hand."

"No one heard the shots?"

Brooks shook his head. "The apartment's soundproofed."

"A nitrate test downtown ought to clear you. You didn't fire the gun, so there shouldn't be any powder particles in your palm."

"I wouldn't count on that, buddy. Morelli's awful slick. After they wasted Zito with the first slug, they could have cupped the gun in my hand and pushed in

the last two. I don't know, but I wouldn't doubt it."

O'Dair nodded, thought a moment, then asked, "So what do you plan to do now?"

Brooks looked at the floor. "That's a good question. I've been sitting here for the half hour since I woke up trying to figure that one out." He caught the other man's eye. "Any ideas?"

O'Dair shrugged. "A few. You're sure this is Morelli's work?"

"Hell, yes. Morelli's hanging by a thread and he knows it. I've been getting too close for comfort and in another week we'd have had enough on him to get an indictment. He knows what the chances of that will be when this breaks. A lot of people aren't too happy about having a colored boy on the force anyway, and this is just what they'll need to put me in my place. 'He was tied in with the mob.' 'It was a falling out among thieves.' You wait, that's what's going to come down. And when it does I'll be out of a job and Morelli won't have a thing to worry about."

Morelli takes orders from Vito Corona," O'Dair broke in, "and the Don hates killings. He's issued a strict edict against them, unless they have his personal approval. What about that? Do you think Morelli got the nod before making this hit?"

Hal shook his head. "No, Corona hates Morelli's guts. He knows Lew weaseled into his job and he's just waiting for Morelli

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to make a slip-up, so he can come down on him. That's one contract he wouldn't think twice about."

A smile curved O'Dair's mouth. "So maybe we can give him the excuse he needs."

"What are you talking about? I don't see any way we could link Morelli personally to this. It looks just like its supposed to; some sort of doublecross or something. Sure, Morelli's boys brought Zito up here and did the trigger work, but Lew's probably got half a dozen good alibis on tap if he needs them."

"It is a good job," O'Dair conceded. "It shows a master's touch. But I'm no slouch either when it comes to pulling fast ones."

Brooks remembered the times the two of them had crossed swords on official cases, and his face creased into a smile in spite of himself.

"I guess I was kind of hoping you'd have something up your sleeve," he said. "Maybe that's why I didn't call this in as soon as I came to. Okay, how do you figure it?"

"We're on the first floor facing the parking lot, right?"

"That's right."

"Then there's a pretty good chance we could get Zito out the back window and into one of our cars without being seen."

"Right again. But--"

O'Dair leaned forward. "I think I know the answer to this one, Hal, but tell me anyway. How bad do you want to nail

Morelli? Bad enough to pull something a little less than legal?"

Brooks looked down at Benny Zitto's corpse. "I wouldn't exactly call this kosher," he answered dryly. "I want Morelli so bad I can taste it. Schoolyard smack pushers aren't my favorite people."

O'Dair stood up, rubbing his hands together.

"All right, then, Let's just see if we can't engineer a little poetic justice."

"Where do we start?"

"With Benny. We're going to get him into the trunk of my car, then you're going down to Morelli's club. You're going to tell Morelli that this stunt did the trick; that you're ready to cooperate. You got rid of the stiff, but you don't want it to happen again. You're willing to play ball, but you want a payoff first. You want to see some green. Let's make it big. Let's say ten grand to go along with him and let up on the heat." Brooks started to object, but O'Dair lifted a hand. "Relax, Hal. Wait until you hear the rest of it. . . ."

Twenty minutes later, the private detective was dialing a number on his friend's telephone. He was alone in the small utility apartment.

Benny Zito was residing in the trunk of his car and Hal Brooks, still leery of the whole operation, had nonetheless decided to follow O'Dair's advice and was on his way down to see Morelli at his

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Morgan Street nightclub.

The number O'Dair wanted was unlisted and he had to call two informants to get it. Now he waited patiently as it rang on the other end.

Finally a voice answered. A voice cloaked in smooth, cultured tones that could not conceal the viciousness that lay just beneath the surface.

"This better be goo," the voice said. "This is a private line and I don't like to be bothered."

"It is good, Mr. Corona," O'Dair said, making his own voice sound nervous and reedy. "My name is Benny Zito. You don't know me but I work for Lew Morelli."

Corona grumbled impatiently.

"So? How did you get this number? What the hell's the idea of—"

"I've got something to sell you," O'Dair said. "It's about Mr. Morelli. It's something I think you might like to know."

Corona's voice lowered. He was getting interested. "What about Morelli?"

"He's ambitious, Mr. Corona. You know that. Well, I heard him talking. He's planning something. Something big. He's tired of being second man on the totem pole."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Zito. Benny Zito."

"Okay, Benny, I think maybe me and you should get together. Maybe we could do some business after all. Do you know where I

live?"

"Sure, I know, but that's no good. I think Morelli's onto me. I've already had to ditch one tail tonight. If he found out I was paying you a call, I'd be hit for sure."

"So what do you suggest?"

O'Dair paused, as if trying to come up with a solution.

"Well, how about meeting me somewhere?" he said finally. "I'm on the near North Side now. How about on the bench under the statue in Leland Park, right at midnight?"

Leland Park was a poorly lighted two acres just off 23rd Street, heavy with foliage and thick with trees. A mugger's paradise and a perfect spot for what O'Dair had in mind.

Corona answered promptly. "All right, I'll be there with two of my boys. How much is this information gonna cost me?"

"It's worth a grand easy," O'Dair answered. "It could save your life, Mr. Corona. I'm not exaggerating. Morelli's up to no good."

"Okay," Corona growled. "Thanks for calling. I've wanted to nail that dude for a long time. I'll see you at twelve."

"Right. I'll be there with another guy. A private cop named O'Dair. Like I said, Morelli knows what I know and he wouldn't like me telling you about it if he could help it. I've hired O'Dair to . . . to bodyguard me."

"I don't care much for cops, private or public," the Don said,

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“But if he plays straight with us there won't be any trouble.”

He broke the connection.

O'Dair replaced the phone on the hook, smiling to himself. He turned off the lights and let himself out of the apartment.

It promised to be quite an evening.

AT FIVE MINUTES of twelve he sat enjoying a cigarette on a bench beneath the statue of some long forgotten Civil War hero in Leland Park. It was a cloudy night and the park was dimmer than usual. The sounds of the city, muffled by countless tall oaks, could have been a million miles away.

O'Dair wasn't alone on the bench. The corpse of Benny Zito sat with him, at his side.

The setting of the scene was complete. To the casual passerby, of which there had been two or three, appeared a common enough sight. Two friends out for a stroll, resting their feet and relaxing quietly.

More important, though, was the picture Don Vito Corona would get: Benny Zito & Associate with some tasty tidbits to spill about a man Corona despised and probably feared.

O'Dair checked his wristwatch.

It was twelve o'clock.

He dropped his half-finished cigarette to the pavement and ground it out with his heel as the action began right on schedule.

Three men approached from the gloom to his left and as they

drew nearer, he recognized the man in the middle. It was Vito Corona. The sturdy, gray-haired Mafiosa's picture had made the front page of enough papers for there to be no doubt of his identity.

O'Dair cast a quick sideways glance at the cadaver next to him. Benny Zito was propped up, with his legs crossed and his hands resting in his lap, just as O'Dair had positioned him. He showed no signs of tilting forward or sideways. That had been O'Dair's biggest worry.

No, Mr. Zito was just fine.

Corona and his men drew closer, crossing the clearing that separated them from O'Dair with aggressive, business-like strides.

O'Dair rose to his feet and glanced in the opposite direction. Now there was something else to worry him. Other things were supposed to be happening . . . but weren't.

By the time he looked around, Corona was practically on top of him. The two bodyguards had stopped a few feet back and remained wary, their hands near the lapels of their coats. Corona continued on and stopped when he reached O'Dair. His eyes were keen and anxious.

“Who are you?”

O'Dair felt knots tying in the bottom of his stomach. He wished he had his gun.

“My name's O'Dair. Benny told you about me.”

Corona nodded curtly. “I know



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what he told me." He looked past O'Dair and spoke to the dead man. "Well, friend, let's hear what you've got. I ain't got all night."

Benny Zito just sat there, his dead eyes staring straight ahead.

Corona looked back at O'Dair, his face twisted with disgust. "He looks drung."

O'Dair's mind was racing.

"Uh, yeah. We stopped off for a few on the way over here. Hell, Mr. Corona, the Guy's pretty shook up. If Morelli found out he's ready to spill, he'd--"

Corona waved a hand. "Yeah, yeah, I know all that." Before O'Dair could react, the Mafiosa stepped around him and crossed over to the corpse, reaching out a hand to shake some sense into him. "Come on, Zito," he growled. "Wake out of it. What's this business about Lew Morelli? What--"

He froze in mid-sentence, his fingertips a fraction of an inch from Benny Zito's still form.

"What was that?" he hissed. "Someone's coming!"

The other two men went into action. Their guns came out and they crouched low, their eyes fanning the darkness beyond in the direction of the new sound: a rustling of bushes as someone approached.

Corona turned to O'Dair, his eyes glaring. "This better not be a setup."

"It's not," O'Dair told him. "Maybe Morelli--"

He was interrupted by the roar of gunfire. One, two, three shots from somewhere nearby; close together, coming almost as one.

A number of things happened then, simultaneously.

Corona fell to his knees for cover, muttering a low, vicious curse. O'Dair waited until the Don's back was turned, and then his foot stretched out and met Benny Zito's crossed legs. He gave the corpse a sudden, quick jar and Zito toppled over onto the grass.

From the general direction of the shots came a hurried, determined trampling of feet and the cracking and rustling of shrubbery.

Corona looked at his two men. "After them," he ordered. "Make it snappy!"

The two bodyguards started forward, but more noises were coming from the darkness beyond. The slamming of a cardoor. The gunning of a powerful engine. The squeal of tortured rubber on pavement.

A white blur zoomed past, picking up even more speed as it roared along the blacktop drive just beyond the statue.

Corona got to his feet. "That was Morelli's caddie," he snarled. "I'd recognize that heap anywhere." He looked down at the shadowy mass at his feet. "What about Zito?"

Benny Zito lay on his back, his sightless eyes staring up into the clouds. O'Dair kneeled at his side

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and turned him over.

Even in the dim light there was no mistaking the three bullet holes that dotted the skinny hood's lower back.

O'Dair looked up at Corona.

"Dead," he said.

The two gunmen came pounding across the clearing. "He got away, Boss," the one on the right said. "He was travelling too fast."

Corona looked down at the body at his feet and nodded grimly.

"That's okay. It was Morelli and he won't get far. He trailed Zito here and hit him before he could spill, but I know enough now. Morelli's gotten too damn big for his own good. He knows there's no hits unless I give the word, but we just saw what happened. He wasted Zito because he knew Zito was going to pull the plug."

O'Dair got to his feet, brushed off his knees. He looked shaky.

"This going to take some explaining when the police get here," he offered.

Corona shook his head. "Forget the police." He glanced at his two men. "Put the still in the car, boys. We'll dump it. Then we're going to pay a call on Lew Morelli." His mouth tightened into a grim line. "The last call that guy's ever gonna get."

IT WAS TWO-THIRTY, and O'Dair and Hal Brooks were the only customers left at Luigi's. O'Dair

had heard that the lasagna there was superb, and he had not been disappointed.

He pushed away his empty plate, leaned back and stretched his arms. "That's what I call Italian cooking," he said lazily. "We'll have to do this again sometime."

Brooks looked up from his barely touched ravioli. "If you're talking about coming here, okay. But as for the rest of the night, once is enough."

O'Dair reached for a cigarette and nodded. "It was kind of hectic," he admitted. "Especially when you and Morelli were slow at showing up. What happened?"

"Just one of those things, I guess. I was there. I went to Morelli's club, made my pitch, told him to meet me at the park under the statue at twelve with the payoff, and went back to the park to get in position. I guess Morelli was just late showing up."

"So you were back there the whole time Benny and I were on the bench? Hal, my friend, there must be some backwoodsman in that blood of yours. I didn't hear a sound."

Brooks grunted. "I was there, all right. You just weren't listening. You could have heard my belly doing flip-flops across the state line. Damn, if a patrol car had come along and seen you sitting there with a dead man—"

O'Dair smiled. "But it didn't. The only ones who saw me with Benny were Vito and his

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crew . . . and Lew Morelli.”

“I don’t even know if Lew got that close,” Hal said. “He got out of his car with the satchel of money and as soon as he started walking towards you I jumped up and started firing in the air. Three times, like you told me.”

O’Dair nodded. “And it did the trick. Morelli panicked and ran, just like he was supposed to. Don Vito spotted his car, put two

and two together and came up with six and, *voila*, there was our poetic justice.”

“So everything worked out,” Hal admitted. “Thanks to you. But it was still a hectic night. I think I’ll pass on any encores.”

O’Dair grinned and finished his glass of wine.

“You shouldn’t complain,” he said. “Just think of poor Benny Zito. He did more running around than anybody.” ●

# HELL SHIP

*He flew to Australia to replace a dead captain  
but it wasn't a ship he commanded. It was a nightmare.*

by M.G. Ogan



WHEN THE *Samoan Princess* docked in San Francisco the Port Captain for Pacific & Eastern Steamship Lines sent for me. I'd been First Officer aboard the P&E flagship for only two cruises. That's enough time afloat aboard a luxury ship to develop a taste for the life, after seventeen years coming up from the forecastle on freighters and tankers.

P&E had a sister ship to the *Samoan Princess* on the ways at

Bethlehem Steel, and rumor had it she would be my first command. There was bounce in my step when I reported to Jerry Rowe in his office at P&E's terminal.

"We've got a command for you, Glenn." Jerry doesn't waste time with chit-chat. "The *Kent Victory*."

"I thought you'd given her to Jim Monroe." P&E had purchased the old freighter a year ago for

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service in the Far East. For sundry reasons she was known as the Hell Ship in the P&E fleet. "Is this a temporary berth, Jerry?"

Jerry peeled foil from a slender cigar. "Jim was lost at sea," he said, lighting up. "On the run from Tasmania to Melbourne he walked over the stern on a calm night."

"The hell you say!" I'd served under Jim for one voyage aboard a tanker, and didn't like him much, but I couldn't see him as the suicidal type. "Did he leave a note?"

"No, but they've closed it up down there as a suicide. So the *Kent Victory* is your ship, and I can't say now whether it's permanent or temporary. We hear that Jim had been punishing the bottle."

A Greek owner had the *Kent Victory* registered in Liberia before selling her to P&E. So Monroe got a rusty bucket long overdue for a major overhaul, and inherited the Greek's officers and crew. I could understand him taking to drink.

"We've arranged for you to fly down to Melbourne," Jerry said. "Your sailing orders are to take the ship from there to Port Moresby, calling at Makassar before going on up to Davao,"

"What's my cargo?"

"It's a mixed batch," Jerry said. "I'll give you the manifests. Oh, yes." He spoke as if it was an afterthought. "There's a gold shipment in the strongroom."

Visions of the spanking new ship I thought would be my first command went glimmering, and an uneasy feeling took their place. Toting gold in that corner of the world is an open invitation to pirates. I'd been aboard one ship they'd tried to take in the Sulu Sea.

"Thanks for the command, Jerry," I said. "I'll do what I can with the *Kent Victory*."

"What you can do whipping a crew into shape and cleaning up a ship is the reason you're getting the *Kent Victory*," he said, and grinned. "Consider it as a challenge, Hilburn."

Some names on the officer and crew roster for the *Kent Victory* were familiar. I'd sailed with Chief Engineer Ben Gloster before, and knew him as a good man. Sparks was a red-headed kid I'd fired off the *Samoan Princess* my first voyage. I caught him coming out of the wrong stateroom, one belonging to a woman passenger.

I didn't know First Officer, Gus Bohannon, nor my Second, Reed Sullivan. They'd been put aboard by the Greek owner before he sold the ship.

The *Kent Victory*, docked in Melbourne, was a sad looking tramp. Rust streaked from her hawse holes. Gray paint flaked from her plates. Her single stack was crusted with salt.

She was loaded down to the plimsoll line but there wasn't any steam in her boilers. According to

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my orders the ship was supposed to sail in the morning. It was midnight when I went up the gangplank. No deck watch was on duty.

The deck was filthy after cargo loading. When I'd climbed to the bridge I found the wheelhouse littered with candy wrappers and cigarette butts.

Gus Bohannon was slouched in the darkness of the chartroom, elbows on the charting table. A can of beer was in one fist. He was barefooted, wearing filthy dungarees and a torn skiyyv shirt.

More than one shore-side brawl had scarred his swarthy face. "Don't you look pretty in that uniform," He said. Bohannon's bloodshot eyes were hostile. "We got word you was coming fresh off the *Samoan Princess*."

"You're drunk, Bohannon."

"Yeah, but just a little."

I turned by back to him. "I want you to hear this, Mister. Finish that can of beer and then toss it over the side. Then I want the cargo booms secured, the hatches on, and the decks washed down."

"Tonight?" Bohannon's laugh was a rumble in his barrel chest. "Most of the crew is ashore."

"Round them up. One more thing, Bohannon. You address me as 'Sir'. If you're not man enough to handle the deck department on my ship, say so now." I turned back to face him. "When I've beaten you to a pulp I'll throw you on the dock."

Bohannon scowled. "You might not be able to manage that . . . Sir."

I stripped off my uniform coat, folded it, and placed it on a stool. "Try me."

Bohannon rubbed a hand against the black stubble on his chin. "This should have been my command," he muttered; then shrugged. "Since it ain't . . ."

Bohannon moved past me and out onto the starboard flying bridge. He fired the empty beer can out into the night.

I tossed him the visored cap he'd left on the chart table. "Clean yourself up," I said, "and get men up here to square the wheelhouse away."

"You think you can get this seagoing garbage bucket in shape to sail by morning?" Bohannon asked. "Sir," he added.

"I'll have your hide and get me a new Mate if it isn't," I told him.

Bohannon gave me a mocking salute and disappeared down the ladder.

Monroe's cabin was at the end of a short passageway aft of the bridge. His gear had been put ashore. I was settling in when my Second, Reed Sullivan, reported. From the wrinkled appearance of his uniform, and the smell of his breath, Bohannon must have roused him while he was sleeping off a drunk.

Sullivan was the gangling type with sandy hair poking out from under his cap.

"Welcome aboard." Sullivan

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slurred the words.

"Tell the Chief I want steam," I said. "Then get your orders from Mister Bohannon."

"We going out on the tide?" Sullivan was stunned. "What about tugs?"

"The day I can't undock a ship of this size under her own power hasn't dawned yet, Mister Sullivan," I said. "You have your orders from me. Now get the hell out of here. The next time I see you, be sober."

My next visitor was Roche, the radioman I'd fired off the *Samoan Princess*. He was a tall, pale kid with red hair. "Hello, Old Buddy." His unfriendly grin showed bad teeth. "Got a message here from our Makassar agent."

I took it and found fifty deck passengers were booked to come aboard at that port. With gold in the strongroom, I didn't like the looks of that. Half that number could take a ship the size of the *Kent Victory*.

"He wants an acknowledgment," Roche said, and lit a cigarette.

Those deck passengers could make the difference between a profit and loss on the voyage. "We'll take them aboard," I told Roche.

"Monroe wouldn't have taken that chance."

"Now you've mentioned Jim Monroe," I said, "maybe you can tell me something. What really happened to him coming up to Melbourne?"

A flicker of fear tightened Roche's face. "Man I wouldn't know," he said. "There was a Board of Inquiry. They wrote him off as suicide."

"Who saw him go over?"

"Nobody. He just wasn't aboard when Bohannon searched the ship."

"All right, Roche. That's all."

Roche started to leave, but then came back to the cabin. "You had me wrong on the *Samoan Princess*," he said. "I wasn't about to lay that biddy. She said something about a port being stuck."

"I said, that's all, Roche."

"You made a mistake." There was a stubborn set to his thin jaw.

"If I did, I'll have to live with it, and so will you," I told him. "Now get the hell back to the radio shack."

When he reported, Ben Glos-ter's was the first friendly face I'd seen since coming aboard the *Kent Victory*. "You're getting steam, Glenn," he reported. "What did you do to Bohannon?"

"I don't know yet. Can I trust him, Ben?"

"About that I don't know." Ben sat down and wiped sweat from his forehead with a rag. "For now you've got him kicking the tails of the crew."

"How's our machinery?"

Ben's was a wry grin. "Tied together with baling wire and spit. The old girl needs drydocking."

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But I guess you'd know that."

"I'll join you in the engine room in a few minutes," I said, "and we'll crawl the bilges."

THE *KENT VICTORY* was an American built ship laid down in 1943 with steam turbine propulsion developing 6000 Shaft Horsepower. Black Gang aboard were men selected by Ben, mainly Lascars with a sprinkling of Filipinos and Chinese. The engine compartments were clean and polished.

"Monroe never stuck his nose down here," Ben told me. "The only time I saw him was when I took up the daily fuel report. Were you ever shipmates with Jim?"

"Once. On a tanker. I was a Second then. The Mate did most of his work."

"Aye, Jim was lazy enough," Ben said. "Aboard this ship he never gave a damn."

"I understand he was a heavy drinker."

"He was that."

"How did he and Bohannon get along?"

"I wouldn't know, Glenn. I've been thinking about Gus since you asked me."

"About trusting him? He expected this command. It strikes me damned funny Monroe should go over the side on a calm night."

"Over the stern," Ben said. "We found his shoes on the fantail, you know."

"I didn't know that."

"It isn't likely we'll guess

what a man like Jim would do in his cups, is it?" Ben said. "But I believe you can rest your mind about Gus Bohannon. I don't read him as a murdering man."

I was called topside before Ben could take me over the ship below decks, and before we could pursue the topic of Monroe and Gus Bohannon further. A seaman was now posted at the head of the gangplank. A woman was on the dock and wanted to come aboard.

Every ship has an Owner's Cabin. The one aboard the *Kent Victory* was aft in the superstructure below the boatdeck. Agents hustle to keep a paying passenger in that cabin when they can. Mary McCloud had a letter from P&E's Melbourne agent that said she'd booked passage to Davao.

Her passport was in order. Mary was 28 and an American citizen born in Iowa, but she'd traveled all over the Far East for the past six years. Profession: *Entertainer*. (According to her passport.)

"You haven't picked a very fancy ship," I told her.

Mary slanted a glance at me. "It's as fancy as I can afford right now," she said. "I plan to stay to myself. You can have my meals sent up."

She had a way of standing that thrust her figure at you. There was a knowing look in her dark eyes that said, "Look, but don't touch."

"What kind of entertaining do you do?" I asked.



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Mary's laugh was throaty. "Captain Hilburn, isn't it?" she said. "Captain Glenn Hilburn?"

"That's right, Miss McCloud."

"Between here and Davao," she said, "I won't be *entertaining*, Captain Hilburn, so it's really none of your business, is it?"

The seaman on duty at the gangplank raised a hand to cover his grin.

"I want to make that quite clear," she said. "I don't wish to be disturbed while I'm aboard your ship."

"You won't be, I assure You," I told her.

THE *KENT VICTORY*, was a cranky ship. I found that out undocking her the next morning. It wasn't one of my most stellar performances, but I got her away without too much trouble. Going up the Coral Sea, reaching for Port Moresby—on a course well outside the Barrier Reef—I learned she was slow answering her helm, that the Radar aboard was worse than useless; Loran equipment was in the same fix.

I got a radio message off to P&E. When and if I docked the *Kent Victory* at Davao, that's where she would rot until I had orders to take her into drydock for a complete overhaul. Bohannon's surly ways were giving me trouble. Sullivan was proving incompetent as a Second. The crewmen in the forecastle were an assorted lot of seagoing misfits.

There were other problems.

The Steward had jumped ship in Melbourne, after provisioning the *Kent Victory* with tough beef and second-rate foodstuffs. The Malay cook's solution, when I complained about the food he was putting out, was to dose everything with red-hot curry sauce—which gave me around-the-clock heartburn.

I didn't care much what word I got from P&E once the ship reached Davao, but approaching Port Moresby the gold bullion aboard concerned me. There was a million and a half dollars worth of it.

Once the *Kent Victory* cleared Moresby to enter the shallow Arafura Sea through Torres Strait, she'd be vulnerable to attack for a swift Kumpit of Macao Junk. But Australian navy units patrol that area, keeping it relatively safe.

Once she reached makassar, and took aboard deck passengers before turning the corner up into Makassar Strait between Celebes and Borneo, the *Kent Victory* would be a sitting duck. That 500-mile run through narrow seaway at reduced speed because of faulty navigational aids was the danger zone.

I called Bohannon to my cabin the night before we raised Port Moresby. Sullivan had the conn of the ship that Dog Watch.

Bohannon was shaved and wearing a uniform of sorts. He'd stayed sober since we'd left Melbourne. The deck department

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showed signs of shaping up, but Bohannon had reason to hate my guts. I hadn't let up on him since our first meeting.

Bohannon spoke up before I could tell him the reason he'd been summoned. "I want off this bucket," he said. "I've had all I can take from you, Hilburn."

I sat on the edge of my bunk. Bohannon stood glaring down at me, twisting his cap in his hands. "Try that bastard Sullivan in my place."

"Gus, we have half a dozen Garand .30-06s in the gun locker," I told him, "and a dozen Colt .45s. There's enough ammunition for both weapons to start a small war and keep it going."

Bohannon stopped twisting his cap. His brows knit in a puzzled scowl. "What are you getting at, sir?"

"I want every man aboard this ship we can trust armed when we leave Moresby. You, Sullivan, and I will pack .45s. I'm leaving it to you who else is armed."

"Ain't you taking a long chance?"

"I don't think so."

Bohannon's eyes wavered away from mine. "I don't know how in hell Monroe wangled that gold shipment, and that's a fact. It shouldn't be aboard this bottom."

"Which is the reason you wanted to stay on the beach at Moresby?"

"Hell, no." Bohannon's was a

short laugh.

"I didn't think it was, Gus," I said. "If there's a plot to get the gold aboard this ship I want you on my side.

"Yeah, a plot." Bohannon was thoughtful. "How about the woman, sir?"

"She hasn't come out of her cabin since we left Melbourne, so far as I know. What about Miss McCloud? Do you know her?"

"No, but I've seen her somewhere."

"She gets around," I said, and forgot Mary McCloud for the time being. "After Makassar, Gus, I want guards posted at all engine compartment hatches, in the radio shack, and on the bridge. During all watches."

While we were unloading cargo in Moresby, Mary McCloud went ashore. So did Roche, and I saw the two of them talking on the dock. They got into a battered Ford, serving as a taxi, and drove up into the town.

Mary came back to the ship alone an hour later. Roche came aboard just before we pulled the gangplank the next morning.

Bohannon was on the deck checking hatches while I took the *Kent Victory* back to sea. Sullivan was on the bridge with me.

"Do you suppose lover boy got some from her?" Sullivan asked.

"Some, what?" I said, with a blank stare.

Sullivan ducked his head. "Never mind, sir."

When we were at sea I left the

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conn with Sullivan and went to my cabin. I was stripped and in the shower when someone knocked.

"Come on in." I thought it would be Bohannon reporting.

Mary's dark eyes appraised me when I stepped out of the shower. She was on my bunk with heels tucked under her; hands clasping elbows so her forearms supported full breasts.

"Well, hello, Glenn Hilburn." She wore tight slacks and a knotted halter.

I reached for a towel to knot around my waist. "How did you get up here?"

"No one saw me."

"That wasn't the question. Why is pretty obvious, but, no thanks. Some other time?"

Mary stretched; then patted a yawn. She slid off my bunk. "I can wait," she said in a lazy voice. "Good night, Glenn Hilburn."

She was gone as silently as she'd come.

I had trouble sleeping. But I decided against visiting her in the Owner's Cabin, which is why I found Mary McCloud in my cabin a second time.

BOHANNON, SULLIVAN and I made sure no deck passenger carried firearms coming aboard at Makassar, and we allotted them a roped off space between hatches two and three. They were a mixed lot of Far Eastern nationalities, some in family groups; some

single men going up to Davao on Mindanao. The group looked as innocent as the one that tried to take over the *John Lash* when I was Second Mate.

A full moon rose at 1100 hours the second night out of Makassar. Bohannon had double lookouts posted fore and aft, armed with Garands, as well as guards on the port and starboard bridge wings. That way the deck passengers would be in a cross-fire if they tried to take the ship.

Bohannon also had guards armed with .45 automatics at the engine compartment hatches. I hadn't left the bridge since sailing. Now I thought it would be safe to duck back to my cabin for a shave and a shower; perhaps an hour in my bunk.

Sullivan had the conn. I left him on the starboard bridge wing getting a celestial fix to compensate for our non-functioning Radar and Loran.

My cabin was dark but the door was ajar. After warning my officers about being careless, I'd left my .45 on the chartroom table. Bohannon was in the forecabin talking over tomorrow's work with the Bosun. I did have enough sense to get him on the intercom and tell him I was leaving the bridge.

A slight swell had the door swinging slightly on its hinges. I'd stepped into the dark cabin before the significance of that door ajar struck me. Coming from the dark bridge and passageway,

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by then I was blinded when Mary snapped the light switch.

Jim Monroe sat on my bunk. "How are you, Hilburn? It's been a long time." He had a Luger automatic leveled at my gut. Jim was thinner than I remembered, and more gray streaked his hair.

Mary moved away from me, and the light switch, but Jim guessed the direction of my thoughts. "Come on in, Hilburn. Lift a hand toward that switch and you're dead. Don't think I wouldn't pull this trigger."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. "I'm not that stupid, Jim. Now you're back from the dead, what's the scenario?"

Jim glanced at his watch. "You never came aft to visit us, Hilburn, so we've had to improvise. Mary was sure you would come, sooner or later. I've been stowed away in the Owner's Cabin all the time, of course. But you asked about our plans now, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Your shoes on the fan-tail were a nice touch," I said. "Sullivan is in this with you two?"

Jim grinned. "Right. Him and the Filipino boys among your deck passengers." Jim glanced at his watch again. "In a few minutes we'll have the *Kent Victory* secured. A Kumpit is lurking out there to take us and the gold off. Right now we'll bother you for the strongroom key."

Mary put out her hand. She

smiled and the tip of her tongue brushed her lips.

A single shot; then a burst of Garand fire echoed down the passageway. Jim jumped, startled, and Mary froze.

The outstretched hand was her mistake, because I grabbed her wrist, spun her to face Jim Monroe, and then shoved her at him when he fired.

Before she sprawled on him, Jim fired again, but I had his wrist before he could push her body away and put a third shot in me. I slammed his wrist against the sharp edge of the bunk and heard the bone break. I snatched up the Luger from the deck.

When Mary fell away, she sprawled on her back, with two bullets in her lungs. Jim slid from the bunk to his knees, head Mary convulsed; died.

"Jim?"

He raised his face to stare at me. I nearly shot him. Instead, palming the Luger, I slugged him unconscious.

Sprinting to the bridge I banged into Bohannon in the passageway. His bulk staggered me backwards. "Glenn?" he said.

"It's me."

"I nearly blew your head off." He lowered the .45. "My God, that was close! Sullivan ordered the guards off the bridge without their weapons. He wounded one of the forward lookouts before I nailed him. He's dead."

"Firing from the bridge?"

Bohannon nodded. "What

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happened in your quarters? I heard the shots."

I told him, Briefly.

"The other forward lookout dropped two Filipinos and stopped their rush for the bridge," Bohannon said. "I guess that's it. So it was Monroe who tried to pull this off? Now I remember where I saw that woman."

"Where?"

"Down in Hobart, Tasmania. In a night spot. She was with Monroe."

That wasn't quite all of it. A

Kumpit had been shadowing us. We learned from Jim Monroe the signal they were waiting for. The *Kent Victory* might have been slow responding to her helm, but she was fast enough, properly handled, to cut that Kumpit in half.

Bohannon got command of the *Kent Victory* on my recommendation from Davao. I flew back to San Francisco. When she's off the ways, sister ship of the *Samoan Princess* will be my command.

●

# SCALP

*His tenant was killing his sleep. But the solution to the noise led to repercussions that would give him nightmares.*

by Lawrence Fisher



YOU'RE A WORTHLESS no-good. D'you hear me?" Stella MacKenzie screeched. The question was ludicrous. Anyone in Foster County could have heard her.

Silence followed. I realized little old Fred MacKenzie would be answering his red-headed fishwife sotto voce. His voice just barely carried through the wall separating the MacKenzies from us, the Bowens. Hers nearly blew it down.

Don't tell me to be quiet, you worm!"

During the next silence, I rolled over and poke dthe sheet-shrouded mound across the bed. "Jennie, wake up."

My wife let out a yelp and shot straight up in bed. "Hah? Whas-sup? Whassamadder?"

"The MacKenzies are at it again."

Another large object slammed against the wall, jarring a picture over our dresser, Jennie winced.

"It's worse this morning."

"I've got to go over there," I said, hunting for my sox.

"Oh, no you don't, Walt. I want a husband, not a corpse."

"She's wrecking our sleep and our property, damn it."

I scrambled off the bed and headed for my closet. Jennie followed, a tangle of black hair, guazy white short nightie, brown

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arms, firm legs. I like my wife. Moreover, I love my wife. She is a warm, affectionate, good woman. I would do anything for my wife. Well, almost anything.

"Let her wreck it," Jennie said. "Better than wrecking you."

"But poor old Fred's out-matched."

A crash cut me off. "You miserable little bald-headed no-good!" Stella shrieked. "How d'you expect me to live in this cheap hovel!"

"Not only that," I told Jennie as I jumped into my pants, "she's insulting our splendid property."

She planted herself in my path, her pretty eyes a-blaze with protective fury.

"Over my dead body you'll go over there, Walt Bowen!"

"Have you got any better ideas, smartie?"

"Call the police."

"Very sharp," I said sarcastically.

"Very sharp," I said sarcastically. "So we sign charges, so Stella vacates the duplex. So it sits empty for six months and we lose over a thousand bucks. No, thanks."

Jennie made a face, not quite convinced I was so wrong after all. We pay for our meat and potatoes from my full-time job, which is selling and maintaining Big Buzzer Disposealls for the home. But it's our properties around town that keep us living in the style to which we've become accustomed.

This duplex is one of them.

But right now, with Stella on the rampage, she could pound our house into a poverty pocket before she even got her second wind.

"Supposing," I said to Jennie, "that I found Fred a job."

"He hasn't held one in years, Stella says."

"But if he actually *got* one, and kept it—"

Jennie shook her dark curls. "She wears the trousers in that family. You couldn't change that."

"But at least then she couldn't accuse old Fred of being entirely worthless."

I felt glum. Jennie was probably right, but I was willing to grab at any straw. I started out to the kitchen to make coffee. I could call Fred from the office and sell him on my idea.

"What job did you have in mind?" Jennie asked, tagging along.

"Selling Big Buzzers."

Her dark brows rose in surprise. "I thought you didn't want any deadbeats on your sales force."

"Let's just say I'm willing to try anything once."

I dressed, shaved, shined, brushed and swallowed orange juice and coffee. Jennie stopped me on my way out.

"You know there's a big 'if' about all this."

"What's that?"

"If Stella doesn't scalp the poor guy before he makes a sale."

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FRED HAPPENED TO be on his way out too. He closed his front door as if it was made of egg shells and went down the front walk in a fast, nervous shuffle. He moved like an old man, which he really wasn't. He was a runty, round shouldered slick-bald little guy who couldn't have licked his weight in baby girls. At the moment he looks just as he had when he and Stella had signed our lease, tow months ago. Friendly, but in the same way a whipped dog is friendly.

He saw me, gave a shy nod, then tried to hurry past.

"Fred," I said, grabbing his arm, "you've got to stand up to her. Now. Before she kills you."

He halted and tightened up, looking scared. "You—you think she might?"

"She's got me guessing, friend. But I've come up with an idea that might help."

He blinked rapidly, his little round blue eyes awed. "If only I could get an idea some time! Gosh—"

"I was getting desparate, Fred. You two are ruining my sleep."

He managed a weak grin now. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bowen. We'll find a different place to rent if you say so. But—"

"Perish the thought," I interrupted hastily. "I was thinking of a more positive approach, like you getting a job. She'd see you really are a good man. Maybe she'd get off your back."

He rubbed his glossy scalp in

grave thought. "I doubt if—if I could get a job, Mr. Bowen."

"Sure you could. You aren't stupid."

"It's just that—" He hesitated, shaking his head in sad resignation—"just that nothing ever comes out right for me. Nothing. You don't know how it is, being a goof-up, Mr. Bowen. I've tried. God know I've tried. Things just don't work for me."

"Maybe it's time you tried again."

"What kind of job were you suggesting?" he asked, sounding as if he didn't care what I would say.

"Selling Big Buzzers."

"It sounds . . . difficult."

"It's a snap. The things sell themselves."

"I just—couldn't do it."

"Suit yourself," I said, maybe a little too brusquely. "It's your scalp, not mine, Fred."

I shrugged and walked to my garage and backed my Caddy out and waited, engine idling, door open, looking him in the eye. He stood rooted to the sidewalk for a full half minute. Finally, he gave his bald pate a nervous rub, shuffled over, climbed in, and slid down almost out of sight.

"You really think I could do it, Mr. Bowen?"

"You can do anything you have to," I said, quoting from one of the Big Buzzer sales manuals. "You can climb a mountain or build a palace. Or sell someone the moon. Or stand up to Stella."



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We headed for town. Fred sat hunched in the seat, scared spitless at the prospect of coming to grips with life. Or so it seemed.

"She's going to Minneapolis to visit her sister," he said presently, surprising me.

"Then this is the time to get set for her. How about it?"

His small round jaw went taut. A gleam of something—determination, maybe—lighted his eyes.

"All right, Mr. Bowen. I'll try."

I gunned the Caddy.

I had the very best intentions, so help me. I wanted to make something go right for him, for both of us.

Boy.

WE SPENT THE morning tearing down a Big Buzzer Dispose-All. Fred learned all the features—the super-hardened stainless steel flywheels, the swing-blade impellers, the over-sized nicked grinding ring, the overload reset control, the removable splash guard, the polished sink flange, the super-quiet motor bearings, the energized gearing system and the annealed brass coupling.

After lunch, we put the unit back together and installed it in one of our training sinks.

"You want to bet in won't run?" Fred said glumly.

I had to get him out of this dumb opinion of himself. So I went out to the soft drink machine and got an empty bottle

from the rack. I held it up so Fred could see it good and clear, then dropped it into the feeder opening.

"Remember, Fred," I told him, "you put it together. You did it."

I turned the stainless steel stopper control, turned on the water, and hit the start switch.

This is one of the happier moments in the professional life of a Big Buzzer pitchman. You can sell the machine verbally until you're blue in the face and Mrs. Housewife will find a dozen reasons to say no.

Until you show her what it can do. The Buzzer sort of grunts, as if flexing its muscles. It kicks into high gear and grabs the bottle in steel jaws and sets up the most ungodly groaning and clattering and grinding you're ever likely to hear. That goes on for a bit, then the racket diminishes to a smooth hum. You rotate the stainless steel stopper control, lift it out and peer down inside and you find—nothing. Just the gleaming stomach of Big Buzzer, all hungry for the next course. It's a dramatic demonstration. It assures a close in one out of every three presentations over the long haul. All a Big Buzzer salesman has to do is ride this percentage and he can't miss.

"For goodness sake," Fred said reverently, "that thing won't take no for an answer, will it?"

"Hardly ever. It's a real ser-

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vant for busy housewives. Grind up your troubles and flush them, gals. Why don't you give Stella one?"

He looked startled. "Give Stella a Big Buzzer?"

"It's better than long-stemmed roses, like the sales book says."

I could almost see the gears turning in his brain. He looked down at his round hands. His bare scalp gleamed in the afternoon light. "I keep thinking how she used to be, Mr. Bowen. A sweet, big warm girl. And all that gorgeous red hair. I—I don't like what I've done to her."

"People do things to themselves, Fred," I said. I clapped him across a shoulder. "But that's history. Today you're starting fresh."

"I—I can't thank you enough, Mr. Bowen."

"Just trying to arrange for a little sleep," I said.

My old Scout Master would have been proud. Humble I was, generous, witty, wise.

Oh, and stupid.

Beyond belief.

JENNIE AND I WERE already in bed when Stella launched her crockery barrage that night. A dish hit the wall above our heads and shattered with a crash as it dropped to the floor.

"I thought you had a plan," Jennie whispered hotly.

"I thought so too." I fumbled in the dark, found pants, couldn't get into them because the zipper

was stuck, pitched them aside, and stumbled through the living room to the front door just as the bell rang. I switched on the porch light and peeked out. Old Fred shivered in brown pajamas, no robe or slippers. His mouth oozed blood at one corner. A prune colored bruise was already taking shape near his left eye and there was a fresh wound in the middle of that bald expanse of scalp.

I opened up and reached out and yanked him in fast. I slammed the door and slid the chain in place. Seconds later, Stella began hammering on the other side.

"Come out her, you lying wretch!" she screamed.

I opened up a crack. "Go home, Stella."

She held one of those two-foot long wooden kitchen spoons. She wore a grubby blue house coat over an orange nightie. She looked absolutely capable of doing old Fred in. It seemed a shame, in a way, that her red hair was shiny and brushed and luxurious, as usual.

"Send him out!"

"Stella," I warned, "I'm counting to ten. If you aren't back in your house by then, I'm coming out there with a shotgun."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"One," I said, my voice squeaking a little. "Two. Three."

"I'm not moving 'til he comes out."

"Four."

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"I demand you open that door!"

"Five. Six!"

Jennie clutched my arm. "I'm calling the police."

"Not yet," I muttered. "She's weakening."

"Fred MacKenzie, you come home right now!"

"Seven, eight, nine. . . ."

Stella wheeled and stalked away, a picture of outrage. She disappeared inside with one final haughty toss of the russet mane.

I walked rubber-legged to Fred and patted his shoulder. I sat down and looked at him.

"What got into her this time?"

"I tried to tell her about my new job. She said I was lying, to butter her up."

"So it's time for you to prove you mean business. Tell you what I'm gonna do, Fred. I'll stake you to a rebuilt Buzzer if you'll do the installation yourself."

He looked doubtful and grateful all at once. "You think I could do it, Mr. Bowen?"

"You can do whatever you have to. Always remember that. And the name's Walt."

"I could pay you for it, a little at a time after—"

"Forget it. I can write it off."

His tiny blue eyes moistened. "Thank you, Walt."

Jennie came back with the news that she had enough milk to make just what we needed to soothe our jangled nerves—hot chocolate. So we sat around for

half an hour, sipping and eating cookies, and listening to Stella bang things around next door. While Fred and I tried to keep our minds on Big Buzzers, Jennie got the guest bed ready. I wouldn't have sent old Fred home now with a platoon of National Guardsmen for protection. We might lose to Stella in the end, but I wasn't going to hand her his scalp on a platter.

SHE LEFT FOR Minneapolis the next morning. That was a Sunday. The following week seemed almost dull—but beautiful—with no mortar fire issuing from next door.

As for Fred, he actually began to come to life. He sold two Big Buzzers, darn good for a new man. He installed them himself, with a little supervision from me.

Saturday morning I took a re-conditioned Buzzer over to him. Later, we heard him working away in the kitchen. And that night, just before supper, he called us over to view the project. You could hardly see his face for the grime, but a kind of shy pride shone out from his eyes. He switched the unit on. Jennie gave me a hopeful grin, and we stood there like indulgent parents as the machine ground away, devouring its first bottle. Then Fred put some egg shells through it, plus a ham bone and half a dozen dried-up old hard carrots.

We drank hot chocolates in celebration, and the mood of

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happy triumph held until Stella arrived home the next morning. Jennie and I huddled next to our bedroom wall awaiting the expected sounds of reconciliation and wifely warmth. Nothing happened.

"At least," Jennie whispered, "she isn't throwing things."

"She's probably struck dumb by that Buzzer. For old Fred to buy it and install it hims—"

The crash cut me off in mid-thought. The building shook as if a typewriter had been pitched against the wall.

"You little liar!" Stella screeched. "You couldn't screw in a light bulb unless I told you how! How much did that grinder cost? If you expect *me* to pay for the damned thing—"

Jennie's face fell. I felt like slitting my throat. I went to the front room and unplugged the television and rolled it through the house to the guest bedroom, which is on the side away from the MacKenzies. I turned the volume far up and settled back for an hour of something, *anything* that would drown out Stella. It was great, just great. Both channels had programs with a lot of shooting and yelling. One of the women sounded like Stella. I endured it for nearly an hour, mostly because I ignored the program I finally settled on and tried instead to figure a way to handle Stella, short of evicting her and Fred.

The movie finished and a cartoon came on. I sat through 10

minutes of cawing idiocy before Jennie came back.

She opened the door and stood with one hand braced against the frame. Her face was putty gray. She looked as if she might throw up. I got up and turned the sound down and asked her what was the matter.

"She's—she's killing him, Walt," Jennie croaked.

"What d'you mean?"

"The Big Buzzer—I think—I think she's—"

I didn't hear what she said next because I was out of the room, running, thinking, God, she'll get away with it, my God, that grinder doesn't leave *anything* behind, by God, all she'll have to do is tell them he walked out on her, my God, Fred, what have I done to you?

I ran outside and around the back fence and up to the MacKenzies' back door. Locked. Shade drawn. Windows along the rear wall—all locked, shuttered.

But I could hear. So very plainly, I could hear the hum of the Big Buzzer.

I heard the heavy wet *cbunk* and a wrenching, twisting, breaking splitting sound.

I know all there is to know about the Big Buzzer, How it works and how it doesn't work. What makes it sick and what doesn't. How it sounds in prime working order, grinding up olive pits or coffee grounds or table scraps.

Or bones.

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I listened for an endless, ghastly eternity.

Then I crept backwards and around the corner and back to our place. Jennie was waiting, white-faced.

"Call the cops," I said.

"Walt, what—"

"You were right. We should have done it before. Quick!"

I ripped open the drawer where we keep all our spare keys to the various properties. I'd let myself in through the front, sneak up on Stella, clobber her with—but the key wasn't there. Damn it, I'd seen it here a week ago. I searched again, scattering junk to the winds. No keys to the MacKenzie duplex.

I ran for Jennie. I bawled that the damned keys had been there, and where were they. She turned even whiter, bit her lip, hid her face.

"I—I gave Stella the spare. She said she n-needed it for when she got back from M-Minneapolis. Oh, Walt!"

I swore. Stella, locked in that house with the remains of her little old Fred. And, sure as hell, she'd have all the traces cleaned up by the time anyone could get in there.

Quick footsteps on our front porch. A knock. Jennie peeked out. "The police!"

They waited outside, two big ones with the glacial calm of cops who've seen it all twice.

"She's killed him." I croaked. "Chopped him up and—" I

gagged, unable to say it.

"What makes you think there's been a killing?"

I gawked at him, then at the other one. Frozen, disbelieving eyes. Accustomed to hysterical citizens reporting non-existent murders, rapes, thefts, cats up trees, knifings. They were ready to discuss the matter, point by logical point, while Stella flushed all the evidence.

I shoved between the cops and jumped the low railing between porches. I began pounding hell out of the MacKenzies' front door.

Almost instantly, footsteps thudded inside, crossing and re-crossing the apartment. The cops glanced at each other. The larger one snapped his fingers and said, "Let's hit it, Mickey."

They put their beef to work. The door panelling gave way with a splintering crash. Stumbling through, we ran for the kitchen.

It was a sight I'll never, never be able to forget. I'll see the picture in my nightmares until I die.

The kitchen was freshly scrubbed. Stella's breakfast dishes stood drying in the rack next to the sink. The dinette table had been cleared and re-set with clean cups and saucers. On the sideboard, a coffee maker burped rhythmically.

The back door stood open. Halfway through it, looking back at us, stood Fred. Sunlight gleamed off his shiny scalp, making an effect like a halo. He

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smiled in his shy, uncertain way.

"You told me I could do anything, Mr. Bowen. Anything I had to."

I stared at him for the space of two heartbeats, my mind not wanting to believe what I knew had to be true. My mouth suddenly went sticky with fear.

"Fred," I said hoarsely, "don't say another word."

"You told me—"

"Not a word!" I yelled.

I thought: *Let him get away with it. Please.* I heard Jennie, beside me, breath in sharply, and I knew that she, too, understood. She, too, would want Fred to get away with it.

"Now you come back in here, Fred," I said, caution sobering my voice. "Come back in and tell these nice policemen about how Stella didn't come back last night. Tell them how worried you are

about her, Fred."

He stared at me, blinking slowly. He looked from me to Jennie, to the cops, and back to me again.

Then he stepped back into the kitchen and shut the door behind him.

Jennie moaned, low in her throat. When I turned to look at her, her face was in her hands.

It was only then that I saw what Fred held in his left hand: A small wrench and an over-sized nickel-plated grinding ring out of the Big Buzzer.

And, oddly, I realized what he had meant when he told me, a week ago, that nothing ever turned out right for him.

Tangled in the grinding ring's jaws was a thick wet rope of firey red hair. Human hair.

Which is just about the only thing in the world you can't get rid of down a Big Buzzer Dispose-All.

●

# THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN THE WORLD

*What happens when a hit man is hired by a  
mysterious client from the future who uses  
murder to change history?*

by Chris Lampton and David Bischoff



JOEY RICO, THE TINY hoodlum from the Bronx, was smiling. In fact he was positively beaming, with a glow a good deal brighter than the naked 50-watt bulb that illuminated his small, dingy hotel room. As he dressed in front of the mirror he sang lightly to himself:

“Lenny Barrow, Lenny Barrow,  
Shoulda walked the straight  
and narrow.”

With a practiced flip he tied the knot in his black tie and shrugged his shoulders into a grey, three-button suit. His mouth was grinning convulsively, his thin lips pulled back to reveal a row of yellow, horselike teeth. Those who knew Joey—at least those who knew him professionally—would probably not have recognized him. Joey himself could not

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remember the last time that he had smiled like this.

"You and me, babe," he said, jabbing playfully at his reflection. "You and me are gonna take care of business tonight." His ferret-like eyes gleamed with anticipation.

The little man ran a comb through his slick, black hair and walked to the bed with a cocky strut, where he picked up a large, green briefcase. It was a case that had seen better days: its leatherette covering was peeling off in long, yellowing strips. But Joey handled it lovingly, like a mother holding her newborn child.

"Lenny Barrow," he said, mouthing the name with obvious distaste. "Tonight you're gonna get yours, Lenny. This time you've gone and pushed me too far." His smile went lopsided, turning into a sneer. Sitting down lightly on the edge of the bed he placed the briefcase in his lap and opened the snaps with his thumbs.

Inside, snuggled into the red satin interior like babes in a crib, were what looked like three pieces of pipe, two of metal and one of wood. They seemed innocent enough, to the untrained eye, but appearances deceived. Assembled, they were the pieces of a high powered sniper's rifle, the weapon of a professional assassin. Joey Rico, if nothing else, was a professional.

Joey examined the pieces one at

a time, handling them with a white handkerchief to avoid leaving fingerprints. Satisfied, he tamped them back into the satin padding and thumbed the snaps closed, replacing the handkerchief in his coat pocket.

He put the case aside and stretched out on the bed, propping his freshly polished shoes on the end of the bed frame. He had plenty of time. He was dressed and ready to go; the only thing to do now was wait. *It's about time*, he thought. *It's about time I did this*. He produced a battered pack of Pall Malls from his shirt pocket and began smoking absentmindedly. Contentment settled over him like a cloud.

There was a knock on the door.

Joey dropped the cigarette in a flurry of bright orange ashes. *The cops*, he thought. *Sheezus Christ! How did they know I was here?* He was up almost instantly, poised on the edge of the bed, weighing his chances of escape. Slowly, cautiously, he picked up the green briefcase. *Don't panic*, he told himself. *Maybe it's just some dope who's got the wrong room.*

The knock came again. *Stubborn bastard*, thought Joey. With measured steps he began tiptoeing toward the window. If he could only make it to the fire escape in time. . . .

But if it were the cops they'd have the fire escape guarded. And if it weren't the cops—well, why worry?



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The knock came again.

"Whaddaya want?" growled Joey. It would be better in any case if he didn't act *too* suspiciously.

A voice from the hallway replied, "I'd like to talk with you for a moment, Mr. Rico." It was a man's voice, deep and cultured.

*God damn it*, thought Joey. *Whoever it is knows my name. It must be the cops. Or—he shuddered—one of Lenny Barrow's boys.*

"Get lost," he yelled. "I ain't talkin' to nobody now. Go bother somebody else." He carefully edged the bed away from the wall and wedged the briefcase behind the headboard.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rico." The voice was coming from behind him now. "But it's quite important that I speak to you immediately."

Joey spun around with a snap. Seated across the room from him in an overstuffed armchair was a tall man in a light blue dinner jacket. He was about thirty-five years old, tanned to a burnished glow and grinning like the proverbial cheshire cat. Joey's mouth fell open.

"Since you failed to open your door," the tall man said, "I took the liberty of admitting myself. I hope I haven't startled you."

"Who . . . who the hell are you?" stuttered Joey. "How'd you get in here? I got the door locked with a bolt."

"Gaining entrance to your room was a simple matter, Mr. Rico. I doubt that you would understand the mechanics of what I did, but in simple terms I removed myself to another cintinum where the walls of your room do not exist."

"What're you talkin' about? You sayin' you can walk through walls?"

"Not exactly. I can, in a sense, circumvent them, by placing my own corporeal existence on another plane of reality."

"Hey! Try talkin' English! You a cop?"

"You mean an officer of the law? Certainly not."

"Then get the hell out of here. I'm a citizen. I got certain righys to privacy."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rico, but I can't leave until I've discussed an important matter with you."

Joey waved his hands in exasperation. The man had one hell of a lot of nerve, breaking into his room like this, uninvited. *He can't be one of Barrow's men*, thought Joey. *He talks like a fag for Chrissake! And if he's not a cop, what is he? Some kinda private detective?*

"Look," he said. "I'm gonna give you five seconds to get outta here or I'm gonna do my best to make you sorry you were ever born!"

"Please, Mr. Rico. I had hoped that you would conduct yourself in a more becoming manner. It

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seems almost unnecessary to point out that I am almost twice your weight and a good foot taller than you are. In any man-to-man combat situation I would almost certainly emerge victorious."

"Awright, so you're a big guy. I'll call the police, then."

"I doubt that you wish to see the police any more than I do. I imagine that they would be quite interested in the contents of that briefcase hidden behind your bed."

Joey started. "Hey, listen! Don't you get too nosy. I got friends. . . ."

"All I'm asking is that you hear me out. I'd like to make you a—how shall I say?—a business proposition? I have come here, you might say, as a prospective client."

"Client? Whaddaya mean, 'client'? I ain't a lawyer."

"Of course not. But you do offer a service of sorts. And that service could be of great value to the people that I represent."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"I think you do. Let's put our cards on the table, Mr. Rico. You are—how would you put it?—a hired gunman?"

"You can't pin anything on me!"

"I have no desire to. I wish only to engage your services. To put it bluntly, Mr. Rico, there is someone that I want you to . . ."

He paused suddenly, as if

he were unable to say the words, then, with visible concentration, closed his eyes and said, ". . . to kill!"

The room became suddenly quiet, almost tangibly so. Joey could feel the sweat break out on his body and fought the urge to take off his coat. *Goddamn this guy*, he thought. *Somethin' about him gives me the goose-bumps.*

"Awright," Joey said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Suppose you *did* hear somethin' about me doin' things like that—which you didn't, 'cause I don't!—but if you did hear somethin' like that maybe you also heard somethin' else about me retirin' and goin' into another business."

"Going into another business?" The tall man leaned forward. "What are you doing here tonight, then? Were you planning on attending a business meeting?"

"Yeah. Somethin' like that. I'm, uh, going to meet, uh . . . with my business partners."

"Stop playing games, Mr. Rico. You're here to kill Lenny Barrow, a big time gangster who's been blackmailing you for the last three years. Barrow is going to be at a theater this evening, where you plan to wait for him with your rifle. Then you're going to fly to Rio de Janeiro to begin your so-called retirement . . . ."

Joey flushed. "I told you to get

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out of here. . . .”

“Calm down. Your personal vendettas are not my concern. As I said, I merely wish to engage your services.”

“Why should I want to work for you?”

“We’re willing to pay you handsomely.”

“How much?”

“I believe your normal fee is ten thousand dollars. . . .”

“Uh uh, buddy. You pay big or you don’t pay at all.”

“Name your fee, then.”

“One million dollars, cash!”

“All right. I think that can be arranged.”

For the second time Joey’s mouth dropped open. *One million dollars in cash! This guy is out of his tree! For Chrissake, maybe I should have asked for more!*

“Wait a minute,” he said. “I want that in advance! And I want all expenses paid.”

“There will be no expenses, Mr. Rico. We will supply your transportation and ammunition.” He gestured toward the bed. “I believe you already have the necessary weapon.”

Joey glanced automatically toward the hidden gun. “I ain’t said I’m gonna do it yet.” The vision of a one followed by six zeroes flashed through his mind. “You . . . you better tell me who you are first, and what it is you, uh, want me to do.”

“Certainly.” The tall man stretched out leisurely in the arm-

chair. “I represent an organization of politicians who control the Amalgamated States of Earth at a point approximately one thousand years in your future.”

Joey sat up straight. “Aw-right! Now who’s playing games? You either put your cards on the table of I ain’t bettin’. Don’t give me no phony stories like that.”

“I assure you, Mr. Rico, that everything I tell you is the truth. I am quite incapable of lying.”

“That’s a lot of bull! There ain’t nobody can’t lie and you know it.”

The tall man made an expansive gesture with his hands. “You live in very primitive times, Mr. Rico. People lie, cheat, kill . . . and all for petty reasons or no reasons at all. I can understand your cynicism. But in my time these primitive instincts no longer exist. They have been bred out of the human race by centuries of eugenic control. Not only are we incapable of lying, but we are incapable of any form of physical violence. When I indicated earlier that I would be your superior in a contest of physical strength it was merely a bluff. I am stronger than you, yes, but I could no more engage in such a contest than you could fly out that window. I am incapable of inflicting harm on another human being.”

*Holy Jesus*, thought Joey. *This guy’s really whacked out!* “C’mon,” he said. “You expect

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me to believe this crap about you comin' from—what did you say?—a thousand years in the future? You ain't givin' me much credit for brains, are you?"

"But, it's true. Time travel is quite a common thing in the 30th century."

"Oh, yeah?" Joey smiled cunningly. "So how come you don't come visitin' more often? How come I ain't never seen no time travellers before?"

"Oh, I'm sure that you have. Many times. But there are very strict rules concerning the use of time travel devices. A time traveller may reveal his identity only in times of strictest emergency. There are too many temporal paradoxes that might result."

*Oh boy, thought Joey. This guy's a basket case. But, I better play along with him and see what he wants.* "Listen," he said. "If, uh, you can only tell people who you are in an emergency, why are you tellin' me? You in some kind of trouble?"

"Not exactly. But the situation is an emergency of sorts. As I said before, the people that I represent urgently require your services."

"Yeah. You said you wanted me to kill somebody. So when you gonna tell me who?"

"Momentarily, Mr. Rico. It's quite a long story, actually. As I said before, I represent a political organization—I believe its nature

would be most closely analogous to one of your present day political parties. For some time now our party—if I may employ that term—has controlled world politics—by popular mandate, of course. During the last decade, however, a new faction has arisen—an organization of political dissidents—and has been slowly gaining power. As public opinion has shifted more and more in favor of this new party, our hold on world government has weakened.

"I can't tell you how important it is that our party remain in power. Our most cherished dreams of world reform have yet to reach fruition. If we are to achieve our long sought goals we must prevent our opponents from gaining power in the next election."

"I get it," said Joey, a sinister gleam in his eye. "You want me to bump off the opposition for you, right?"

"Nothing so barbaric. Assassination as a means of political expediency is a thing of the past, in my era at least. In this case we have devised a method that is infinitely more subtle—and humane." The tall man stood and began pacing the floor.

"Political analysis, in my time, has become an exact science, quite unlike the crude guesswork that passes for political theory in yours. Our political analysts have made a thorough study of this

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shift in public opinion and have come to some very interesting conclusions.

"First of all,"—he spun around to face Joey—"They traced the roots of the shift back hundreds of years. They found its origins in a number of events occurring in the latter half of the twentieth century. *Your century*," he added.

"They also determined that with a little judicious tampering it would be possible to reverse this tide of events. In fact the elimination of a single individual is all that would be necessary to sufficiently alter history. If this individual should cease to exist, our opponents would never rise to power and our party would remain the uncontested leaders in world affairs."

"And you can't kill this guy yourselves 'cause you ain't got the, uh, primitive instincts for it, right?"

"Succinctly put. And that, as you would have it, is where you fit in."

"You want me to kill this guy?"

"Please. The expression is distasteful. I prefer the euphemism 'to eliminate.' We want you to . . . to *eliminate* this individual. He will be at a certain place at a certain time—it was simple enough for us to determine where and when. I'll take you there and you'll . . . do what is necessary, then I'll return you to this room.

Have I left anything unclear?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, there's somethin' I don't get."

"And that is. . . .?"

"This bit about one guy changin' your election and all. I mean, how can one guy today make any difference in somethin' that ain't gonna happen for a thousand years? He must be somebody pretty important—like some kind of politician or somethin'."

"Not at all. He's actually quite unimportant—but tiny flames can start great fires, Mr. Rico. Over the course of centuries an effect can be magnified out of all proportion to its cause. An insignificant action today—the lighting of a cigarette, for instance—may result in the deposing of a world leader five hundred years from now."

"That don't make no sense. How could lightin' a cigarette do that?"

"Well . . . suppose you stopped someone on the street and asked him for a match. Because you stopped him he might miss his bus. Because he missed his bus he might be late for an appointment and because he's late for an appointment he might lose his job. After he loses his job . . . many things could happen—or fail to happen. I believe you have a saying that begins, 'For the want of a nail. . . .'"

"What's a nail got to do with it?" Joey frowned. "Alright, I think I get what you're talkin' "

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about. Now listen, suppose I say I'll, uh . . . *eliminate* this guy for you—what are the details? I got plans, you know."

The tall man smiled. "Your plans won't interfere. We'll want to get underway immediately. Our rendezvous is to take place approximately. . . ," he pulled a watch-like device from his coat pocket, "one half hour from now."

"A half hour! Are you outta your mind? I gotta, uh, be at the theater in," he glanced at his watch, "forty minutes."

"No problem at all. You'll be able to keep your appointment with Mr. Barrow and perform our mission as well."

"How? I can't be in two places at the same time."

"You most certainly can." The tall man leaned forward. "If I recall correctly, I am, at this very moment, in India, discussing religion with a Hindu priest."

"Huh?"

"When one possesses the ability to travel in time, simultaneity takes on a new meaning. One can exist in hundreds, even thousands of places at precisely the same instant."

"You mean I can bump off your guy and Lenny Barrow at the same time?" Joey's eyes sparked with interest.

"Of course you can. I'll take you forward twenty minutes into the future where you will accomplish your task. Then you'll be

returned to the exact moment of your departure, where you may do as you wish."

*Two places at the same time, thought Joey. Holy Jesus, what more could I want? If I could be in two places at the same time I could establish the perfect alibi, commit the perfect crime. . . .*

"I must ask for your decision, Mr. Rico."

"Huh?" Joey snapped back to awareness. "Oh, yeah. Yeah. I'll do your job for you." His eyes narrowed. "Just show me the million bucks first."

"Certainly. I'll have it for you right away." The tall man stood and pulled back the sleeve of his jacket, revealing what appeared to be a large, plastic toy watch. It was a tight bank of some shiny blue material, snugly circling his wrist. It actually had a watch face on it: three of them, in fact, overlapping one another in concentric circles.

"This is my time travel device," he said. "We call it a temporizer. Its appearance is not terribly impressive, I'm afraid." He touched a tiny lever to the side of the watch face. "I'll return in a moment," he said. He vanished silently into the air.

"Jesus Christ," Joey exclaimed, staring blankly at the spot where the tall man had stood. Instinctively he waved his arm in the air to see if anything remained.

*He wasn't kidding, he thought.*

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*He really is a time traveller!* Joey fell back on the bed, his head spinning with more thoughts than it was meant to contain.

*And if he really can travel in time . . . then what he said about being in two places at one time must have been true, too. . . .* He stood up and began pacing excitedly about the room.

*Two places at the same time*

*...  
If I could be in two places at the same time. . . .*

*. . . I could commit the perfect crime.*

He leaned against the window sill and stared out at the late evening sun hanging in the sky just above a large building across the street.

*If I could be in two places at the same time I could rob a bank—or commit a murder—and then make myself an alibi so airtight that the cops could never break it. I could—his heart beat faster—be the most dangerous man in the world! The cops could never touch me!*

*If I only had that gadget he's got on his wrist. . . .*

The idea, once conceived, was impossible to shake off. If he could have that gadget—the tempORIZER—he would have power like no criminal had ever dreamed of.

There was a predatory gleam in his eye. His breathing came quicker; he hunched forward against the window like some hungry jungle beast preparing to spring on its unwary victim. A

voice inside his head repeated over and over: *the most dangerous man in the world . . . the most dangerous man in the world . . . .*

There was the sound of a foot-step behind him.

He turned and saw the time traveller, standing again in the center of the room. He had changed clothing—now he wore a tight fitting, blue body tight, with a short cape-like attachment around the neck. In one hand he held a black suitcase and in the other a small brown bag.

“Where’d you get the long underwear?” asked Joey. “You look like Superman or something.”

“Superman? Isn’t that the creation of one of your twentieth century philosophers? This ‘long underwear’ as you call it, is the standard clothing of my time. I hope it doesn’t offend you, but it does afford me a good deal of comfort.”

“S’okay with me. How’d you get changed so fast?”

“I beg your pardon? Oh, I see. It would seem to you that I have been gone for but a few moments. Actually, I was gone for several days. Believe me, it’s no easy task to acquire a million dollars in twentieth century bills.” He tossed Joey the suitcase.

“This is the money?”, Joey asked. The time traveller nodded. Joey snapped open the suitcase and began greedily counting the

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bills inside.

"I assure you, Mr. Rico, that it contains the agreed upon amount. I'm afraid, though, that we have no more time to waste. We must hurry." He handed Joey the small, brown bag.

Joey dumped its contents onto the bed. It contained three long, thin bullets. Joey turned them over carefully in his fingers.

"We hope," the time traveller said, "that you'll require no more than one. However, we must be prepared for emergencies."

A sudden thrill ran up Joey's back. *He's playing right into my hands*, he thought. He dropped the bullets into his pockets. Pulling the bed away from the wall he removed the green briefcase from its hiding place.

"Come on now," the tall man beckoned. "We have only ten minutes before the rendezvous." He extended his arm. "Take my hand."

"Your . . . hand?" Joey stared dubiously.

"Of course. We must be in contact to bring you within the temporizer field." Joey came forward cautiously. The tall man took him by the elbow, then rolled back his sleeve to reveal the blue, watch-like temporizer.

"Look," Joey said, "I'm a little nervous about this time travel bit. Could you, uh, show me how that gadget works before we go anyplace? It'd make me

feel a little more comfortable."

"Certainly. But we must hurry. There are only moments left."

He held out his wrist to give Joey a better view of the device. At close range he could plainly see the three concentric dials on the temporizer face: dials marked with what appeared to be numerical calibrations, though the numerals were subtly different from those with which Joey was familiar.

The tall man explained: "Before one disembarks on a temporal journey, he must set these dials for the desired date. You might call the inner dial the 'fine tuning'. It is used for small, delicate movements in time. The outer dials, of course, are for greater movements—months, years, even centuries.

"Since we are only moving a slight distance into the future we need only concern ourselves with the center dial. It is controlled by the use of this lever." He indicated three small, green-tipped levers on the side of the device. He pressed the one closest to his wrist and a tiny red indicator moved forward on the inner dial.

"That should take us approximately fifteen minutes into the future. Now to begin the actual temporal movement, you need only apply a slight pressure here . . . ." He indicated a red tipped lever next to the three green ones.



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"The greater the pressure the faster the movement in time." He pushed it slightly. "We are now moving at a rate of approximately five to one. Five minutes of real time for every one minute of subjective time."

"I don't feel anything different," said Joey. "You sure that gadget's working?"

"Of course. There is no real sensation involved in time travel. But here. . . ." He indicated the bed post. "If you require some proof of our temporal motion, try touching that."

Joey hesitated. "What's gonna happen?" he asked, dubiously. "Will I get a shock or something?"

"Not exactly. In fact I doubt that you'll feel a thing."

"Okay. But I'm warnin' you . . . ." He extended his hand and touched the bed post as carefully as if it had been made of tissue. His hand passed through it like a cloud. He emitted a small gasp.

The tall man laughed. "I hope you find that demonstration convincing enough. We are in an entirely different continuum now, one in which we can have no contact with the world we see around us. Only light particles, by some freak of nature can pass through the barrier—allowing us to see back into the continuum from which we came. But even that is a one way flow. We are invisible to anyone in that other world."

"But . . . but if we can't

touch nothin', how come we don't fall through the floor?"

"We are held in place by the temporizer field. It generates a powerful electromagnetic current, which locks us as firmly into this segment of space as neutrons are locked into their orbits. This, however,"—he flipped open the temporizer fact to reveal a small red knob inside—"is called a locator. It allows us to shift the position of the temporizer field and ourselves with it. With its help we can move through space as well as time. Simply push the knob in the desired direction of travel. . . ."

He gave it a slight nudge. The two men slid lightly across the floor. As they approached the outer wall, Joey automatically threw up his arms for protection.

"That's hardly necessary," said the tall man as they passed wraithlike through the brick. Suddenly they were suspended high above the city, skyscrapers rearing around them like upraised fists. The early evening sun was reflected like tiny bonfires in thousands of office windows. Far away Joey caught the glimmer of the river between two dirty buildings. His stomach forced its way into his throat.

"There is much grandeur," the tall man said, "in these primitive stone and glass buildings. That one there—," he in-

"There is much grandeur," the tall man said, "in these

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tive stone and glass buildings. That one there—," he indicated the Empire State Building, "—still stands in my time, though it had to be partially rebuild, I'm told, after the Eight World War. It's become quite a tourist attraction—one of the Finteen Wonders of the World."

Joey made a tiny gurgling sound.

"i hope you're not prone to motion sickness, Mr. Rico. These aerial excursions *are* a bit rough on the novice. . . ."

Joey gagged and with almost explosive force, emptied the contents of his stomach in the direction of a nearby seagull. The half digested food particles formed into tiny balls of brown liquid and hung suspended in the temporizer field just below Joey's feet.

"My apologies, Mr. Rico. I had no idea you suffered from such a weak stomach."

"S'allright," gasped Joey, his face white.

"Fortunately, we have almost reached our destination."

They hovered momentarily over the roof of a large apartment building. The tall man lowered them gently to the sun deck and, with a slight pressure on the red lever, brought them back into the normal continuum.

Joey lay limply on the gravel, breathing in short, ragged breaths. The tall man said, "I'm afraid you have only a few moments to prepare yourself, Mr.

Rico. Your, ah, victim will be making his appearance in about five minutes. He'll be over her, I believe."

The tall man led Joey to the edge of the roof, where he could see, far below, the intersection of two large, city streets. Traffic was light now, in the early evening hours. A few yellow taxis darted madly from lane to lane, fighting their way through crowds of oblivious pedestrians.

The view caused another twinge in Joey's stomach, but he steadied himself and peered over.

"He will be appearing *there* . . . ." The tall man indicated the street corner directly beneath them. "He will wait briefly for that light, then cross the street diagonally toward the far corner. You will have approximately thirty seconds to accomplish your task—time enough to discharge all three rounds, if necessary. If you miss the first shot, don't worry. He probably won't be able to hear you over the noise of the traffic."

Joey nodded. He opened the briefcase and began assembling the pieces of the rifle, fastening them together with professional care. When it was assembled he made a few slight adjustments in the telescopic sight, using the tiny jewelers instruments he kept in his coat pocket. Then he lay the rifle against the low retaining wall at the edge of the roof and waited for a signal.

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The tall man was carefully studying the temporizer dial. "Are you ready?" he asked. Joey nodded assent. "Very good. He should be appearing . . . *now!*"

A man appeared below and—as predicted—paused briefly for the street light. He was wearing a suit—probably a businessman. Joey could tell nothing more about him. He found the man easily in the sight of his rifle.

The light changed and the man began walking briskly toward the opposite corner. Joey tracked him in the gun sight, carefully following the rhythm of his walk. Slowly, easily, he began to squeeze the trigger.

Then, suddenly, the man dropped out of the sight. Joey caught his breath. Looking away from the gun sight he could see the man standing frozen in the middle of the intersection, staring upward.

*What's the matter with this guy?* thought Joey. *What's he doin' standin' there in the middle of the street?* Joey automatically followed the direction of the man's gaze, up to the top of a nearby building. The man was staring at a bright red billboard with a picture of a pack of cigarettes on it.

*Now what the hell's he doin' that for? What's so damn fascinatin' about a billboard? He wanna hold up traffic or somethin'?* Joey quickly lifted the gun back into place. *Well, if he wants to hold still while I shoot him, that's his*

*business.*

But the man didn't hold still. Even as Joey brought him back into the gun sight he broke out running, heading wildly for the curb.

*Damn it,* thought Joey. *I wish this bastard would make up his mind.* Remaining calm, Joey followed the running man until he reached the curb, then squeezed the trigger. Even before the man fell to the ground Joey's well trained instincts told him he had hit his mark.

"Did you strike your target?" the tall man asked, from behind him. Joey turned and realized that the time traveller had not been watching. Rather, he was facing the opposite side of the building. *Too squeamish to watch,* Joey told himself.

"No, I missed," he lied. "Must be a stiff wind down there. I'll try again." Joey quietly turned and leaned against the retaining wall. He propped the gun on his knees and aimed it at the tall man's head. Slowly, carefully, he pulled the trigger.

Even before the echoes had died away, Joey could hear sirens in the distance.

*It doesn't matter,* he thought. *I've got the temporizer now and nobody can touch me.*

He removed the device from the tall man's wrist. It was held by a sort of velcro binding which gave way easily when pressure was applied.

## THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN THE WORLD

*The most dangerous man in the world, he thought. With this on my wrist there ain't nothin' I can't do.*

He packed up the rifle and studied the temporizer. *Let's see. He said it worked like this. . . .* He moved the green lever gently, until the inner dial was back approximately where it had been set before they left his apartment. *Okay, now I pull this lever here*

. . . .  
He felt nothing, but a bird flew by the building, moving backwards. Far below him, the cars had all gone into reverse. "I guess it's workin'," he said, speaking out loud. "Now, how do I get outta here?"

He found a catch on the side of the temporizer and opened up the face. He pushed the red locator knob forward.

With a quick jerk he sailed out over the city, dangling helplessly like a puppet on magnetic strings. His stomach bobbed like a demented yoyo, forcing his adam's apple practically into his houth. "Hey," he yelled. "How do you stop this damn thing?" He wrenched the knob in the opposite direction, sending him just as rapidly back the way he had come. Finally he brought himself to a tentative midair halt. He retched emptily toward the buildings below.

Slowly, through careful trial and error, Joey worked his way over the rooftops, back to his hotel room.

He returned to a few moments after the initial disembarkation. Joey was grateful for this. It would be rather embarrassing to encounter his earlier self and the time traveller—how could he explain the fact that he was returning alone, with the temporizer, yet? Of course he could not have encountered them—he would have remembered it from before, right?

He lay in a state of nervous exhaustion on the bed. His head was spinning, his stomach boiling. He briefly considered using the temporizer to keep his appointment with Lenny Barrow. But no—it would be some time before he was ready for another trip like that.

*Okay, he thought. I gotta get a hold of myself. Accordin' to this gadget I got about a half hour before Lenny Barrow gets to the theater. I can walk there in twenty minutes, so I'd better get goin' now.*

He stood on uncertain feet and stumbled toward the door, almost forgetting to take the briefcase with the million dollars. He practically crawled to the elevator, which took him down to the lobby, where he checked the money in the hotel safe.

Once outside on the street he felt better. The waning sunlight restored his flagging spirits. His walk became brisker, more confident. He briefly considered taking a subway, but realized that walking would be just as fast.

He thought about the device on

## THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN THE WORLD

his wrist. *I won't even have to hide when I shoot him. Witnesses won't matter if I can prove I was some place else when it happened.* He smiled. It gave him a feeling of power to know he had the temporizer—the very feeling that he had been looking for when he chose murder as his profession. He had never found it until now.

He had cut down a side street, a short cut on the way to the theater. In the shadow of the surrounding buildings his thoughts went back to the time traveller—when they had talked together in his room.

*It's funny, he thought, what that guy said about the future. About one man changin' it and all. I wonder who that guy was, that I killed? What was he gonna do that they had to stop him like that?*

*Suppose that guy was Lenny*

*Barrow. Suppose Lenny was gonna do somethin' they didn't want him to do. Then he'd have to be knocked off. But that's stupid. I'm gonna knock Lenny off anyway. So they wouldn't have to go to all that trouble.*

*But suppose it was somethin' that Lenny was gonna do if I didn't knock him off? Suppose it was somethin' that they wanted him to do? Joey came out of the alley and turned on to a major thoroughfare, absorbed in thought. Then they'd have to get rid of the guy that was gonna kill him. Then I'd be the one that would have to be. . . .*

Joey stopped, standing in the middle of a large intersection. It wasn't the thought that made him stop, but something that he saw. High above the street there was a large red billboard with a picture of a pack of cigarettes on it. ●

## THE HARD SLAM

Take a love-starved plain girl, involve her in a clever robbery scheme and you're home-free with a fortune. Or are you?

by Vic Alexander

AGNES KLEIN HAD a pointed nose, small brown eyes, dull brown hair, and often wore drab brown suits. She reminded me of a plump pumpernickel loaf, a bread I didn't consider particularly eye-

appealing, nor tasteful. She was a few years past thirty and had apparently resigned herself to being alone. She lived in a modest apartment on the east side of the city and worked at the Five-A Loan

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Company. Her existence appeared to be devoted to ten, and sometimes twelve, hours of work a day; her nights were usually spent alone. Her life-style seemed rather uneventful and without purpose of direction. A real drag.

That is, until I stepped in and gave it not only *purpose* but a definite direction.

I had checked out her background before I engineered a chance meeting with her. That took place at Jefferson Park, during an outdoor concert. I had sent her a ticket, along with a note saying that she had not been at home when the Lucky Listener Jackpot had telephoned, but enclosed was a consolation prize.

She showed up at the concert, of course. How many people can

resist a free ticket to anything? I was looking for a way to 'accidentally' meet her when I saw her purchasing a soft drink at the refreshment stand. I found my opening and maneuvered into line. When she looked away, I managed to position myself so that when she turned, she spilled most of her drink on my shirt and tie.

"Oh dear, I'm terribly sorry," she murmured, flustered. She had a pleasant voice and I thought she really wasn't all that unattractive. Maybe ten or fifteen pounds overweight, and a bit heavy in the face, which gave her a dry matronly look. Her lips were thin with a sort of determined line about them; her eyes had the same kind of lines at the corners

## THE HARD SLAM

and somehow they didn't seem to belong on that face. I had seen such hard lines on women before, but they were bitter, cruel women, and Agnes didn't appear to be anything but soft and sort of helpless.

"That's perfectly all right," I said, gently, smiling to ease her discomfort.

"Oh dear me, I ruined your nice shirt," she said, blinking as if close to tears.

"It's an old shirt. Nothing to fuss about." We stepped off to the side, away from the crowd, and I became boyishly innocent as I glanced around. "I notice that you haven't come with anyone. You're alone, then?"

"No," she said too hastily. "I mean, yes, I'm alone, and no, I didn't come with anyone. Oh dear, that sounds confusing, doesn't it? I mean, I . . ."

"I know what you mean," I cut in, smiling again. "My name is Dave Adams. Do you think we could sit together?" When she hesitated, I added in a kidding way, "After all, you did ruin my shirt. What's your name?"

"Agnes Klein." She smiled at me. "Miss. I'm single. I guess we can sit together."

We listened to Brahms' Third Symphony in silence but every now and then I absently ran my fingers over my wet shirt, pulling the material away from my skin. And during intermission, she made a concerned comment about

my catching cold.

"It is getting a little chilly," I admitted with a nice shiver. "I'll get a blanket. My Chevelle isn't parked too far away." A perfect way, I thought when I returned and wrapped the big plaid cover around us both, to get to know Aggie a touch more intimately.

She enjoyed snuggling and I could tell she dug me. After all, modesty aside, at thirty-five I'm not a bad looking guy. I looked younger, according to several women I'd dated. I kept wondering, during the rest of the concert, why some guy hadn't taken her long ago. I mean, she wasn't *that* much of a dog, really, and she was rather interesting to me, particularly since she worked at the Five-A Loan Company.

Naturally, I had cased the place before I met her. I'd learned that on a good weekend the company might have twenty or thirty grand in cash stashed in the office safe. They specialized in short-term and cash loans. At least that was the information I got from carefully nosing around. Agnes was going to be my link to the whole set up. I needed to find out the inside details. That made her of very special interest to me.

We dated often after the concert—a movie or a play, and dinner, the usual bit. I gave her a phony background, of course, because she wanted to know all about me. I told her I was an artist, and that enabled me to oper-

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ate without a lot of cash-on-hand; everybody knew that struggling artists were pretty much paupers. I did, though, buy a pile of pictures, oils and charcoal sketches, from a second-hand art store. And I learned a good deal about Agnes and the Five-A Loan Company during that incubating period.

I learned, for example, that the Five-A Loan Company had three employees, besides the manager, Hayden Rush, who was near retirement age. There was Preston Walker, thirty-seven, who had been there two years and was single, drank a bit, and kept his private life pretty much to himself. Laughing lightly, Aggie told me that Preston reminded her of me. After seeing the guy, I felt flattered because he was pretty good-looking in a to-hell-with-everything kind of James Coburn way. Then there was George Rush, Hayden's brother, forty-six, married, with four kids and fourteen years of service with Five-A. And there was Aggie, of course. She did all the final paperwork, checked references, opened and closed the office.

I considered it a beautiful set up, real sweet. And just perfect for my talents.

Sometimes I would call for Aggie at the office; it helped to get the pattern of activity at Five-A in my mind. The manager, Hayden Rush, was more often than not away on business, and on those occasions his brother, George, was in charge. And Pres-

ton was his assistant; he did most of the legwork. Both men were friendly enough and one time, when I'd called Aggie and Preston answered the phone, I could hear him chuckle.

"Hey, Aggie, your boy friend's on the phone, wants to talk to you."

Which was good, I thought; it established the fact that she was quite smitten with me and considered me her boy friend. That would make things easier all around—when the time came.

Things progressed in my relationship with Aggie to a point where even marriage was discussed. But she understood my feelings about wanting to make it as an artist, that it took time and a lot of work. And I told her about a cozy place I knew in Western Canada where two could live quite cheaply and the scenery was gorgeous. I pointed out that if a man had a nest-egg of a few thousand dollars, he could live well and devote himself to his art full-time, and really explore his talent without worrying too much about bread. I laid it on thick.

"As long as I'm working," she said, somewhat coyly, "why can't that carry us through, Dave, until you start selling your work? You *will* sell, I know, because your work shows real talent.

"No, dear heart," I said, gently. "I have too much pride for that." I sighed and looked despondent. "It's true what they say about money being the root of



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evil. We just can't. . . ."

"Money, money!" she cut in, impatiently. She seemed irritated in a way that was foreign to her submissive, patient nature. "So near and yet so far," she added with a faraway look in her small brown eyes. I had a feeling that she could almost taste that cozy hideaway in Canada.

"Yes, isn't it a shame? You handle lots of money all day long, week in and week out," I said, sighing again, deeper this time. "No, it's ironic, that's what it is."

She was quiet a long time, then said very calmly, "Maybe we could borrow some."

I arched my brows. "Borrow? How do you mean that, Aggie?"

"Well," she said, "supposing the office were held up."

My eyes widened in surprise and something akin to expectation. "You mean rob the office?" I asked.

"It wouldn't be stealing, exactly. The money is insured, you see. Nobody would actually get hurt," Agnes said, touching her hand to her brow as if she were fevered by such boldness and would momentarily faint. I quickly put my arm around her shoulder.

"There, there, dear heart," I soothed. "Take it easy. Let's think about this, very slowly."

"Oh Dave, you're not angry with me, are you?" she asked, as if frightened that somehow the suggestion might have offended

me.

"Of course not," I said softly, kissing her cheek. "How could I be angry with you, dear heart? You're only thinking of our future happiness together, right?"

I HAD WORKED out an ingenious plan which would make it fairly easy for Agnes; I mean, after all, it would hurt her pretty badly when I skipped out on her and the very least I could do was erase all suspicion of her involvement in our caper.

This was the set up. On a night when Agnes would be working late and alone, which was often the case, and the safe contained a healthy hunk of cash, she was to give me a call. And the first thing I'd do was rip off a set of wheels for the job. There would be no problem finding one with keys inside; too many people were careless about such things.

I needed another car because Agnes had to be stashed out of sight and in close quarters while I made my getaway towards 'Canada' in the Chevelle. It was as simple as that.

You see, the crux of her story was going to be pretty heavy stuff in itself. She was going to tell the fuzz how this man who called himself Dave Adams had briefly 'courted' her—being a romantic she would probably use a word like that. And then she'd tell them that Dave, high on something, suddenly burst into the office one night, forced her to open the safe, and abducted her.

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The beauty of it all was that she'd be telling the truth, except for the high-on-something bit. I was never into drugs. I didn't need them; living dangerously gave me enough of a high.

After things quieted down, Agnes was supposed to join me in Canada. I'd give her an address, phony of course, where she was to contact me.

It was my plan to work things so they'd look convincing. But I had to spell it out for Agnes; she insisted. After taking her as hostage, I'd leave her tied up in the trunk of the stolen car. She was awfully apprehensive over that part of it but through patient persuasion and some pretty heavy petting, I convinced her she'd be found in a very short time. I swore there was absolutely no danger of suffocation in the trunk. I made her realize how that particular angle would keep her in the clear. I couldn't tell if Agnes really bought the deal but she nodded.

And then it hit me; I wondered why I was so damned concerned with what the cops would think about this 'dumb broad after everything was over. I don't know, maybe Agnes was getting to me. And a guy can 'use' people only so far, right? I mean, there's a limit, some call it 'karma,' to what you can do, even for an artist like me.

Okay, I considered it a good plan.

MY ONLY PROBLEM was in getting Agnes to be less uptight and to get the thing into action. I never liked to stay in one place too long. She was much too cautious. I wanted her to get it together, already. Sure, she enjoyed our dating. I kind of enjoyed it myself. I mean, she wasn't all that bad in the sack and once her clothes were off, she warmed up into a willing companion. But after awhile, I began to feel she was stalling.

So I kept the pressure on and finally, on a Friday night when the office stayed open late anyway, she called. There was a tinge of excitement in her voice.

"It looks good for tonight, Dave. Hayden is out of town and George left early." She paused briefly. "Preston took off early, too. I think he's got a girl waiting for him someplace."

I smiled. The moment had arrived.

After I got dressed, I quickly packed my things. There wasn't much I needed to stow into my Chevelle. All the pictures, charcoals and oils together, I'd leave behind for the cultural enrichment of the next tenant. This artist was splitting.

I drove around awhile until I spotted a dark green Buick, a nice Skylark. The dumb owner had left the keys tucked atop the sunvisor. No sweat. I parked my Chevelle a couple blocks away, walked back, then got into the

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Skylark and headed for the Five-A Loan Company. It didn't matter if my prints were on the car; the fuzz had no make on me. And I'd never been in military service, either. Nobody could trace me through the usual channels. Neat.

Agnes was waiting for me, properly nervous until I squeezed her hand for reassurance. She took a deep breath, fluttered her short eyelashes and tried not to look anxious. Her pointed nose was quivering like a nervous rabbit's in a lettuce patch.

We killed the office lights. Without a moment's hesitation, Agnes opened the safe for me, the way she might for an unexpected thief who had entered the office as she was locking up.

But a few minutes later, she got anxious again. "Let's hurry, Dave, please!"

I had taken out the cash and was carefully counting it when she implored me to rush things. I frowned at the count.

"Is that all there is, Aggie? Just ten grand? Maybe we should wait for another time. I mean, this haul isn't exactly what I . . ."

"There should be more than that," she interrupted. "Unless George took some of it to the bank when he left. Hayden put him in charge, you know, and maybe he was worried about the responsibility." She paused and began dry-washing her hands. "I'm truly sorry about the

amount, Dave, but please let's take the money now. I just couldn't go through this a second time. I couldn't!" Her voice cracked, unmistakably.

I sure in hell didn't need a hysterical woman on my hands. "Don't get your water hot, dear heart, just play it real cool, hear?"

She looked pained, as if she'd let me down, and her voice was rather humble when she asked, "Can't we make it for awhile on ten thousand, Dave?"

I shrugged: yeah, *I* could live all right on ten thousand in Mexico. Living was cheap there.

We messed up the office some, left under cover of darkness, and drove toward the edge of town. I half-turned into an alley not far from where I'd left my Chevelle.

"They won't have any trouble finding you here," I said as we walked around to the trunk area of the Skylark. I pulled out a roll of adhesive tape and some rope from my pockets. I intended to gag and bind Agnes.

She didn't like the idea at all. She was not only afraid that the closed lid would suffocate her but the gag, as well.

"That's a double hazard, Dave," she said, shaking her head.

"Okay, forget the tape," I said, not wanting to be hard-nosed about it. Anyway, her screams wouldn't be heard that quickly out there. I gave her a

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hard kiss for reassurance. Her lips and body were warm against mine. I almost hated to do her in like this. I sighed. "But I've got to tie your hands and feet, Aggie, to make it look good, dig?" I couldn't allow her to screw up my plan at this stage of the game.

I opened the trunk.

Agnes shrank back. "Dave, I'm afraid! I honestly don't think I'll fit in there."

"What fit," I said. "Sure you will. You just curl up like a fetus, dear heart." She still hesitated so I had to show her how.

I burrowed in and quicker than you could snap your fingers, her hands began darting around. She slapped a piece of paper on my folded arms and when I scrunched my chin to glance down at the paper, her hands shot to the trunk lid. It slammed down. Hard. And I knew I had been taken.

"Goddammit, what the hell's coming off here!" I muttered, banging my fist on the closed lid. Then in the distance, not too far away from where I was, I heard a car door close with a loud bang. I knew at once that someone had followed us and had waited in another car.

I tinkered with the lock, knowing I'd get out in a few minutes, but I sure was puzzled, and a little mad. I still had the ten grand on me so what in hell did Agnes gain by locking me up in the trunk?

After I picked the lock, I crawled out. The paper on my arm fluttered to the ground and I

scooped it up. I flicked on my Zippo to read by. I scowled and balled one hand into a fist which I waved in the air.

"Son of a bitch, anyway!" I was definitely deflated and not a little offended. I shoved the paper morosely in my pocket and walked to my Chevelle.

Without even looking back, I sped off for a less chilly, in more ways than one, climate.

I READ THE NEWSPAPER account of the Five-A Loan Company heist two days later as I headed south towards my hacienda hideaway. Agnes had related quite a tale to the police; yes, it was very imaginative. She said Dave Adams had completely gained her affection and confidence, although it was obvious now that he'd only hung around waiting for the right moment to rob the company.

She went on to say that Adams had turned vicious that night; he pointed a gun at her head and there was nothing to do but obey him. She had been so afraid for her very life. He had tied her up in the office near a desk. He had also gagged her. Then, her story went on, she waited about ten minutes and managed to knock the telephone from the cradle onto the desk with her head. She dialed the operator. With her nose.

Evidently, because of the open line, the operator notified the police and they eventually checked it out. When the police freed

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her mouth the tape tore off a bit of her hair at the temples. A nice touch, that.

I smiled and thought about her funny pointed nose, the end of which would do as nicely as a pencil for dialing the phone. But as I read on, my smile vanished. Agnes said that with the gun at her head, there was no way to avoid turning over all the money in the safe. Thirty thousand dollars. In cold cash.

I flung the newspaper across the seat of my car, started up the motor, and swore in my best salty blue. Thirty grand, eh? And this artist had gotten the smallest share of the bundle. That meant dear Agnes had the other two-thirds safely tucked away somewhere. The rotten bitch! And I suddenly knew why.

I read again the crumpled note I'd kept in my pocket. It was a very simple, neatly typed message, unsigned, of course.

"I've been waiting for someone like you, dear heart, to come around for a long time. And you reminded me so much of P. That made it easier for me to pretend. We'll always remember

you, fondly. And have fun painting, dear heart.'"

Just like a dame to rub salt in a guy's wound. I hated her snotty mockery of my favorite expression for a femme—dear heart. That dear heart of a pumpernickel was also one hell of a story-teller.

I balled up the note and flung it out the window before stamping down on the gas pedal. Christ, I should have known when Agnes told me I reminded her of Preston Walker, that he was the stud she had hearts for all along. Once I had come into the picture and awakened her, so to speak, she probably got enough confidence in herself to work on Preston. And he was no dummy; with the promise of money tossed in, he probably figured she wasn't all that hard to take anymore.

Hell, I should have been socked in to that hard line around her mouth the first time I saw her close up. Agnes was cruel and scheming, just like every other woman I'd known. A true whore, damn her ass, anyway!

That broad was something else.

I hate to admit it. She was my kind of doll.

●

# THE NIGHT CALLER

*The dirty calls ended with the worst obscenity: death. How could he save the next listener?*

by Carl Henry Rathjen



IT WAS THE TIME of the month when the night caller terrified lone women with his obscene phone calls. So the cruising police officer became suspicious when the man at the public phone averted his face. As the car stopped the man attempted to flee. The officer, moving fast, caught his arm and swung him around.

“So maybe you’re the one who—”

The panicky suspect suddenly stopped trying to pull away. In-

stead he lunged against the surprised officer, shoving him through a store window. Huge shards of plate glass dropped like guillotines. The officer’s blood spurted. The suspect scurried away before the crash of glass drew people from beds and TVs to upstairs apartment windows across the way. They looked out, then dashed to telephones.

In the small telephone exchange for Valley View, population 2534, Police Chief McCabe

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watched a supervisor and switchman. Working overtime that night, they had just completed an installation and were demonstrating a new sophisticated method for rapid tracing of telephone calls.\*\*

"Good, that's real fast," McCabe commented, gray eyes noting the brief lapse of time required to trace from a called number to the originating one. They weren't listening in, just demonstrating how quickly they could trace back. "This," said McCabe, "is going to be a big help to police everywhere in putting a stop to bomb scares and other malicious—"

A switchman turned from automatic apparatus. "Mac, here's one to your home."

McCabe knew that at this hour it could only be a call to the town's night police number. "Give it to me here," he said quickly.

They switched the call for him.

"M-M-Mac!" an excited voice yelled in his ear. "R-R-Ralph K-Keeley is B-B-bleeding to D-death!"

McCabe recognized the stuttering voice. Davy Carlin who had the snack bar concession at the bowling alley. "Calm down, Davy. Take it slow. Tell me where."

"East F-First and-and-and—" The breathless voice couldn't complete it. McCabe made a stab at it.

"Your neighborhood? East

First and Ash?"

"N-N-No. Elm S-Street and-and—"

"Stay there," McCabe ordered, hanging up. He heard switchmen call.

"Mac, here's another to your home . . . the police station . . . looks like a whole mob of incoming . . ."

"Relay them to Knapperman of Donovan," McCabe replied. They were his two regular patrolmen. Ralph Keeley was a very capable auxiliary who hoped to become a regular if McCabe could get city council approval to increase the department.

Driving fast in his official station wagon with red lights flashing, McCabe radioed county, requesting dispatch of an ambulance. Approaching East First and Elm he saw Keeley's patrol sedan facing the wrong way near the public phone on the pole. A shop window's broken glass littered the sidewalk. People crouched over a body amid merchandise in the window. A woman in curlers and housecoat dashed across the street with an armful of towels. Glass cracked under McCabe's boots as he joined the group applying tourniquets and compresses to Keeley.

"M-M-Mac!" Davy Carlin's eyes behind thick lenses looked ready to burst from their lids.

"Wait," McCabe snapped, climbing into the window. "An ambulance is coming. How is he?"

A man, pressing a fresh towel

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over a soggy one, shook his head. "Pretty bad. He was bleeding like a sieve when we rolled him over to—"

There was nothing McCabe could do to assist the first-aiders. "Ralph," he called, but there was no response from the officer. McCabe's gray eyes were bleak as he stepped out of the window. "Did anyone see this happen?"

They'd only heard the crash of glass. Davy's lips tried to form words.

"Take it slow," McCabe said. "Did you see it, Davy?"

"N-No. I H-H-Heard it. W-Was almost H-Home . . ."

McCabe glanced along the short block to Ash Street, the next intersection where Davy Carlin lived. Then he frowned at the thick lenses.

"If you ran into the house to phone me, how could you have known it was Ralph Keeley down here who—"

"I-I-I—"

As Davy fought to get control of his voice a woman spoke up. Ruby Wilkins, who ran a beauty shop in town and lived diagonally across the way from the Carlins.

"He didn't go in the house, Mr. McCabe. I saw him running down here."

"That's right, Mac," said her burly husband, Jack, who drove a restaurant supply truck. "When I heard the crash of glass I came barging out, thinking it was vandals doing something to my car. Davy was already on his way

down here."

Davy nodded jerkily, pointing toward the public phone.

"I-I-I phoned you from there. You-you hung up before I c-could t-tell you about the-the-the m-man."

"What man?" McCabe demanded.

"He-he-he ran. . . ." Davy pointed across the street toward an alley. ". . . into th-there."

McCabe heard the sound of approaching sirens.

"Davy, were Ralph Keeley and that man here at the corner when you came by on your way home?"

"N-No-No."

McCabe turned to other people in hopes of faster answers about Keeley's attacker. The Wilkins had seen only Davy. Someone in an apartment across the way had looked out quickly, but by then the fugitive must have been below the line of vision. McCabe turned resignedly back to Davy Carlin.

"Describe him."

He finally got it dragged out, such as it was because it had been night and Davy's vision was none too good, even for the short block. McCabe's boots crunched glass as a sedan drew up with red lights flashing inside front and rear windows. Knapperman, one of his regulars, started to get out. McCabe waved him back.

"Head through the alley. We want a tall man, about six feet, leather jacket. Some kind of Duckbilled cap . . . maybe."



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Knapperman swerved the car away. The ambulance arrived. The attendants began applying more emergency bandages.

"I'm afraid, Mac," said one, "he's going to be DOA if he isn't just about that already."

Nodding grimly, McCabe went to the phone on the pole and called Keeley's home to break the news.

"I should come in person, Mrs. Keeley," he apologized, staring at the phone, "but I'm tied up here. However, if you need transportation. . . ."

Keeley's wife understood. As the ambulance left, McCabe got the clipboard from his car. As he took down names and statements he hoped that someone would recall pertinent details to add to Davy's meager report. The store manager, summoned from bed, arrived and thought that nothing was missing from the disordered window display. Anyway, if there had been something worth stealing, wouldn't the window have been broken before the officer got there?

McCabe moved slowly toward Keeley's car. Why would he have stopped and gotten out? What had made him angle the car across the street to the left curb? McCabe stood by the open left door and imagined himself on patrol and swinging the car abruptly over here. What had been going on here? Nothing on the sidewalk now except glass. No signs of attempted break-in by the store's

front door. The public telephone caught his glance. His gray eyes narrowed as he recalled staring at the phone when he'd spoken to Keeley's wife. He went to the pole and looked at the phone again. Maybe. . . .

He quickly drove Keeley's car to the curb, locked it, then hurried in the station wagon to the telephone exchange. The switchman who let him in started to ask questions about East First and Elm. McCabe interrupted.

"Have you still got those lists of numbers from the demonstration?"

He scanned a paper with two columns of numbers. The first column contained numbers that had been called. Opposite each was the traced number that had originated the call. McCabe looked at the last two entries in the second column. Both were the same number!

"That's the public phone at East First and Elm," he said with growing excitement. "The second call from there is the one Davy made to me." His glance shifted up one line and over to the first column, to the number which had received the first call from the public phone. "Who's listed for that number?"

"Mac," the switchman began hesitantly. "I don't know whether—"

"Never mind the red tape," McCabe snapped. "We'll unravel it later, if necessary. Ralph Keeley was attacked, is probably dead by

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now, murdered. That call may provide a lead. Now who received it?"

The number was listed for Earl A. Nellis at an address on the northeast side of town. Despite the hour, well after midnight, there was a light by the bungalow's front door and a floodlight illuminating the back yard. McCabe rang, but no one answered. He rang again, then he knocked impatiently. Suddenly, in the night's stillness, he heard a woman's shrill voice inside.

"Operator, get me the police! Any police! Someone's trying to break into my home!"

McCabe waited until her voice stopped. "Mrs. Nellis," he called. "This is Police Chief McCabe. Look out your window first to be sure."

A moment later drapes moved. He stood back so he could be seen. He also gestured toward the police car out front. She unlocked the door. Her eyes were dark holes in an extremely pale face. Her hand trembled, clutching the lapels of a housecoat.

"Oh, you're an angel in uniform!" she gasped. "I've never been so frightened in my life."

"Everything's all right now," he said reassuringly. "Just a moment." He picked up the phone lying beside its stand. The operator had made a connection to the sheriff's office. McCabe identified himself to the dispatcher's satisfaction and cancelled the call. The dispatcher informed him

that Keeley had been DOA when the ambulance reached the hospital. McCabe turned to Mrs. Nellis. "You were expecting trouble," he began.

She interrupted, nodding tensely. "Earlier this evening, about an hour ago, I received a filthy phone call."

"That's why I'm here," McCabe said.

"But I don't understand," she explained. "I didn't report that call. I tried to phone the Valley View police right after it happened, but I kept getting busy signals."

Because, McCabe decided, the police line was being jammed with calls about the broken window and Keeley.

"So," she continued, fumbling to turn on lights in the living room, "I gave up trying, it was probably too late anyway. I put on the outside lights and went to bed, but not to sleep. Then when the doorbell rang and you began pounding. . . ." She shuddered.

McCabe placed his cap on a table. "I think we have the means now to put a stop to these calls. However, for your information, and pass it along to your friends, if you receive such a call, don't break the connection. Get to another line promptly, or have a neighbor contact the telephone company to trace the call and notify the police." McCabe sat down opposite Mrs. Nellis. "Now tell me about the one you received tonight."

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Color flooded her face. "It was just . . . awful, disgusting."

"You're home alone?" McCabe inquired.

"Yes. My husband was in an auto accident a few days ago . . . in Allentown. He wasn't hurt badly, but his doctor preferred him to stay in the hospital a few days for observation."

McCabe nodded. "Who knew you would be here alone tonight?"

She moved her hands helplessly. "Anyone, I guess. It was in the paper about his accident and being held in the hospital."

McCabe had hoped for something with more direction, for the night caller always knew when women were going to be alone.

"Getting back to the phone call, Mrs. Nellis. This won't go any further, but if you could bring yourself to tell me everything he said, it might help to tab him."

She took a deep breath, then kept her eyes closed in embarrassment as she spoke very softly. McCabe got nothing from it but deep disgust and seething anger toward the night caller who tonight had converted his misdemeanors into a felony with the killing of Ralph Keeley. Although he knew where the call had originated, he asked if Mrs. Nellis had heard any background noise.

"It was a very brief call, and I was so appalled . . . and frightened. But when he paused suddenly . . . I think I heard a

motor of some kind . . . then he hung up quickly."

That tied it in, thought McCabe. The night caller had paused when he'd spotted the police car, then hung up and tried to flee.

"What about his voice?" McCabe asked. "Was it high-pitched or low? Any suggestion of accent? Unusual phrasing of words?"

She closed her eyes again. "There *was* something about it. I can't really describe it." McCabe waited while she rested her forehead on her hand. "It was . . . sort of flat . . . and yet it wasn't. There was something about it . . . maybe cooing would describe it. Anyway, I'd never heard anyone speak that way . . . I mean, aside from the suggestive filth he was saying."

McCabe frowned. "Voices *are* odd when there's an attempt to disguise them." He stood up. "Thank you, Mrs. Nellis. It's been an ordeal for you, but you've been helpful. Now try to get some sleep. I'll order extra patrols in this neighborhood tonight and. . . ."

He spoke through his teeth. ". . . and every night until we get that louse."

Knapperman had found no trace of the fugitive. He accompanied McCabe to check up on a few men who had previously been convicted or suspected of sexual offenses and who were still living in the vicinity of Valley View. There wasn't much to go on, just

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a disguised voice and a vague description. Three of the men they awakened could have fit the description, but each claimed an alibi.

McCabe got a couple of hours sleep, then checked out the alibis. All of them proved to be valid. He'd have to dig in another direction. But which direction? Later that morning on his way back to the one-room station at city hall he stopped by Davy Carlin's home. Mrs. Carlin answered the door. Someone had once described her as a draft horse with the face and disposition of a mule.

"You're wasting your time here, Mac," she scoffed. "He's still so wound up from last night he can't get a single word out—" She mimicked her husband. "—without s-s-str-tr-tr-etching it-it-it." She grimaced. "A mouse with rubber bands for vocal cords."

"And yet," McCabe said pointedly, "he found courage enough to run down there last night."

"Yeah, he did at that. Maybe he's got something I ain't discovered. He's in the kitchen, slopping coffee on everything."

She was right. McCabe couldn't pull or prompt more information from Davy. He'd just have to find that new direction, if he could, the usual hard way.

At city hall he delved into the file of malicious phone calls. Every complaint had been filed by a woman who had been home

alone or just there with young children. They were single, recent widows, babysitters, or husbands had been away on business, hunting, or fishing trips. The night caller couldn't have learned about all of them from newspaper items as in the case of Mrs. Nellis. He had some other source of information, and it must be right here in Valley View.

Late that afternoon and during the supper hour McCabe interviewed some of the women who had been terrified. He got common denominators of the odd-sounding voice. He also began to gather possibilities about the night caller's sources of information. Aside from newspaper items, it could be from talk overheard in beauty or barber shops, the bowling alley, at the numerous breakfasts, luncheons, and banquets of service, church and social clubs.

That evening he rang doorbells in the neighborhood of East First and Elm. People said they couldn't add anything to the statements made the previous night, but unknowingly they did under McCabe's adroit questioning. He had one more place to visit. Jack Wilkins answered the door.

"How you coming on last night's lousy business, Mac?"

"Not the way it's done on TV," McCabe said wryly. "Is Ruby home? I stopped by her beauty shop this afternoon, but it was closed."

"Don't tell me, Mac, you're

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going to be ome a longhair and want to get it waved!" Wilkins grinned. "Ruby had a bowling league this afternoon and then the girls were giving someone a bridal shower tonight. Even if you'd seen her, she couldn't tell you anymore than she did last night."

"I've been wondering about something," McCabe said quietly. "Does she bring home, or repeat elsewhere, the gossip she hears in the shop?"

"She's a woman, isn't she?" Jack Wilkins's grin snapped away. "What are you fishing for, Mac?"

McCabe spoke very evenly. "I've been checking up on people's statements about last night. Some of them, like you and Ruby, saw Davy Carlin running to the scene or at the public phone to call me." McCabe paused. "But none of them recalls your being right on his heels."

He stood balanced, almost expecting the tall Wilkins to swing at him.

"So that's it. You think I fit the description Davy gave." Wilkins flexed his powerful shoulders. "And I might at that. Ruby told you she was with me when I barged out, but I suppose what she says won't count." He let his breath out through lips as tight as his huge fists. "My *good* neighbors are right. I wasn't on Davy's heels getting down to that broken window. And you ought to be able to guess why."

"You tell me," said McCabe.

"Because of what happened a couple months ago," Wilkins retorted. "Somebody made a commotion out front. Then, when everyone went out to see what was going on, a couple of places were entered from the rear and quickly burglarized. I thought it might be the same thing again as soon as I got out front." He glowered at McCabe. "Maybe you think I should have sent my wife out back to see if everything was okay. No, I went back there myself before I went down the street."

It sounded plausible. "You didn't mention that last night," McCabe said.

"It wasn't important enough to remember when I saw what the commotion really was. And I'll tell you something else, Mac." His blunt finger jabbed McCabe's chest. "Ruby and I have been married for twenty years and if I had it to do over again I would. So I don't have to get my goodies making dirty phone calls to women." He shook his fist. "And you can pass the word around to my good neighbors that if anyone suggests—"

"Don't start trouble," McCabe cut in. "None of them realize what I picked up from their statements. And, unless anything additional develops, this conversation will go no further."

"Thanks for that much, if it is worth thanks," Wilkins grunted. "Dammit, I should have followed my first hunch last night and ta-

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ken off right down the street after Davy. All right, Mac." He slapped his thigh resoundingly. "I'll be around, making deliveries to eateries, if you should *think* you've got those additional developments."

McCabe continued to dig, especially seeking *the* main source of the night caller's information about women who would be alone. Everything began to point in just one direction, but in his mind it just wouldn't drive home. It became blunted and curled back.

The third day after the killing he went to the Keeley funeral. He and Knapperman were pallbearers. So were the three remaining members of Keeley's bowling team, Jack Wilkins, captain. Wilkins just gave McCabe a stare when they met in an anteroom of the mortuary. When the service ended, the pallbearers remained seated in the chapel as people filed by the bier. McCabe and Knapperman unobtrusively watched the face of each man, for by now McCabe was convinced that Ralph Keeley had been killed because he'd recognized the night caller. But there were no apparent reactions.

McCabe suddenly frowned in surprise when he saw a well-known TV star file past the bier. That man used to live in Allentown, eleven miles east of Valley View, and according to fan magazine articles, which McCabe's eldest daughter devoured, as a

child he was supposed to have been handicapped. The direction of McCabe's thoughts began to sharpen. When he had opportunity, he murmured orders to Knapperman. The patrolman nodded, but gave him an incredulous glance.

After the graveside ceremonies McCabe stood near as the TV actor spoke to Mrs. Keeley. Seeing McCabe, she beckoned him closer and made introductions.

Shaking hands with the celebrity, McCabe spoke quietly. "You've known Mrs. Keeley for quite some time."

"Ever since I was a boy, Chief. I wouldn't be where I am now if it weren't for her."

McCabe nodded. "One would never guess that as a child you had a speech impediment." He turned to the widow. "My apologies, Mrs. Keeley. This is not the proper time or place to ask questions about your work in speech therapy, but in police matters the social niceties frequently can't be observed."

She glanced toward her husband's grave. Her voice and bearing were composed. "How may I help you, Mr. McCabe?"

He glanced about first. Wilkins and a couple of pallbearers were moving toward their cars. Knapperman had vanished. No one stood near McCabe, Mrs. Keeley and the TV star.

"Your husband was a member of a bowling team," McCabe said. "Do you bowl too, Mrs.

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Keeley?"

His question puzzled her. "No, I usually stayed home."

"And," McCabe suggested, "even though it was known you were home alone, you never received one of those phone calls?" She shook her head. "Could it be," he went on, "because you might have recognized the night caller's voice even though, if not exactly disguised, it might have been different than normal?"

"That could be possible," she agreed, still very puzzled. "I'm very cognizant of voices."

"All right," McCabe said intently. "Though you usually stayed home, were there occasions, Mrs. Keeley, when you *did* accompany your husband to the lanes?"

"Yes, especially if it were an important league game."

"On those occasions," McCabe asked, "were you ever asked, or did you volunteer, to assist someone briefly with a speech problem?"

"She would," said the TV star. "She's generous and—"

McCabe shook his head impatiently at the interruption. Mrs. Keeley stared past him in

"Well, there was always joking about my work, almost anyone's work. The sort of kibitzing at gatherings like that when—"

"This was not joking, Mrs. Keeley. It involved a *real* speech handicap for which you may have suggested a corrective therapy or technic."

That was as close as he dared point the direction of her thought to avoid later accusation he might have fed her leading questions. She frowned, then she gasped, sucking in her lower lip.

"You can't mean—"

"Davy Carlin," he said grimly.

She stared at McCabe. "Why . . . why, yes," she said breathlessly. "One evening when I went to the snack bar. He was trying to place an order over the phone for next day delivery—"

"Mrs. Keeley," McCabe asked, "just what did you advise Davy Carlin to do to control his stuttering and stammering?"

Hurrying to his station wagon he radioed Knapperman who had tailed Carlin from the cemetery to the bowling alley.

"If he leaves," McCabe ordered, "stay with him." Driving rapidly into town he scooped up Jack Wilkins. "Relax, Jack. I just need your help as a material witness."

At the bowling alley he and Knapperman took Davy Carlin into the manager's office.

"Wh-what's this all about, M-Mac?"

Knapperman looked as bewildered as Carlin sounded.

"Anything you say is going to be held against you," McCabe tersely began informing Davy Carlin of his rights. "Now let's go back to the other night. Ralph Keeley on patrol saw you at the public phone after you finished

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work here. At first sight he probably didn't know what you were up to, but *you* did, and you aroused his suspicion by some guilty action, ducking your head or turning away. Then you tried to flee, but he caught you. You panicked when he recognized you and began to suspect your actions. You shoved him through the window, causing his death."

"N-N-No—"

"You darted across the street to get below the vision of anyone looking out apartment windows. Then you raced for home. Before you could get there the Wilkins's porch light snapped on. You realized they'd see you fleeing from the scene. So you abruptly reversed direction to give them the impression you were running *to*, not away from, the next corner. Jack and Ruby Wilkins will testify that when they saw you, you were between their home and the broken store window."

Davy Carlin's eyes bugged enormously behind the thick lenses.

"I-I ran f-fast from home. That's wh-why—"

McCabe cut in grimly. "A few minutes ago when I was in that neighborhood I spotted a couple members of the highschool track team. They cooperated by running from the store window to your home, and also from your home to where the Wilkins first saw you. Despite their speed and training, they could only do it the way I just said you did it."

He waved aside another interruption from Davy Carlin.

"And another thing . . . - which should have hit me that night when I got to the scene . . . the people giving first aid to Ralph Keeley said they had to roll him over. So *how* did you, first on the scene and running on by to the phone, know it was Ralph Keeley bleeding to death in that window? He isn't . . . was n't that distinctive in build that you could have recognized him—"

"I d-d-d-did. I s-saw him when—"

"When you pushed him through the window," McCabe accused. "Later, in answer to my question, you said you hadn't seen him on your way home. An out and out lie, because you did see him and you never got near your home."

McCabe was aware that Knapperman, standing by, was scowling. He knew why. A defense lawyer could probably poke holes in all this, so far.

"And now," McCabe persisted, "We'll go back to that phone call you were making to Mrs. Nellis when Ralph Keeley saw you."

"M-M-Mac," Davy Carlin objected. "With a v-v-voice like th-this, how-how-how c-could I—"

"Mrs. Keeley once suggested to you a technique that frequently works very well in cases of stuttering and stammering. Just *sing*



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it.”

“N-N-No—”

Knapperman’s scowl deepened.

“Or,” McCabe went on, “The next thing to singing . . . sort of coo it or chant it in a flat sing-song voice.”

“You-you-you c-can’t p-prove—”

Ignoring the broken protests, McCabe opened the door.

“All right, Jack, come on in. Did you phone your boss?”

“Damn right I did,” Jack Wilkins said. “And he’s got it for you, Mac.”

McCabe gestured toward Davy Carlin. “Tell him about it.”

“With pleasure.” Wilkins planted his bulk before Carlin.

“Our restaurant supply trucks get out early in the morning, but a lot of places, like the snack bar here, operate late at night and maybe get a run on something they’ll be short of the next day. It used to be they had to get up early to place their order before the trucks left. But the company, as a convenience to customers who wanted to sleep in, set it up so they could order at any time of the night so the stuff would be sure to be on the truck.”

“Who takes those calls?” Knapperman asked.

“There’s nobody in the office that late,” Wilkins said, “but there’s a gadget which tape records the phone calls.” He glared at Carlin. “In the morning

they used to have trouble understanding this louse’s stuttering orders . . . until a couple of months ago he began sort of singing them.”

“And,” McCabe said, “your boss has some of those tapes. We won’t let Davy Carlin’s name be heard, but I’m sure a lot of women will identify his voice, his singing voice, and when they tell the district attorney—”

Davy Carlin made a lunge for the door. Though McCabe and Knapperman were ready and moved fast, Jack Wilkins moved faster. His brawny arm swept Carlin back, knocking him into a blubbering heap across the office.

“That’s for a lot of women you scared and for describing me as the man you claimed you saw.”

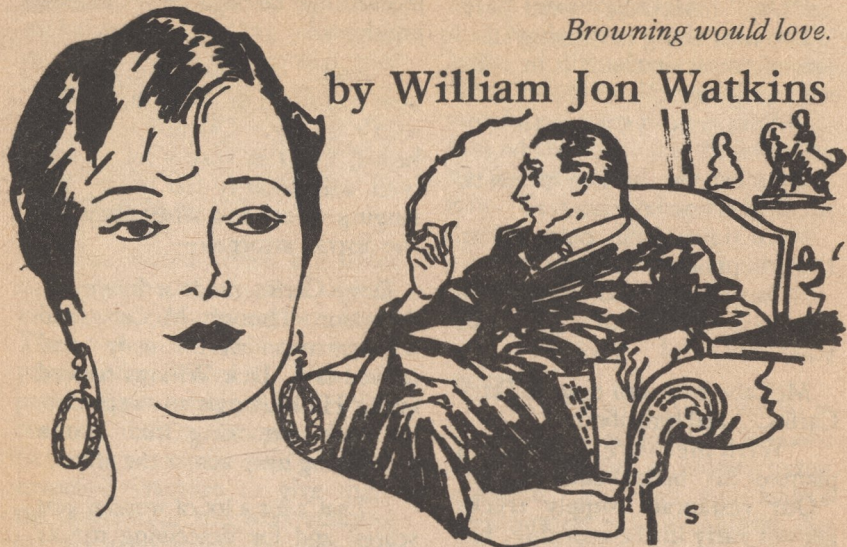
Later, after Carlin had been placed in the county jail, Knapperman spoke to McCabe. “Do you think it will go all the way to trial or will he sing?”

They grimaced at the unintentional pun. “Well,” said McCabe, “aside from all the witnesses against him I think he’ll confess, sing or stutter, just to be safely beyond the reach of that big mulish-tempered wife of his.” McCabe sighed. “I could do with stopping in somewhere for coffee.” He smiled. “But let’s jam the jukebox or ask to have it turned off. I don’t care to hear any vocal records.”

# THE LAST DUCHESS

*He had invented a bizarre game but the price of his amusement could be a gruesome death. A tale that Robert Browning would love.*

by William Jon Watkins



AH—THE PORTRAIT. My last duchess, you know. An exquisite creature. The artist captured her perfectly, the quiet fierceness, eyes that blaze with passion. Or perhaps hatred. A magnificent woman!

The portrait is the only one ever painted by *Le Triste*, the sculptor. You've heard of him, of course. He lives in Rome now, I believe. He was a painter when I discovered him in Barcelona, but I offered to support him until he made his mark as an artist if he would paint this one picture and no other. He agreed, of course, and became a sculptor. Fortunately so, as it turned out. For both of us. I have a peculiar fondness

for original things, things which have no duplicate anywhere.

Notice the broken wine glass in her hand. There's a story behind that, one that would lend itself perfectly to your style. It has a certain irony to it, not unlike your novel. I've read it of course. A publisher friend was kind enough to show me the manuscript. He couldn't afford to publish it himself, naturally, and he knew of my interest in unique art.

It's a shame there's no general taste for that kind of artistry any more. Once a publisher would publish a book simply because it was great literature. Now, a book must make money. And to make money these days, a book must be

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That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

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all sex and violence. A sad thing, eh? No room left in prose for a true artist.

But that could be to our advantage, no? I have a proposition for you. If you will write this one story and no other, I will become your patron for as long as necessary at whatever figure you deem reasonable.

Now, my friend, don't be too hasty. I didn't say that you should stop writing altogether. Like *Le Triste*, you would find it impossible to totally abandon your art. However, you once had ambitions of being a poet, did you not? Come, admit it, prose is not your first love. You have a calling in poetry.

But wait, let me tell you the story before you decide. As you know, I am in a sort of self-imposed exile in your country. There was a slight incident in my own country. Nothing was ever proven, but enough vulgar curiosity was aroused to make my villa a tourist attraction. I complained to the constable to keep the tourists from stopping along the cliff at the foot of my driveway, but the village officials were against me. The merchants insisted that I was good for trade and that was that.

I could not bear to see them disembark at the foot of my drive every day, looking over the cliff, and standing there in their hideous shirts gawking at the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of the murderer.

Oh yes, the murderer. I was quite guilty, of course, but he was such a lout, little more than an animal really. But there was never a trial, and there were what you would call I believe, *mitigating circumstances*. But that comes later. First let me tell you about the duchess.

I found her working as a salesperson in a silk goods shop in London. One could tell by the way she handled the silk that she had an innate sensibility for fine things. The person who owned the shop was very reluctant to let her go. He claimed that she added, if you will excuse the vulgarity, *class* to his establishment. There was no doubt that she had the potential for becoming a great lady, and I was much amused at adding to my collection an original Pygmalion. She agreed to come with me after I bought the shop.

I had her schooled in all the graces. Her natural manner was refined by experts on the deportment of a duchess. I sent her to Rome to study great art, even to school in Istanbul where the concubines of the shaws are trained. She was to be the perfect woman. It took several years but eventually she was ready to become my duchess.

She worked out excellently. Her beauty was the envy of every man who saw her, and her natural aloofness sharpened into a dignity found only in queens.

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All my treasures have been acquired with one thing in mind; the pride of owning something beautiful that no one else can have. It is so with all collectors, I'm sure. You've heard, no doubt, of men who will buy a stolen masterpiece although they can never display it. They do it for the sheer joy of knowing that they alone can look at something of great value that is denied to the world at large. The ultimate feeling of superiority is knowing that no one in the world can share your pleasures.

But it was not long before my first disappointment with her occurred. She fell in love with me. It was so trite, so much like the plot of a poor play. Ah! and she was too perceptive. She accused me of keeping her as one of my paintings, a thing meant only to excite the envy of others, never to be used for my own pleasure.

She even claimed that she was less than the pictures in my private gallery that I alone enjoy. She was a public *object d'art*, she said. She was very bitter. I believe she even cried. It was extremely awkward. I told her such sentimentality was a flaw in her character.

Then, of course, she began to hate. Ah, what a woman, to hate so passionately. Sometimes, I envy her her ability to be moved. Life was so boring to me then. Even my collecting was hardly worth the effort. She was, in fact, the project that had kept up my interest in life. It was a fascinating

pursuit at first.

But then there were disappointments. She began to lapse more and more often into her salesgirl ways of thinking. She had rages. Her language was sometimes indelicate. I was tempted to discard her.

But she was, as I have said, too perceptive at times. She sensed the precariousness of her position and I became aware of peculiarities in her manner. She began to move about nervously, to be upset by trifles. The hatred went out of her voice too quickly. She became docile almost overnight. Yet when she thought I was not watching her, she moved around me like a tigress on the spoor of fresh blood.

I suspected she had plans to do away with me. While we were away one weekend, I had a recording system put in. Late each night I listened to the tapes in my study. I suspected she might employ her maid as a confederate. I was wrong.

She began a liason with Raoul, her chauffeur. For the first time in my life, I was enraged. Not because of any feeling I had for her of course, but because HE defiled one of my private pleasures. I had consummated, I believe the phrase is, our marriage but once and had found my duchess to be as excellent at her art as you are at writing or *Le Triste* at painting portraits.

It is almost a compulsion with me to have the sole use of any-

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thing I possess. I cannot express the anguish my discovery caused me. It was as if I had found that someone had gained entrance to my private gallery.

The tapes of the dalliance were an agony to me. It was less than a week before she proposed that they do away with me so that she could marry him.

It was almost more than I could bear, the thought of that stupid brute fondling my treasures, walking in my private garden, sitting blankly in my private gallery. It drove me almost to madness to think of his rough clumsy hands opening a book in my personal library.

Even though he could not appreciate my books or my paintings, he would be certain to use them. My duchess would see to that. She would make him feel it was the duty of the master of such a fine mansion. She would create her own Pygmalion. the thought sickened me.

Nevertheless, I listened to the tapes until the details of my demise became clear. I took pleasure in driving my turbine car along the ocean road before breakfast every morning. It was a model the automobile industry had developed and then surpressed and as major stockholder, I had little trouble adding it to my collection.

As I have said, the driveway in front of my villa was a perfectly straight downhill run to the ocean road. It was extremely steep, and I was in the habit of not breaking

until I made a sharp turn into the roadway. If I were unable to make the turn into the roadway, there would be nothing between me and the cliff except the narrow strip of gravel.

They planned of course, to sabotage my car. Raoul was under the car with the front end raised on a jack and one wheel off. He was, no doubt, too preoccupied with arranging my accident to notice my feet from under the car. She was bent over, handing him a flashlight when I reversed the small clip that determines the direction of the jack. With the slip turned it was only a matter of lifting the handle to send the car crashing down on the poor fool.

My wife was not, perhaps, to blame for becoming hysterical. His hand still clutched convulsively for the flashlight, and, of course, she did not expect to see me smiling at her when she turned around. Nevertheless, it was a disappointment to see her panic and run for her car.

I returned to the library. On a table was the brandy decanter and two glasses. They were to drink a toast to their success in the morning before Raoul went down to "investigate" my crash. I never entered the library before my morning ride and she had been perfectly safe in leaving the brandy out. Still, it showed less restraint than I had expected from her. I sat down with the decanter to muse on my disappointment. I filled a glass, thinking how ludi-

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crous it was to have had that clown crawl under my car when it would have been so much easier to drain the fluid from the steering column as I had done with her car.

I had hardly filled my glass before I heard the squeal of brakes on gravel, the brief noiseless moments of flight, and the first of several loud clashes of metal and rock. I was moved almost to remorse as I drank the brandy. There HAD been a bit of poetic justice in making that clumsy bear a duke and then parading him in my place as I had paraded her so often. I almost regretted that she was now a part of the twisted metal sinking slowly in the seal.

Still I was disappointed that she had used her own chauffeur as the clay for her Pygmalion. It would have been so much more clever to have gone out and created a duke from some common workman, one of those collectors of garbage who wear the coarse gloves and hang so smoothly onto those huge white trucks. That at least would have shown some originality. I had misjudged her, she was an insipid salesgirl after all.

Still, I began to feel that something had been lost. A strange emptiness came over me and then a kind of restlessness. I felt that something was missing.

As I began to pour a second glass, I became drowsy, and the glass fell from my hand before I could return it to the table. In the

last seconds of consciousness I perceived the more subtle plan that had eluded me. She had not intended to keep Raoul at all! He was not her lover but her dupe.

The brandy was intended for HIM. He would have succumbed to an irresistible drowsiness just as he reached the bottom of the driveway. His car was to have plummeted after mine, leaving no witness to my murder.

Ah, never have I regretted so much what I had done to her as at that moment. I had misjudged her so grossly. She was truly a magnificent woman.

By the way, would you like to meet the original to that painting? Dead? No, No—she was thrown clear on the first tier of rocks. She's a most remarkable woman, as I've said. There were a few scars of course, but I've had all traces of them removed. She is again in my possession. The wine glass in the portrait is the one I dropped when I fell.

When I thought her dead, I cherished that glass as a reminder of her cleverness and the respite she gave me from my eternal ennui. Why, she had kept me interested in the same thing for more than a month! For the first time in my life, I was genuinely interested in staying alive. Solely because she wanted to kill me of course. It's the same perverseness that makes me collect things so that no one else can have them, no doubt.



## THE LAST DUCHESS

My friend, it was a gift of life to me when she was thrown clear. I knew she could be restored, and I knew she would hate me even more than ever for restoring her beauty as one might restore a broken figurine.

Of course she doesn't suspect that I keep her merely for the pleasure of foiling her attempts on my life. Oh yes, she's tried again, several times. Very cleverly too. You've noticed the slight lines along my jaw? Plastic surgery. A mysterious explosion on my yacht. An excellent plan that. It left me several miles off shore, and I am a very poor swimmer. Fortunately, there was a

fisherman . . . Still, an excellent plan. Excellent.

She'll get me sooner or later, of course. But in the meantime, I've learned how to enjoy a great many things thanks to her. Almost everything is a pleasure to me now. Too bad we can't all have someone hunting us. But then, perhaps we have.

Your kind of story is it not? Certainly one worthy of your talents before you turn your back on prose. You'll accept my offer then? No? Well, let us go down to dinner. Perhaps after you've met my last duchess, you'll reconsider.

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## A CHANGE OF HEART

*The plan to stop his rich aunt's transplant proceeded in a way that was deadly and ironic.*

by Talmage Powell

TURNING THE CONTINENTAL onto the whitegravelled driveway of Aunt Crabby's estate, Eddie Crabtree listened to the chit-chat in the back seat between his aunt and Dr. Picard. Each innocent word distilled another drop of venom in Eddie's reservoir of bitterness.

He choked back a monstrous case of heartburn as he tooted the heavy car through spangles of

bright sunlight filtering through the elm-shaded lane. Today, he hated mother nature along with everything else. As if by special arrangement, a lovelier spring day couldn't have been imagined for Aunt Crabby's homecoming from the hospital. The first subtle taste of summer was in the air. The sky was a misty blue. Quickened and freshly green, the very earth shared with Aunt Crabby a

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bursting of new life, renewal. The death rattle of falling leaves was past, for Aunt Crabby as well as the trees.

The glistening, steel-gray car wended around the terraced front lawns and gardens. Ahead loomed the imposing, two-story, brick neo-colonial home that Aunt Crabby's husband, deceased, had left as a reflection of himself. Its quiet, fortress-like solidity was relieved by the touch of ivy growing on the walls. The servants, five in number, had noted the car's approach and were lining up on the veranda beside the front door to welcome Aunt Crabby home.

Aunt Crabby was holding her breath as she leaned forward for her first look after all these long weeks. "Home. . . ." she murmured from just behind Eddie's right ear. "I can't wait to get inside and caress every stick of furniture!"

"You're not eighteen, my dear," Dr. Picard grumped, "even if you do have the heart of an eighteen-year-old. You follow my orders, now. No overdoing it."

"I certainly don't feel my forty-nine. But I don't want a shaggy old bear of a heart surgeon growling at me," Aunt Crabby giggled happily.

Eddie stared hard through the windshield. Laughing? Aunt Crabby? It didn't seem possible. He was dreadfully certain her new vitality would last another fifty years. . . .

He stopped the car at the shallow front steps, which were flanked by a pair of stone lions. He jumped out and opened the rear door. His face a carefully-composed and long-practiced mask, he offered a tender hand to help Aunt Crabby from the car.

Her gaze lingered on his face. Her eyes were almost like those of a stranger, deeper, gentler, quieter than the eyes he remembered. "Thank you, dear," she gave his hand a quick, motherly squeeze.

Dr. Picard bumbled out beside her. He permitted her to take the short walk up by herself, slowly and carefully, one step at a time while the servants strained with each of her movements.

She paused on the veranda to accept their welcome. Cook, gardener, maid, butler, the spare-boned registered nurse who had been assigned by Dr. Picard to live in for awhile.

"Welcome home, mum. . . ."

"It's so good to have you back! . . ."

When all the murmured greetings were over, the servants sneaked bewildered glances at each other. The eyes of Mrs. Violetta Crabtree Harper had actually filled with tears of tenderness and gratitude!

Aunt Crabby led the way into the spacious foyer with its vaulted ceiling, gold-framed mirror, antique hatrack and umbrella stand. Eddie was the last to enter, on dragging feet.

The servants scattered to their

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tasks. Dr. Picard gave Aunt Crabby a few moments to look about brightly and exclaim how good it was to be home. Then he ordered her into the chair-lift that had been installed at the graceful, curving stairway.

"Up we go, my dear," he said. "You've had plenty of excitement for the first day. Don't rush things. You've years and years to enjoy your home now."

He was a big, slovenly looking man whose appearance belied his genius as a heart surgeon. It took the setting of an operating room the touch of a scalpel in his hand to transform him.

Aunt Crabby, Dr. Picard, and the skeletal nurse (Miss Mayberry was her name) disappeared in the upper reaches toward Aunt Crabby's bedroom. Eddie slouched into the living room and flopped in a huge wingchair upholstered in dark green silk. The chair seemed to shrink his slender frame. Behind heavy black glasses, his face was sparrow-like, with a thin cap of brown hair plastered on a long, narrow skull.

He stared blindly. His scanty, wiry muscles twitched now and then, visible echoes of his churning thoughts.

Right up until today he'd fought the idea that Aunt Crabby would leave the hospital alive. Sure, heart transplants were no longer news. But it just hadn't seemed possible to Eddie that Dr. Picard could tear the heart from the still-warm body of the Dut-

cher youth, jam it into Aunt Crabby's bosom, and have the whole thing work out. Her tissues would reject the alien flesh; her kidneys would collapse; her lungs would fill with fluids and she'd drown in pneumonic juices. But her tissues, kidneys, and lungs had performed with the ease of a computer.

"She's a lousy, sneaky cheat!" Eddie whispered, his voice quivering with savagery even as it cracked on a note of intense self-pity.

That was the sum and substance of it. For two long, insufferable years he'd played the role of dutiful nephew. Whipping boy. Slave, no less.

He'd leaped to obey her whims. He'd soothed away her fears of death when nightmares had brought her screaming to wakefulness at three in the morning. He'd borne her vituperations as she'd grown to hate those whose days weren't numbered.

The seemingly certain and foreseeable goal had sustained Eddie. He'd stuck it out, even if the effort to stay in the compliant-nephew character had cost him an ulcer. Each day she'd used up had brought him twenty-four hours closer to the moment when he could buy his dear, departed aunt the biggest funeral wreath in town.

He'd played the game honestly. Like the time when he was a kid with the Monopoly game and the neighborhood kids had cheated by

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skipping squares on the board.

When the sole surviving relative passes "Go" he collects two million dollars. Wasn't that the rule?

But they had conspired, that horrible old man with the doctors degrees and Aunt Crabby. And they had reached into the "Chance" pile and sneaked out for Eddie a card that read: Go to jail. Go directly to jail. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two million dollars. . . .

A burning-knife sensation gathered force behind Eddie's navel and shot through viscera to his spine. He gritted his teeth, labored out of the chair, and struggled upstairs to his room. He was in the bathroom, chasing a slug of Amphojel with a shot of Alka Seltzer, when timid knuckles rapped on his bedroom door.

"What is it?" he snarled through the open bathroom doorway.

The maid's voice drifted from the hallway: "Mr. Crabtree, Mrs. Harper wants to talk to you."

Eddie slammed the glass into its porcelain holder and glared at himself in the medicine cabinet mirror. Sucker. . . you'll probably pop off with a bleeding ulcer long before she ever again thinks of dying. . . .

Aunt Crabby was reposing on a white chaise lounge near the tall, gossamer-curtained windows when Eddie entered her room. She dropped the book she was

reading, smiled at him. "Thank you for coming so quickly, Edward. I excused Miss Mayberry. I wanted us to have a chat; just the two of us."

From long habit, Eddie's face was a bland, myopic mask. Only a tremor in the jaw muscle suggested a gritting of teeth.

She studied him as he shuffled forward, his bony shoulders slightly stooped. A glow of compassion softened her brown eyes. "You poor boy, the lines in that dear little pale face are my doing, aren't they?"

She held up a slender hand as Eddie started to speak.

"No, dear. You don't have to fib to me." She drew a breath. "Don't forget, I've had weeks in which to think, about myself, other people, life, the really important things. Did you know there's no place quite like a hospital to do some heavy thinking?"

She reached out to pat the arm of the nearby boudoir chair. The gesture was quick and lively. One thing for sure, the restoration of life—in the midst of certain death—seemed to have peeled the years from her. It was hard to look at the almost youthful glow of her face and imagine the drawn, vulturous visage that had entered the hospital.

"Please sit down, Eddie. Bear with me for a moment. What I have to say isn't easy."

"Aunt Violetta. . . ."

"No, Eddie. Don't try to gloss

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it over. I know what a real shrew I've been." A smile trembled in the dainty oval face. "Vixen. Harridan. Old witch. I made life perfectly dreadful for all those around me. I repaid kindness with ire, compassion with wrath. But I was lost, Eddie. Nothing was real to me except suffering and the darkness of death. I know now that I was lashing out. . . ."

She drew a breath. "Yes, just lashing out."

Staring at her, Eddie eased to the edge of the boudoir chair.

"But Dr. Picard. . . the new heart. . . ." Her solemn eyes sought his face. "What I'm trying to say is that the old heart, Eddie, and all the vile rancor that stemmed from it are gone. I can't go back and undo the meanness of the old witch that I became. So we must let her rest in peace, mustn't we?"

Eddie glanced away, hating the vitality of her. "Why not?"

"I knew I could count on your kindness and understanding!" She sat up, a fire of excitement building in her eyes. "I want to start writing on the new page of life with a little act of repayment, Eddie. My new heart has given me faith and hope. Now it behooves me to express charity."

Eddie held his breath. Was she actually going to do something decent for him?

Then the burning sensation began to spread throughout his insides as he heard her intention, this big deal she'd dreamed up in

the hospital.

"This boy whose heart heats at this moment within my own breast. . ." she was saying. "This Spades Dutcher. . . I had a hospital orderly make inquiries on his days off, Eddie."

"But I didn't know you were. . ." Eddie burst out.

She cut him off with a pat on his hand. "Yes, you would have tackled the chore, had I asked. I know that. But you'd have stuck out like a little green man from Mars in that poor, ghetto neighborhood. No one would have told you anything."

"And what did this accepted individual, this hospital orderly, learn on his days off?" Eddie asked stiffly.

"Much that I'll remember always," Aunt Crabby gazed thoughtfully at the sunny window for a moment. Then her eyes gradually re-focused on Eddie.

"Never mind all the little details," she sighed. "You need only the highlights for your chore."

"Chore, Aunt Violetta?"

"Yes, dear. That's what I'm getting to. The boy, Spades Dutcher, had so little. Broken home. Lack of education. All that. Yet he left me so much. He also left a poor old mother who lives all alone."

Eddie stared at Aunt Crabby blankly. She caught the look and smiled wryly.

"Yes, Eddie," she nodded. "The old Violetta Crabtree Har-

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per, wrapped in her own troubled self, wouldn't have cared two pins about Mrs. Dutcher. She was just a signature on the legal papers necessary for the transplant, obtainable at the cheapest price possible. But now she is a person, Eddie. And I want to do something for her. Something lasting, for the memory of her son."

Aunt Crabby pointed toward her dressing table. "You'll find her address written on the pad there, Eddie. Go to this poor woman. Tell her that my bankers will arrange for her to draw on a small but adequate account monthly, for so long as she lives. The bank will advise her the details later. But hurry now, with the good news! She need never be cold or hungry again."

Eddie groped with a feeling of blindness to the dressing table. He ripped the top sheet from the writing pad. He was tempted to turn and stuff the address down Aunt Crabby's throat. She'd do a kindness for a stranger—but for him. . . nothing. She'd had a change of heart, all right. She was a worse creep than ever!

Eddie expected to find a pitiful, malnourished, rickety scarecrow of the slums. Instead, meeting Mrs. George Dutcher was something of a shock. She lived in a two-room walkup in a scabby, century-old brick building. Eddie parked the Continental at the trash littered curbing, and it was the immediate center of a gang of ragged, fearsome looking kids.

Eddie didn't dare open the door until a beat cop came up.

Eddie thumbed the button that opened the electrically-operated window, thrust his head out of the car, and explained to the cop that he had important business upstairs.

"Better make it snappy," the cop said. "I can't keep an eye on the heap all day, and if I didn't you wouldn't have even a spark-plug left when you come out."

Eddie nerved himself, dashed across the sidewalk, and scurried up the dark, stinking stairway. His stomach was a bubbling cauldron of hydrochloric acid by the time he reached the fourth floor, sought out a rusty number hanging by one tack, and knocked on the door.

A big woman in a greasy wrapper opened the door. She had a bulbous, liverish colored face and the frizzled ragtags of hair that perhaps is a dim and forgotten past had been a rather luxuriant dark blonde.

"Yeah?" she snarled. "If you're a bill collector, beat it. I'm broke."

"No, M'am," Eddie gulped. He fought the urge to hold his nose. The woman's breath was coming on like a lion with a three-day muscatel hangover. "I mean, are you Mrs. George Dutcher?"

"So what if I am?"

"My name is Edward Crabtree." He glanced up and down the gloomy hallway where wooden lathes showed here and there

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like gaunt ribs exposed by fallen plaster. "Could we talk—briefly—inside?"

"What about?"

"Doesn't my name—Crabtree—mean anything to you?"

"Can't say that it does."

"How about Harper? Mrs. Violetta Crabtree Harper?"

Came the dawning of knowledge to the wine-soaked gray eyes in their folds of greasy fat.

"Sure—Harper. . . . The woman who got my son's heart—for a lousy hundred bucks."

"It's about the stipend that I want to talk to you, Mrs. Dutcher."

"The what?"

"Money."

"Well, why'n'cha say so! Come in." She jerked the door wide.

A feeling of faintness smote Eddie when he entered a dark hole furnished with a sway-backed bed carelessly covered with dirty linens, a broken-down washstand, and a sofa with gray stuffing spilling from rents in its filth-greased arms. He glimpsed the adjoining kitchen, where swarming flies battled with a colony of marching cockroaches over a table littered with tin cans, dirty dishes and wine bottles.

"I told Spades he was going to get in trouble fooling with them gangs." Mrs. Dutcher shoved several tattered confession magazines aside to make room for Eddie to sit down. Crossing the room to turn off the battered,

snow-blurred TV set, she added, "Like a good mother should, I warned him. Did my duty, I did. Think it helped, changed anything? Not a bit, it didn't. He was down there in the next block—it's all colored—busting windows with the best of them the night the riot happened. Some excitement around here for awhile, I tell you! Six big buildings going up in smoke. People running around like crazy. Say, don't you want to sit down, Mr. Crabtree?"

"Well, I. . . what I have to say won't take long."

"If it's about money, let's get on with it. It's high time I was getting a break. Never had one. Like Spades, my poor boy. Running across the street, he was, when some joker tossed that hunk of busted cement from the roof of the building. Spades and the brickbat. . . they both picked the same spot on the street at the same second. Knocked a hole right in his skull." Her head moved slowly from side to side. The watery content of her eyes overflowed a trifle. Her huge, pulpy chin snapped up. "And where the hell was the pigs, the lousy cops? They're always there to kick you in the teeth, but how come they couldn't stop somebody from busting my poor Spades in teh head!"

The lumpy sofa sagged a few inches further as her ample bottom dropped onto it. She sat there for a moment, raising a thick-fingered hand to knuckle mois-

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ture from her eyes. "Anyhow, guess you ain't here to talk about all that. You know the rest. Spades was taken to the hospital, and he is dying sure enough, and this doctor tells me he's got a waiting list a yard long of patients who need and wants new hearts real bad." She squinted up at Eddie. "And this lady what sent you is the one got Spades's."

"That's why the bank will be in touch, Mrs. Dutcher. You won't move into the Hilton by any stretch of the imagination, but neither will you have to worry about beans or a roof."

"It's hard to believe . . . hard to believe." She shook her head. Gradually, she became very still, staring at a crack in the floor.

The moments passed. Eddie cleared his throat in twitchy discomfort.

"I don't want you telling George about this," she muttered, not looking up.

"What?"

"George, my husband."

His eyes popped behind the heavy glasses. "A husband? I thought you were a widow."

"Might as well be." She wiped her nose with the back of a forefinger. "If you're worried about them legal papers I signed for the doctor, don't. I told the doctor about George. I guess he just didn't bother to tell you. George Can't sign no papers, nohow, him being out in the state-run loony bin."

"I'm sorry," Eddie said.

"Sure, I know. But it's all right. George had his day, he did. Two-hundred and thirteen fights. He fought in every tanktown ring from Maine to Miami. Ring Magazine even mentioned him onct. Great days, those, Mr. Crabtree. George paid down on a real fur coat for me one time and I got to wear it nearly the whole winter before the finance company nailed us in Greensboro, North Carolina."

Her sigh was heavy. "Last fight. . . George couldn't stand the bees buzzing in his head no more. Couldn't hear nothing else. Kept right on fighting after the bell ended the fourth. Liked to have killed the other fighter, and the referee, and the two cops it took to drag him out of the ring."

She looked toward the kitchen, probing the wine bottles. "George is all right most of the time, Mr. Crabtree. They let him walk around the grounds when the keepers are watching, and even have company. But sometimes it don't take much to tee George off, real bad. So just let him be. He's real happy where he is, and he might get a crazy idea if he learned I come into a little money."

Eddie's silence, his very stillness, drew her attention from the wine bottles. She began to frown as she looked at him. She stood up slowly. "Something wrong, Mr. Crabtree?"

"Wrong?" He looked at her, starry-eyed. His happy laugh



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burst against the scaly walls. "Mrs. Dutcher, you're a source of sheer inspiration, no less! I've never enjoyed meeting anyone so much in all my life!" As if quite out of his senses, he reached and gave her repulsive hulk a quick hug.

As he turned and dashed for the doorway, she lunged after him. "Hey, about the money. . . ."

"The bank will be in touch." He threw the words over his shoulder as he disappeared in the stairwell.

A big man with iron gray hair and a creased face as patient looking as a hound's, the white-coated warder strolled the grounds of the state mental hospital keeping an eye on his charges. It was a lovely afternoon, very quiet and peaceful. Little Miss Quackenbush was quietly reading the same thin volume of poetry over and over as she strolled about the walkways bisecting the green lawns. Mr. Heaterly was quietly leaning against the trunk of a huge oak tree discussing the market situation with an invisible broker; Mr. Heaterly's short-circuited brain had arranged for that black market day in 1929 to be always in a non-existent tomorrow.

The warder glanced toward the long wings of the brick buildings that were beginning to cast shadows over the lawns. Just about time to herd them in, see that they didn't try to eat their spoons

for dinner, and tuck them in for the night.

The warder yawned, stretched, and then lowered his arms slowly. He mused on the pair of men sitting on the low stone bench near the splashing fountain.

Now don't it take the cake? The warder's head moved in a wry shake. All this time everybody had thought George Dutcher was nothing more than a beatup, punch-drunk ex-pug. Then this skinny young guy wearing the heavy glasses comes swooping up in a snazzy Continental. Says he's a cousin from a distant branch of the family. Been in Europe a long time. Tried to look up George and was shocked to find him out here. Wants to see the old boy. Maybe arrange for him to enter a private sanitarium. After all, says the young fellow, one doesn't like to think of one's family being in a public institution does one?

George hadn't remembered his visitor at all. That wasn't surprising. Sometimes George Dutcher remembered things in detail that had happened twenty years ago. Simple unimportant things that most people couldn't have recalled at all. Then, in the next second George might forget what had happened five minutes ago.

Anyway, the young guy had been pleasant and easy and patient with George. That was good. The visit should be fine for George.

"... He's watching us," Eddie said softly, his face close to

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George Dutcher's frightfully lumpy visage. "The big man with the iron gray hair."

"I'll break 'im in two!" George gravelled.

Eddie quickly laid his hand on the hairy mitt that was curling into a fist. "No, no, george! Don't even look around. He'll suspect. He's the warder, remember, and we don't want anybody to suspect, do we?"

George's elephantine shoulders relaxed. His hands, twisted and misshapen from bone and tendon breakage, slowly uncurled. He sat hunched, popping his knuckles in his lap. "Nah! Nobody. Just me and you, pally. And thanks for coming out and giving me the tip."

"You sure you got it all?" Eddie said. "You won't forget? Her name? Where she lives? How to get to her house?"

"I won't fergit nuttin'!"

"She's the one, George." Eddie glanced over his shoulder. The white-coated warder was strolling toward the old geezer at the oak tree, suspecting nothing. "She had a guy bust Spades's skull with a brickbat. Then she had your boy's heart cut out."

George lifted his left hand and beat the palm against his skull just above the ear.

"Georg?"

"Yeah, pally? Okay . . . I'm okay . . . Don't worry about me. Nobody flattens Battlin' George. I'll get to her and put a stop to these noises in my head. . . ."

Eddie flinched as he looked into George's milky eyes. Eddie gulped. His scalp prickled. He kept a tight control on his voice, and the urge to run. "But you got to be smart, George. You can get out of here easily enough, but you got to be smart to keep them from dragging you back. Here. . . ." He quickly fumbled a fifty dollar bill into George's hand. "This will help. You'll know where to buy a gun in some poolhall." Eddie jumped to his feet. "I got to go now, George. Really I have."

"You been a real pal, pally. I won't fergit. Spades . . . he was my boy . . . my only kid. . . ."

Eddie kept his report to Aunt Crabby brief, stating only that he had seen Mrs. Dutcher and the poor woman had been quite grateful.

"You were gone a long time, dear," Aunt Crabby said from the provincial writing desk where she had been penning a note.

"Had the car checked over," Eddie mumbled. "The engine started missing a little. Nothing serious. It's all fixed. Everything, in fact, is fixed."

"Well, tell cooek you're here. She's been holding your dinner."

"Right-o," Eddie said cheerfully. He paused at the doorway, glancing back at her. He returned her sweet smile. Hmmmm, he thought, who'll I get for pall bearers?

With its mad, conspiratorial smile, Dutcher's lumpy face was a horror from another realm. He

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inched his right hand up to show Eddie that he was holding a gun.

"You planned great, pally. It's a snap. Now where's the witch what had my boy's heart cut out?"

"Listen," Eddie gasped, "it's all a mistake!"

"And it's the last one she'll make," Dutcher said. "You can take a walk, pally—while I pay off for Spades."

As Dutcher edged toward the stairway, Eddie wrenched movement from his muscles. He grabbed Dutcher's arm.

"Please, George, she's got to live. As long as she lives, I've got it made. But the minute she dies a bunch of guys with testtubes and microscopes pass Go and collect two million dollars!

George . . . you've got to understand!"

Eddie flung himself between George and the stairway. It was like trying to turn aside a ponderous slab of cement.

"George," Eddie screamed softly, "you simply can't kill her! You wouldn't kill an innocent woman, would you, George?"

George slowed. "Innocent?"

"Sure," Eddie said. "She wasn't the one who busted Spades's skull."

George's eyes focused on Eddie. They were wracked with the pain of trying to link up a thought process. Then, as an invisible switch clicked behind them, they escaped. The eyes

were almost at peace. George's voice was almost gentle. "I get it, pally. I been around. I know the score. You was covering—for yourself! That's the only way you could've knowed so much. So here's a present for Spades!"

"No, George . . . George, you have to. . . ."

George didn't have to do anything but press the trigger once, twice, three times, to stop the noises in his head. The bullets punctured a lung, the solar plexus, and a bleeding ulcer.

Just after midnight, a young intern brought Mrs. Violetta Crabtree Harper the news. She rose quietly as he crossed the hospital waiting room.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Harper. Everything possible was done for Eddie. But your nephew has only a few more hours at best. Dr. Picard sent me ahead. He'll be down as soon as possible.

"No," Aunt Crabby said after a thoughtful moment, "the need for Dr. Picard is much greater in surgery. . . ." Aunt Crabby took a long breath. "Please advise him to begin immediate preparations for the next heart transplant on his waiting list. It appears we shall have a donor—and I'm sure poor Eddie's dear, wonderful heart will keep life's blood pumping for someone else for a long time to come. . . ."

The nervous sweats didn't hit him until late that evening. In his bed-sitting room suite down the hall from Aunt Crabby's, he tried

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to focus on a TV show. He'd expected tension, not knowing precisely when George Dutcher would make his move. He could handle himself—if his ulcer didn't start bleeding. Every few minutes he went from his sitting room to the medicine cabinet to gulp soda mints, tranquilizing pills.

He fiddled with the TV set while his mind rolled a film of his own. He was talking with quiet grief to a policeman: Yes, sir, I drove up-county to the mental hospital. I saw Dutcher. My aunt asked me to do so. She'd learned that Mrs. Dutcher had a living husband. She told me to stop by Mrs. Dutcher's first and then visit Mr. Dutcher on some kind of Pretext. My aunt wanted to help both of them. She was going to set up a small fund for Mrs. Dutcher. The bankers will tell you that. She wanted to know something about Mr. Dutcher, how he looked, what he was like. Then, I suppose, she planned to take further steps on his behalf . . . Yes, sir . . . terrible thing, Mr. Dutcher breaking in and killing her like that . . . But no doubt at all as to who did it . . . I'm sorry, sir . . . Only my aunt could tell you any more, and she's no longer with us. . . .

Pat story. Stand on it. Stick to it. No one could disprove it. If the police started whistling, it would be in the dark.

The acid fount was loosed for the third time since dinner. Eddie clutched his stomach, came off

his sitting room couch, and headed for the medicine cabinet with its woefully inadequate blams.

Halfway across the bedroom, he grimaced as someone knocked on the door. He turned to the door and yanked it open. Dr. Picard was standing in the hallway.

"Well. . . ." Eddie said. "How are you, doctor? I didn't expect to see you."

"Routine call on my patient—in a way." Dr. Picard chuckled. "But it turned into quite a chat. Say, my boy, do you feel up to par? You look very pale."

"Just tired."

Dr. Picard laid his hand on Eddie's shoulder. "You've been through it, all right. But you can relax now. Take a vacation. Start enjoying yourself." He glanced down the empty hallway. "She really is a changed woman, Eddie. I think she's going to open up the purse strings—for as long as she lives. And you do deserve it, you know. You've attended her faithfully for a long time now."

"For as long, . . . as she lives?"

Dr. Picard's hand gave Eddie's shoulder a benign squeeze. "No, no, my boy! I didn't mean it that way! She's taken no turn for the worse. By the time she passes away you'll be an old retired businessman yourself."

"Then what did you mean?"

"She wants to further the kind of research that did so much for her. In fact, during her last days

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in the hospital she whiled away some of the boredom of convalescent time by discussing it with her lawyer and having him draw up all the necessary papers." Again Dr. Picard looked in the direction of Aunt Crabby's closed door. "I think it wonderful of her. Upon her demise, the bulk of the estate will go for heart research." The hand lifted. "Just thought you'd like the news about those loosened purse strings. If her present mood lasts—and I think it will—you won't have to worry about settling down for a long time yet. You'll have a ball, the kind young men dream about. But see a good G.P. and have a check-up so you can really enjoy yourself."

With a final slap on the

shoulder, Dr. Picard was gone.

Eddie came out of his stupor with a spasmodic shudder. He dashed down the stairway, grabbed the phone in the foyer, glaring wildly. Who to call? Who to warn that a madman was probably already loose and had armed himself? Hospital? Police? An anonymous call, that was the ticket.

His finger was stabbing at the dial when a voice gravelled from the shadows, "Hullo, pally."

Eddie dropped the phone and spun, his back against the table. George Dutcher was standing just inside the open front doorway. "Had to let that guy drive off, pally," Dutcher said, shuffling forward. "Almost bumped into him." ●

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## HIS HONOR THE MAYOR

*He was as snug as a bug in a rug before he realized the garish plan the Mafia had set up for him.*

by John Lutz

MAYOR DAVID MORAN sat alone at his breakfast table. His wife was away for the weekend and the maid was on her well earned vacation, so reluctantly he rose from his chair before his toast rose from the pop up toaster. He pulled the cords to his robe tight and walked

stiffly to the front door to get the morning paper.

The headlines were satisfyingly mild: NEW SCHOOL TAX URGED. A far cry from what people had read a week ago in the Point Placid papers. Then the troublesome Joe Baines had been

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writing his daily column exposing 'organized crime' in the thriving little city of just under 100,000. As if organized crime could exist on a large scale in Point Placid without David Moran, the mayor, knowing about it!

Baines had appeared one day out of nowhere, sent by one of the major news services that supplied the Point Placid papers, and a week later his column, based he said on information supplied by an 'insider' had begun in the Daily Star. The column had infuriated Moran. It was obviously sensationalized, trumped up nonsense, presenting neither facts nor solid accusations. There were names, however: Frank King, owner of the unprestigious but lucrative King Sanitation Company, which had the city contract for trash collection; Bert Wilson, prominent businessman, councilman and

owner of a chain of cleaners; Hal White, nightclub operator and alderman—all honorable men, some of whom Mayor Moran had personally endorsed or appointed. Baines also had written about a number of high ranking city employees, none of whom Mayor Moran had any reason to doubt. It wasn't as if Baines had said anything definite, just veiled, half-accusations and accounts of minor incidents blown tremendously out of proportion.

The mayor took a sip of coffee and smoothed his graying hair. Well, Baines was gone, and Mayor David Moran hoped that he had something to do with it. He remembered that day a week ago when, under constant pressure from a bewildered and irritated public, he'd summoned Baines to his office and asked him what he had in the way of concrete proof.

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"I have it," Baines had said, his face serious in that perpetual squint, "but I haven't written about it for a very good reason."

"What reason?"

"Maybe nothing will be done about it," Baines said, leaning back in his chair. "The corruption has eaten too far into your city government."

Mayor Moran put level sincerity into his voice. "Believe me, I'm the mayor and I'm telling you there is no corruption in Point Placid's government."

"I'm not positive I can believe you, Mr. Mayor."

Moran felt himself flush with anger. The man actually was suggesting that he might be implicated.

"Are you telling me you don't know about Hal White's gambling operations?" Baines asked.

"About the kickback on the new road construction? About the house of prostitution on Seventh Street?" He'd leaned forward, surprising Moran with his vehemence. "Are you telling me you don't know where the money from these operations goes?"

"I know about two-dollar bettors," Moran said. "And I know about a very small percentage of prostitution. But I don't know about any 'kickback' as you call it, on road construction." Moran lit a cigarette, not bothering to offer one to Baines. "These things go on in all growing cities, Mr. Baines. If you have real proof

of anything bigger, of some tie in with a national syndicate, why don't you go to the police?"

"Your police department is crooked," Baines said simply. "I'm having your background checked very carefully, Mr. Mayor, and if it checks out okay I'll present the proof to you. In the meantime, the citizens have a right to know something's going on."

Barely controlling his anger, Moran had shown Joe Baines out of his office.

And that was the last anyone had seen of Baines. Unable to present the proof he'd boasted of, the man had disappeared as suddenly as he'd appeared two months before.

Moran put down his paper as the doorbell rang two quick demanding notes.

When he opened the door they were standing there, two men in spotless white coveralls. Behind them Moran saw a small van with "Wilson's Rug Cleaners" lettered on its side parked at the curb.

"We're here to pick up the carpet," one of the men said.

"Carpet?"

"Your wife called us to pick up a carpet here today."

"I don't know anything about it," Moran said. He stepped back and they entered. "It could be the one in the bedroom."

The front door slammed. When Moran turned he was astounded to see that one of the men had

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drawn a revolver and was pointing it at him. "What's going on here?" he asked shakily. He'd never looked into the barrel of a gun before.

"Nothing's going on," the man said, smiling. "A rug is going out."

The other man pushed Moran down into a chair. "We can't be too sure about what Joe Baines told you that day in your office."

"We?"

The man with the gun was still smiling. "I think you know who we are."

Moran felt naked and helpless sitting there in his pajamas and robe. He was beginning to see what was going on, but he couldn't quite bring himself to believe it.

While the gun was kept trained on Moran one of the men went into a bedroom. There was the sound of furniture being moved around, and he came out a few minutes later dragging the folded purple carpet. He unrolled it on the living room floor.

"Stand up, Mayor," the man with the gun ordered.

Moran obeyed. "You're going to . . . kill me?"

"Oh, not here," the other man said. "The Big Ones want you to know what's going on the whole way—like Joe Bines."

"You mean? . . . ."

"Put your hands behind you," the man with the gun said.

Moran's wrists were bound so tightly that they burned. The man

behind him tripped him, and he went down on the rough carpet with a suddenness that momentarily knocked the wind from him. Within seconds he was rolled up in the thick carpet.

"Don't panic, now, Mr. Mayor." The voice came to him from a thousand miles away.

There was barely enough air for Moran to breath. He could see a small oblong of light at the end of the rolled carpet, but even this disappeared as he felt himself hoisted onto the shoulder of one of the men. To the neighbors nothing would seem unusual, just a carpet being carried out to be cleaned, and there was nothing Moran could do to attract attention to himself. He attempted to move his arms, but they were pinned tightly to his sides. The only thing he could move was his head, and all his efforts were concentrated on keeping it turned so his nose wasn't pressed into the dusty underside of the carpet.

In thick silence, Moran felt himself being carried out through the front door, felt the man carrying him take the two steps down from the porch, walk the fifty or so feet to the front gate and out onto the sidewalk. He felt the slight bump as the man stepped down off the curb, and then all motion stopped.

The rough but padded blow made Moran's heart leap as he was tossed onto the floor of the van. That's when he started to panic, tried impossibly to move in



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his thick prison. He screamed, but he could barely hear it himself.

With the carpet lying straight the distant oblong of light appeared again. Moran craned his neck and concentrated on the light to calm himself. His heart beat slower, his straining lungs relaxed. The carpet vibrated gently as the truck began to move.

The carpet was unrolled in a back room of Wilson's Rug Cleaners. Moran blinked his eyes and struggled to his knees. He realized where he was when he saw some of the rug cleaning machinery through the partly opened door. Wilson's Rug Cleaners, he knew, was located on a very isolated lot on the west side of town.

But Moran was more shocked by who he saw when he turned. Frank King was there, as was Hal White. There were also several aldermen and Police Captain Floyd Randall, who was in charge of the vice squad. Ben Wilson, owner of the cleaners, was casually leaning with one hand against the window frame alongside a pulled yellow shade.

"Your Honor," Frank King said in greeting, and there was viciousness in his voice. The others nodded unsmilingly at him.

Moran's voice was incredulous, unnaturally high. "... What is this ... what's happening?"

"You're going to be elimina-

ted, Your Honor," Frank King said, "like Joe Baines was."

Moran was silent.

"He never really left town," Hal White said with a smile.

Moran looked up at them from where he knelt. "But you can't just kill me! You can't!"

"We don't really have a choice," Ben Wilson said apologetically. "We can't be sure what Baines told you that day in your office. Besides, we have orders from higher up."

"Then you *are*, all of you . . ."

"Part of the organization," King finished for him.

"Listen!" Moran pleaded. "Joe Baines was one thing, but I'm something else! The mayor of a town this size can't simply disappear!"

"It wouldn't be the first time," King said. "Heads of countries have disappeared. Eventually you'll just be presumed killed in some freak accident that left no trace. Or maybe people will think you ran away for some reason. In six months you won't even be a topic of conversation."

"But you can let me go!" Moran said. "Baines didn't tell me anything! He didn't trust me! I swear it!"

"We can't take chances," Wilson said. "We got where we are by being careful." He walked to the partly opened door and nodded to someone. A large cardboard barrel that had contained powdered detergent was rolled

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into the room and the lid was removed.

Moran didn't even have time to geg. The two men who'd brought him there lifted him quickly from the ground and stuffed him head first into the barrel. The metal lid was clamped on and fastened with screws, leaving Moran in darkness. Then the barrel was turned over so that he was right side up. He pressed his aching head against the now upright metal bottom of the barrel, but there was no give.

"There are air holes, Your Honor," someone called in to him. "Breathe easy and you'll be all right." Moran wasn't sure, but he thought he heard laughter. He was revolved dizzily in the darkness as the barrel was tilted and rolled out the back door and into the alley. He knew he was on cement by the scraping sound when the barrel was straightened, still bottom side up so Moran's head was on top. Then there was no motion, no noise.

Moran tried an experimental call for help, but decided he was only using up the already stale air. Even if he could be heard through the thick cardboard, there probably wasn't a sympathetic ear for a quarter of a mile. He fought the surge of claustrophobia that he'd felt in the rolled carpet, and he made himself think.

His container had been well chosen. There was no sense beating on the inside of the barrel or screaming. The thick cardboard

didn't conduct sound like metal would. Given enough time he could gouge his way out with some sharp instrument, but his hands were tied and he had no sharp instrument. There was, he finally decided, nothing to do but wait and try to remain calm.

What seemed like hours passed. It was warm in the barrel, and Moran's breathing was labored. He thought of how he'd been completely fooled the last two years, how Joe Baines had been right all along. Point Placid's city government was eaten away with corruption, had been that way when he'd taken office, had stayed that way right beneath his nose.

Moran heard a rumble and the seemingly distant squeal of brakes. Of course! It must be ten o'clock, time for the trash to be picked up in this part of town. And what was suspicious about a barrel of refuse being loaded on trash truck? He felt himself lifted, then set down gently on the bed of the truck. They knew what was inside.

The truck gathered speed. And that's when Moran panicked. There was only one place that Point Placid's trash was taken now. He screamed and struggled desperately until he slipped the ropes that bound his wrists behind him. His fingers explored the thick cardboard frantically, hopelessly. His hands pressed upward against the metal end of the barrel, hopelessly. There was

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no way out. He sagged down in despair and sat quietly.

The truck stopped and the barrel was unloaded. Suddenly Moran found himself lying on his side. He kicked at the barrel and pressed with his hands, but his body was too coiled to generate enough strength. Someone shouted something and he heard the steady grind of an electric motor. He felt motion.

Hate and fear shot through him. Even Joe Baines hadn't fully grasped the extent of the corruption, hadn't realized that the machinery of city government could actually be used to commit murder. And now what had hap-

pened to Baines was about to happen to Moran! He knew where he was. In one of the metal bins that was moving on a conveyor belt toward the mouth of Point Placid's new incinerator. He'd helped pass the proposal himself to have the incinerator built.

Moran heard a faint roar and he sniffed the acrid scent of flame. That's when he began to scream the loudest—piercing screams, screams of disbelief. He clawed at the thick cardboard until his fingernails were shredded, then he wept.

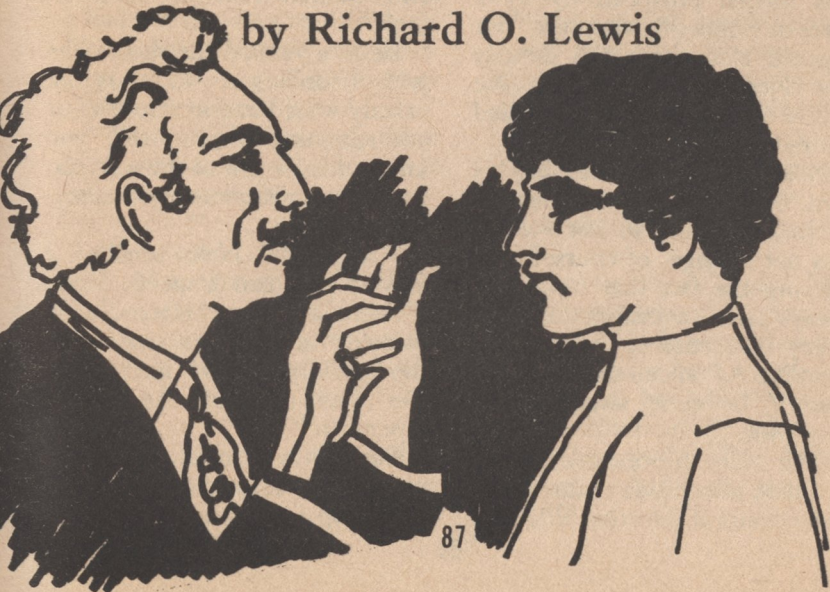
It began to grow hot inside the cardboard barrel. Then, mercifully, it began to grow hotter. ●

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## TORRIDISAMO

*There is a little larceny in every tourist's heart and Nola had devised an intriguing scheme to use it his advantage.*

by Richard O. Lewis



## TORRIDISAMO

NOLO ORLANDO ANSWERED the door of his little office in front of his meager living quarters before the sound of its chimes had completely died away. A man and woman stood there. The man was tall, had a neat moustache, grey eyes, and was dressed in English tweeds. He looked to be a highly successful businessman. "Senor Orlando?" he asked.

Nolo bowed low and made a graceful gesture with his left hand. "*A sus atende.*"

"You speak English?"

Nolo made another bow. "In my business it is necessar' I speak the many tongues."

"I am Hendrick Beshire. London. And this," indicating the young woman at his side, "is my secretary, Miss Delta Strove. We read your advertisement. . . ."

The left side of Delta's oval face was hidden provocatively by a wave of blonde, flowing hair. Her exposed blue eye gazed directly into Nolo's dark ones as she smiled to flash white teeth behind her red lips.

Nolo smiled back, flashing his own, even whiter, teeth. He took an instant liking to her—which was not strange, of course, considering the fact that he almost always took an instant liking to every presentable female he chanced to encounter. "*Entre nous,*" he said, swinging the door wide.

The office furniture consisted of a desk at one side of the room, some chairs at the other side, and

some shelves in two corners of the room. The walls were hung with enlarged photos of various Etruscan tombs, excavators at work, and famous vases that had been unearthed in recent years. Shards of colorful pottery were on the desk and in the corner shelves.

"*Sitios, por favore,*" he said, sweeping a slim hand toward the chairs. Then he glided to his desk in a flowing motion not unlike that of a man accustomed to dancing by moonlight with gracious women to Latin rhythms. Seated, he treated Delta to another flashing smile.

"I want to hire you as a guide," said Beshire, coming directly to the point.

"The tombs. The ancient burial places," said Nolo. "*Mais, oui!* We have the many famous ones throughout Tuscany and Unbria. All ver' interesting!"

Beshire rubbed his moustache with a forefinger. "That is not exactly what I had in mind. Your advertisement implied that you knew of some out-of-the-way places, places not generally frequented by tourists. . . ."

"Ah, so!" Nolo brushed a lock of dark hair from his brow. "There are these places." He twisted his head to one side, thoughtfully. "Ver' interesting. Ver' hard to reach. And—*Ver' expensive!*"

Beshire got from his chair, went to one of the corner shelves, picked up a shard of vase, and fin-

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gered it speculatively. "We could do a little digging, perhaps?"

Nolo shook his head quickly. "*Mais, non, Monsieur*! She is against the authority!"

Delta swept from her chair to the desk and looked down at him with her one uncovered eye of blue. "But you have many pieces here," she said, leaning over to indicate those on the desk and, inadvertently, exposing part of a snowy white cleft that until now had lurked in concealment behind a loose-fitting blouse. "Surely you were able to get them—*Somehow* . . ."

"*Veridad*," he said, letting his nose nibble at her delicate scent. "But they are like what you call the throws-away." *Imagine having a traveling companion like that! Torridisamo!* Nolo didn't know what the word meant—or even if such a word existed—but it had a better ring to it than did *Wunderbar*, *Caramba*, or *Gosh-darn*, and so he used it whenever occasion demanded.

"Then we shall pick up some of the throws-away," she said, as if that took care of the entire problem.

"How can I make the refusal!" Nolo got to his feet and glanced at his watch. "It is now ten o'clock. If you give me the address of where you stay, I pick you up at one o'clock, *una punta*."

"You will show us a good place . . . ." Beshire raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"For a fee. . . ."

Beshire nodded. "It can be arranged."

"Then dress for the climb," Nolo warned. "She is steep. Few go there."

Four hours later, with Beshire and Delta in the back seat, Nolo was coaxing his vintage Fiat up a steep grade along the narrow river valley, the sky cloudless, the sun bright. He passed through the edge of the villiage of Wasta that had clung precariously to the side of its rocky, tree-studded hill for ages unknown, inched along the road for another mile or so, and came to a halt. To his left ran the swift, clear waters of a small branch of the River Arno. To his right, the hills rose abruptly.

Nolo slid over to the passanger side of the front seat, got out, and opened the door for Delta and Beshire.

Beshire was dressed in hunting shirt, whipcord trousers, and high boots. A canteen and a long, powerful flashlight dangled from his belt. Delta wore tan slacks that caressed her hips and thighs lovingly and a short blouse over which she had thrown a green scarf.

"She up there," said Nolo. "By the big *basta* tree. And here is the trail." He pointed to what may once have been a path leading upwards but which was now nearly obliterated by fallen rock and undergrowth. "*Tres difficile!* Almost nobody go there no more!"

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Beshire nodded, grasped a sapling, and pulled himself up over the first low ledge of rock. Then, bent over and using hands and feet, crab-like, he began clawing his way up the zigzagging trail. Delta followed, and Nolo brought up the rear closely behind her, hoping that, perchance she might stumble back into his arms, even slide a few feet downwards in tight embrace. . . .

Beshire stopped on a small ledge and sat down on an outcrop of stone to rest. He was breathing heavily from his climb as Delta and Nolo joined him, but there was a light of eager determination in his eyes.

Nolo pointed at the basta tree. "She not far now," he encouraged. "We make heem in a leetle *minuto*."

Several times during the climb, Nolo had felt the urge to reach up, place his hands firmly on Delta's hips, and aid her in the ascent. And once, when he had been exceptionally close to her curved body, he had been forced to fight down an almost overwhelming desire to grasp the zipper at the back of her straining slacks and give it a quick, downward jerk—just for the sheer joy of it!

The entrance to the cave lay in the thick shadow of the basta tree. It was a slanting cleft that had comé into being when some cosmic cataclysm had split the face of the rock wall.

"Come," said Nolo, taking a

flashlight from his pocket and clicking it into life.

Beyond the narrow entrance, the cave suddenly widened. There was a long, stone-strewn aisle, and on each side of it ran cryptlike ledges that had obviously been hewn from the solid walls of rock.

Nolo let his light play along the lippie piles of aging bones that lay along one ledge and let it come to rest on one pile that was topped by a grinning, toothless skull.

"Heavens!" gasped Delta, taking a quick step backwards. "Don't the people here *bury* their dead?"

Nolo's head bobbed the light. "*Vero!* Then, after a time, the bones are dug up and brought here for the final rest. Land for the crops is scarce here. Cannot be wasted on big cemeteries. Use same graves over and over."

"Ghastly!" breathed Delta.

"*Mais, non!* When people visit ancestors in cemeteries, people see only stone slabs with names. Here one visits ancestors like *tete-a-tete*. Sees them in person."

Beshire had been playing the powerful beam of his light here and there among the crypts. "I don't see a thing of value anywhere," he grunted accusingly. "Not even a shard."

"*Veridad.* Ages ago, people brought vases here, urns filled with flowers or water or food for the dead. Sometimes brought personal belongings. Then come thieves, *turistas*, collectors. Laws are passed. No good. Stealing go

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on. So villiagers no longer bring things.”

“But your advertisement said

“... that I guide to out-of-way places,” finished Nolo. “Come. I show you I do not lie.” He led the way further back into the musty cavern. “There,” he said, pointing to a rubble of stone and dirt that slanted upwards from floor to roof. “She cave in. Long ago.”

Beshire stood for a full minute gazing at the rubble. “You mean to tell me,” he said, his voice husky, “that there is more of the cave behind this pile of stuff! An unexplored area!”

Nolo shrugged. “*Quien sabe?* Cave ver’ out-of-way place. Villiagers now put new bones in new cave somewhere. No one bother. No one dig.” He pointed his light to the cracked stones in the roof directly over the rubble. “Is ver’ dangerous!”

Delta bent suddenly forward, and, once again, Nolo became possessed of the great desire to reach out and give the zipper a jerk. But this was neither the time nor the place. . . .

“Look!” she gasped, pointing.

There at the edge of Beshire’s beam was a glint of reflected light.

Beshire pounced upon it immediately, dug it loose from the dirt, wiped it quickly on his shirt, and help it up.

“*Ansa!*” breathed Nolo, reverently. “Handle of a vase!”

Beshire shoved it quickly into a pocket of his shirt. “Here,” he said, shoving his flashlight at Delta. “Hold the light for me.”

Then he set to work with both hands, casting aside small stones, scooping away handfuls of dirt. Moments later a larger reflection of light came into view. Beshire renewed his efforts, eagerly pawing dirt and stones away from the top, bottom, and sides of the glittering, half-buried object.

Suddenly, he lifted the treasure from its bed, emptied it of dirt, and held it to the direct rays of light.

“*Torridisamo!*” Nolo gasped. “A true Etruscan! *Veridad!*”

“Beautiful!” sighed Delta.

Beshire was turning the vase over and over with trembling hands, his eyes avidly admiring the glazed pastoral scene upon it. “And perfect!” he announced. “Except for the broken handle!” He brought the missing piece quickly from his shirt pocket and fitted it into place. “No doubt it can be glued back on without trace!”

Nolo extended a hand toward the vase. “The government, she be ver’ proud and ver’ happy . . . .”

Beshire cradled the vase protectively in his left arm and held out a restraining hand. “Now just a minute! I didn’t come here just to get something for the government! The vase belongs to me! I found it!”

“We found it,” corrected

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Delta.

"But she belong to government!" Nolo insisted.

"The government will not miss something it never had," said Beshire. He held the vase in both hands again, fondling it. "It might have remained hidden forever if I—we—hadn't found it. At the right market it should bring a handsome price."

"Always out for the fast buck," sighed Delta.

Nolo shook his head. "Cannot be taken out of *Otalia!* Illegal!"

"I have a shipment of goods leaving Firenze tonight for my firm in London," mused Beshire. "I could include the vase. That way, it would easily pass Customs."

"*Mais, non!* My license . . . ."

Beshire gazed for a thoughtful moment at the disturbed rubble, then swiftly removed the scarf from Delta's shoulders, wrapped the vase carefully, and tucked it under an arm. "Let us go," he said—as if the matter were closed.

BACK IN NOLO'S little office, Beshire placed the wrapped vase on the desk and came quickly to the point. "I will sell it in London immediately after my arrival there. Then I will send you your share. One-third. Many times greater than your fee as a guide."

Delta glanced quickly at Nolo, but said nothing.

"If I let you take the vase . . . ." Nolo shrugged. "How do I know for how much you sell

heem? Maybe you not even sell . . . ."

"All right! Beshire snapped. "I'll buy your share right now!" He brought a wallet quickly from a pocket and opened it. "Twenty thousand franks!"

Nolo shook his head slowly. "I know for true that some Etruscans bring ten times that much . . . ."

Beshire thumbed a sheaf of bills from his wallet to the desk. "Ten thousand franks. All the cask I have on hand at the moment. After I get the vase safely on its way to London, I'll cable my firm for money and bring the other ten thousand to you tonight."

Nolo shook his head again. "*Mais, non.* The vase, she stay here till I get the full amount."

Beshire glanced quickly at his watch, and his neck began to flush with anger. "But, man! You do not understand! If I don't get this vase in the shipment to London within the next two hours, I may *never* get it out of the country!"

"But I will have no security . . . ."

The angry flush spread to Beshire's face. His lips worked for a moment without sound. "I'll leave Delta as security!" he finally blurted out. "I'll pick her up tonight when I bring the money!"

Taking Nolo's silence as acquiescence, he snatched up the vase and started toward the door. He glanced back once, then hur-



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ried out, closing the door quickly behind him.

"I don't trust him," said Delta, turning her back to Nolo to gaze absently at one of the pictures on the wall. "I know how his mind works."

Nolo took a step toward her, then halted, his eyes riveted hypnotically on the zipper. Suddenly, the impulse became overwhelming. He grasped the top piece of metal firmly between thumb and finger and gave it a quick, downward jerk.

Delta wheeled to face him, brushed the lock of hair from her eye—and smiled.

BESHIRE DID NOT return that night. Neigher did he return the following morning.

"You see?" Delta said over the brunch Nolo had prepared for them in his living quarters. "He had no intention of returning. He's probably in London right now, along with the vase, gloating over the slick deal he pulled on us."

"And you will not get your share. . . ."

Delta's exposed eye narrowed and her lips became set in a straight, determined line. "I'm taking the next plane to London," she ground out. "And when I catch up with him, I'll get my share. Or else!"

After seeing Delta safely off in a cab, Nolo deposited most of the ten thousand francs in a local bank, did some shopping, and returned to his office. An hour

later, he was coaxing his grumbling Fiat up a hill towards the village of Wasta. He did not take the lwo, river road, but took the high road directly through the village and came to a halt atop the high bluff beyond, the giant basta tree directly below him.

The path that led down to the mouth of the cave was certainly a lot less tortuous than the one up which he had taken Beshire and Delta the previous day.

Inside the cave, Nolo turned on his flash, placed it on the edge of a crypt, and unwrapped the cheap vase he had purchased that morning. Very carefully, he broke off one of the handles, rubbed the raw edges thoroughly with dirt, and grinned. "Now she look old and authentic."

Flash in hand, he started toward the back of the silent cavern, then stopped abruptly. A long, powerful flashlight lay lifeless on the floor, its batteries spent. Beside it was a canteen. There was a new break in the roof of the cave, a new pile of rubble, and from beneath the fresh pile extended the twisted heel of a boot.

Nolo stood for a moment in silent thought, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "*Torridisamo!*" he said, finally. "Now I must find a new cave in which to plant my broken vases for the *turistas!*"

# THE COUP

*In a Latin-American takeover one slip can mean you're facing a gun barrel instead of Mr. Big.*

by Richard Deming



THE ASSASSINATION attempt was rather cleverly planned for a fanatic. It indicated thorough knowledge of General Emilio Paz's habits.

For instance the would-be assassin must have known that the dictator never had his bullet-proof limousine brought around to the palace front door in the morning, but always walked back to the garage accompanied by his chauffeur and flanked by his two bodyguards. Obviously if this hadn't been the general's custom, the explosion would have

killed no one but the chauffeur, so the would-be assassin must have known the routine.

It just happened that on the morning of the attempt General Paz stopped to admire a new horse one of the handlers was leading from the stable. The chauffeur went on ahead to open the garage door and start the engine. So the general was twenty-five feet away with a horse between him and the limousine when it blew up.

The chauffeur, the horse, the horse's handler and one of the bodyguards were killed instantly.

## THE COUP

The second bodyguard was seriously injured. The general received severe facial burns, but otherwise was uninjured.

When Minister of Finance Raul Cedro heard the first erroneous report that General Paz had been killed, he was elated. He immediately dispatched messengers to the various members of the junta ordering them to carry out their long-planned assignments at once, so that he would be firmly in power before any other member of the cabinet had a chance to move.

His elation quickly turned to terror when, less than fifteen minutes after the first news, he received the corrected report that the general had only been injured. He managed to get a second message to each member of the junta, rescinding his first order, in time to prevent catastrophe, but he knew that even then he wasn't out of the woods. While he had nothing to do with the explosion and had no idea who was behind it, he knew it would bring on a thorough investigation of everyone in the administration who conceivably might have ambitions to succeed Emilio Paz.

And with Colonel Juan Diego's spy system, it was distinctly possible that Cedro's own plans for a coup would come to light.

Fortunately the efficient Colonel Diego moves so fast, the crime was solved without his having to make an investigation in depth. Within three hours of

the explosion a young student fanatic named Pedro Aguinaldo had been arrested, had confessed and had been executed by a firing squad. When the chief of the secret police issued a bulletin that the young man had been deranged, had acted entirely on his own and there were no political implications in the incident, Raul Cedro began to breathe easier.

Late that same afternoon he called at the palace to inquire about the general's condition.

Security measures, always strict, had been increased even more. Cedro was stopped by guards at the gate to the grounds and was informed that by order of Colonel Diego his chauffeur would not be allowed to go any farther, as visitors were restricted to government ministers and certain specified aides. He had to walk the hundred yards from the gate to the palace.

At the palace door he was stopped again, then escorted by a guard to the general's quarters, where the dictator's personal bodyguards were stationed before the door. Both were new men, the general's regular bodyguards having been casualties of the explosion. They seemed to recognize him, though, for both presented arms and one said in a respectful tone, "Good afternoon, Senor Minister."

Cedro wasn't immediately passed inside, though, despite this recognition. One of the guards disappeared into the living quar-

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ters and brought out Colonel Diego himself. Apparently the chief of the secret police had decreed that he personally would check all visitors, even of cabinet rank.

Juan Diego was a tall, cadaverous man of about forty-five dressed in a spick-and-span uniform without a single decoration. This was a peculiar affectation in a nation where medals were handed out like popcorn and the colonel was a recipient of most of them. It tended to make him seem even more austere than he was. Most people, even those who classed themselves as friends of the colonel, were a little uncomfortable around him.

"How are you, Raul?" Diego said with his usual polite frigidity. "Sorry to subject you to all this red tape, but everybody's going through it for the time being. Cone on in."

Cedro followed him into the anteroom of the general's living quarters, then on into the huge drawing room. General Emilio Paz sat there alone, clad in pajamas, a bright purple robe and slippers.

The dictator was a stocky, bull-shouldered man of about the same size and shape as Raul Cedro, although at sixty-five he was fifteen years older. At the moment you couldn't tell what his features were like, because his face was so thoroughly bandaged, nothing but his eyes and lips showed. Thick, curling, iron-gray hair

thrust out of the top of the bandage.

In his deep, resonant voice the general said, "It was good of you to come, Raul. I hope it's just a social call, because I'm not up to business. These burns are rather painful."

"I'm sorry for your discomfort, General," the minister of finance said. "It isn't business. I just called to see how you are."

"Alive. I'm going to have a few scars, but I'm told I'll recover."

Cedro glanced at Colonel Diego. "You certainly moved fast, Juan. I hear the culprit was shot three hours after the explosion."

"It's my job to move fast," the chief of the secret police said in a colorless tone.

"All these underground advocates of a return to so-called democracy ought to be shot," the general growled. "Juan, why don't you have a general round-up?"

"Most of them are harmless," Diego said. "Aguinaldo just happened to be a madman. Let them preach on street corners, so long as they don't advocate violence. If you dropped around to listen to some of them, you would quickly note that the few who do tend to mysteriously disappear. Those who merely rant about the free election you promised ten years ago when you dissolved the congress and appointed yourself premier are no threat. Letting

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them talk provides a safety valve."

"I suppose so," General Paz said grumpily. "You're always so damned right, you sicken me, Juan." He waved toward chairs. "Sit down, both of you. It strains my neck to gaze upward."

Cedro chose an upholstered chair directly opposite the general. The colonel took a straight-backed chair near the fireplace.

Glancing around, the minister of finance asked, "Where's Consuelo?"

"Senora Paz is vacationing in Miami," Colonel Diego said.

"I cabled her I wasn't seriously enough hurt for her to come home," the general said. "No point in interrupting her vacation. Besides, Juan hovers over me like a wife. Temporarily he's even moved into the visitor's wing of the palace. He's here all day until my guards tuck me in at night."

"How long will you have to wear those bandages?" Cedro asked.

"A couple of weeks, the doctors tell me. They have to be changed every other day."

Knowing the dictator's vanity, Cedro was sure he would never appear in public so thoroughly bandaged. It might mar the image of invulnerability he had so carefully build in the public mind.

He asked, "What about the dedication of the new Finance Building next Friday?"

"Postpone it. The only place I'll be going during the next two

weeks is my every-other-day trip to San Jon Hospital."

"Why don't you have the doctor come here?" Cedro asked in surprise.

The bandages hid the general's expression, but Cedro could sense his flush from his voice. "The specialist treating me is an exchange doctor from America. These blasted Americans have no respect for authority. He had the effrontery to tell me he was too busy with other patients to waste a whole afternoon on me. I would send him packing back to America, except that he happens to be a plastic surgeon of great skill, and there isn't a native doctor in the whole country I would trust to remove a hangnail."

Cedro discreetly changed the subject. "Next Monday is the end of the month and the end of the fiscal year. Will you feel up to going over the annual report?"

"I'm always up to checking on money," Paz told him. "That's five days off, so I should be feeling a bit better. Monday is a dressing-change day, though, so I'll be leaving for the hospital at two P.M. You had better come in the morning. You can lunch here."

"Very well," Cedro agreed. "Expect me about ten A.M."

Colonel Diego accompanied the minister of finance to the door when he left. In the entryroom, out of sight of the general in the drawing room, the colonel laid a detaining hand on Cedro's arm.

"Would you like a bit of ad-

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vice, Raul?"

"About what?"

"I know your party imitations of General Paz are meant merely to amuse your guests, but the general has no sense of humor. It would be unfortunate if he ever heard of them"

Cedro felt a slight chill. He had been careful to render his satiric imitations of the dictator only in social groups where no one was present but members of the junta and vouched-for sympathizers. But Colonel Diego had ears everywhere.

"I haven't meant any disrespect," he said. "Is the general likely to hear of them?"

"Not from me. I regard you as an excellent minister of finance."

The implication was obvious that at some future date the chief of the secret police might want a return favor. Cedro was both relieved and amused, for Diego was high on his list of those to be purged the moment the coup succeeded.

When he left the palace, it occurred to Cedro that Monday would be a perfect time to strike. It was difficult to plan the assassination of a man who was so thoroughly guarded. But once a year the finance minister was closeted alone with the dictator. General Paz didn't care for even his trusted chief of secret police to sit in on the annual financial report, because it involved certain deposits in numbered Swiss bank accounts that the general had no desire for

others to know about.

The only trouble was that the ever-present colonel would be sitting in the next room. It would be simple enough to kill Emilio Paz. The problem would be to get past the colonel and three sets of guards afterward.

Then a brilliant thought struck Cedro. If, after the assassination, he walked out of the palace as General Paz instead of as himself, no one would dare stop him.

That evening he called a meeting of the junta.

When they were all assembled in the abandoned barn where meetings were currently being held, Cedro announced that the long-awaited coup would take place the following Monday afternoon.

"I, personally, will take care of the assassination," he said. "General Paz will be dead by two P.M., but I plan to arrange things so that it will be unlikely his death will be discovered for several hours. By three I should be far enough from the palace to be safe. We'll allow an extra hour's leeway to take care of unforeseen circumstances, then all of you will simultaneously perform your assigned tasks. Let's go over those once more. We'll start with Alanzo. "Explain your assignment, Alanzo."

Lean, wiry Alanzo Obisco, who had been promised the post of minister of public relations after the coup, recited: "I am to take over the government radio

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station with a squad of Major Aragon's soldiers. At exactly four P.M. I will announce the general's death over the air. I will inform the listening audience that you have assumed command of all military and naval forces and that martial law is in effect. I will explain that any military or naval personnel refusing to accept your authority will be shot as traitors, and that any resisting or demonstrating civilians will also be shot. I will then announce the new cabinet, including myself as minister of public relations."

Raul Cedro gave an approving nod. "Major Aragon?"

The bull-necked major, whose reward for participating in the coup was to be a full colonelcy and the title of chief of the secret police, said: "My A Company will take over the palace and arrest all persons found there. B and C Companies, divided into four platoons each to make eight separate units, will hunt down and arrest Colonel Diego and the seven cabinet ministers aside from yourself. D Company and Headquarters Company, less the squad I am to furnish to Alanzo, will patrol the city to maintain order. When everything is under control, I will gather such troops as can be spared from other duty, lead them to the department of secret police and announce that I am assuming command."

Cedro said, "There is one minor change in your instructions. You won't need a platoon

to search out Colonel Diego, because he is currently living at the palace and your A Company can handle him. I have another assignment that I'll explain in a few minutes for the extra platoon." He glanced at Captain Alfredo Diaz. "Alfredo?"

The middle-aged naval captain glibly described his plan for assuming control of the minute navy, which consisted of only four P.T. boats and a gunboat.

Young Air Force Lieutenant Carlso Obregon was next, and he described how the six-plane air force would be taken over. The only remaining conspirator was a civilian named Panch Ibenez, who had been promised the job of minister of finance after the coup. He had no assignment to perform during the actual overthrow of government.

Ibenez asked, "Just precisely what are your assassination plans, Raul?"

The hopeful premier said, "I have an appointment to go over the fiscal report with General Paz Monday. I am also invited for lunch. I plan to arrange things so that our business will not be completed before lunch. We will retire together to the general's study, probably about one. General Paz is to leave for San Jon Hospital for a dressing change at two. He will emerge from his study, announce to the ever-present Colonel Diego that I still have some work to do and should not be disturbed, then go off with his bodyguards."

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Ibenez said puzzledly, "What has this accomplished?"

"It will not really be General Paz who leaves the palace. He'll be dead. We are identical in build and eye color. I will have a gray wig and a roll of guaze bandage in my briefcase. After I kill him, I will don his uniform, put on the wig and bandage my face."

There was a combined murmur of admiration from everyone except Major Aragon. He said doubtfully, "How about the differences in your voices?"

Alanzo Obisco said, "You're the only one here who's never heard Raul's imitation of the general, Major."

In General Paz's deep tone, Cedro said, "I don't think that will be any problem. I'm a pretty good mimic."

The likeness was so uncanny that Major Aragon looked startled. He was also convinced. The major was a firm believer in detailed planning though, and he had more questions.

"All right, so you're out of the palace," he said. "Now you are headed for the hospital with an armed chauffeur and two armed bodyguards in your car, another car in front of you and one behind you, both containing more armed guards. Since the general never carries a pistol, it would be out of character for you to wear one. Unarmed, how do you plan to get away from that small army?"

"Simply by issuing a couple of

orders," Cedro said with a smile. "I'll dismiss the two accompanying cars. Even if my bodyguards think that odd, they won't dare object. Who has the courage to argue with any of the premier's whims?"

"You'll still be in a car with three armed men who are fanatically loyal to the general," Aragon said dubiously.

"I'll take care of that with my second order. A mile from the palace on the way to the city there is a dirt lane leading off to the right that winds through some woods for about a mile to an adobe farmhouse. A widow named Maria Cortez lives there alone."

"I know the place," Pancho Ibenez interrupted. "The Cortez woman is noted for her wine."

"Yes. She sells a good deal of it to the palace. On rare occasions General Paz has been known to stop by there to taste a sample of some bottling ready for release. The chauffeur and the bodyguards shouldn't think it odd if I order a slight detour to visit Senora Cortez."

A slow smile spread across the thick-necked major's face. "So that's where we use the extra platoon. When you and your bodyguards enter the house, I'll be there with them."

"Exactly," Cedro told him. He raised one balled fist. "Viva revolucion!"

Five other balled fists raised,



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and five voices repeated, "Viva revolucion!"

On Monday Raul Cedro made sure he and the premier could not possibly complete their business before lunch by sending a message to the palace early in the morning that he would be delayed until eleven thrity. General Paz was a little testy when he finally arrived, but Cedro was able to sooth him with a plausible excuse. He said he had been conferring with the American ambassador about possible economic aid.

The general, never one to discourage his minister of finance from exploring new sources of revenue, promptly mellowed.

General Paz liked to lunch precisely at noon. Cedro had hardly gotten the numerous papers of his fiscal report spread across the dictator's desk when a waiter was discreetly tapping on the study door.

"Leave it," General Paz ordered as the minister of finance started to gather up the papers again. "We'll continue after lunch."

The only other luncheon guest today was Colonel Juan Diego, Cedro was relieved to discover. Usually there were numerous people for luncheon at the palace when General Paz was in residence there. Probably it was the man's vanity again, Cedro thought. He wouldn't want any more people than necessary to see his bandaged face.

After lunch Cedro and the

premier again returned to the study. As they left the table, Colonel Diego reminded Paz that he was supposed to leave for the hospital at two.

"We should be finished by then," the general said. "If Raul can't explain his figures in an hour, I'll appoint a new minister of finance."

Once the study door was closed behind them, Cedro didn't tarry. As General Paz walked toward his desk, the minister of finance drew an icepick from beneath his coat. He took two rapid steps, inserted the point of the pick into the dictator's right ear, clamped his other hand to the left side of the man's head and brought his hands as nearly together as they could go under the circumstances.

The general didn't make a sound. He merely slumped to his knees. Cedro gently eased him forward on his face without withdrawing the icepick.

Today, because he had expected to go out, the dead man wore his full-dress uniform. Stripping to his underwear, Cedro quickly switched clothing with the dead man.

Fifteen minutes after the assassination Raul Cedro was examining himself with satisfaction in a wall mirror. The gray wig peeping above his face bandages exactly matched the general's hair. The bandages had been wound so as to match exactly those covering the dead man's face. Gazing at his re-

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lection, Cedro couldn't distinguish himself from the general.

He waited patiently until five minutes of two before emerging from the study. Closing the door behind him, he marched into the drawing room, where he found Colonel Diego alone.

In the general's deep, resonant voice Cedro said, "Raul is still working on the report. I don't want him disturbed. I'm leaving for San Jon Hospital now."

Rising to his feet, the chief of the secret police said, "I'll ride along with you. I have something to discuss."

This was a development Cedro hadn't contemplated, since the colonel never accompanied his premier anywhere. It was generally known among those high in the administration that Diego had convinced General Paz that they should never be in the same car together. The colonel's argument was that if the general were assassinated, he certainly would want his death avenged, and it inevitably would be if the chief of secret police were still alive to avenge it. There was enough vindictiveness in Emilio Paz for the argument to appeal to him.

"You're going to violate your own rule?" Cedro asked.

"It isn't a long drive, and my men have already checked the route," Diego said with his frigid smile. "I don't think one exception will be dangerous. And the matter I have to discuss is important."

Cedro saw no way of avoiding the situation without exciting suspicion. And one more person in the car should be no problem against a full platoon of Major Aragon's men.

Merely shrugging, Cedro continued on into the entryroom.

As befitted a man who was used to having his every move guarded, Cedro hung back to allow Colonel Diego to precede him into the outer hall. The two guards on duty there were not the same ones who had been stationed before the door when Cedro arrived at eleven thirty. They probably worked in shifts, Cedro thought, and another shift had come on duty.

The bodyguards silently fell in on either side of the counterfeit general.

The guards on duty at the palace front door came to attention and saluted smartly as the group passed. They were over the second hurdle, Cedro thought.

Since the explosion of his limousine General Paz had abandoned his habit of going to the garage to get in his car. Now the new chauffeur drove it around to the front steps of the palace. It was a sleek, bullet-proof limousine identical to the one that had blown up. Smaller sedans, neither bullet-proof, were parked in front and in back of it.

As they reached the bottom of the steps, Cedro said irritably in the general's voice, "I don't feel like a parade today, Juan. Tell the

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two escort cars to stay behind. Four armed men in mine should be adequate protection.”

The colonel looked surprised, but he made no objection. He went over to the front car first, then to the rear one, and issued instructions in his frigid tone.

There was the third hurdle passed, Cedro thought as he climbed into the back seat of the limousine.

Colonel Diego rounded the car to sit on Cedro's left, one of the bodyguards sat on his right and the second climbed in front with the chauffeur. The limousine drove down to the barred gates of the palace grounds.

The guards there stared into the car from either side, carefully studying each face, before giving the signal to open the gate. As the car moved through the gate, Cedro breathed a sigh of relief. There was only one final hurdle to get over now.

A half mile along the main highway leading from the palace to the city, Cedro said, “Run past Senora Cortez's place for a moment, driver. She has just finished aging a batch of wine.”

Again the colonel glanced at him with an expression of surprise, but he made no comment. Cedro wondered why he had come along, since so far he had made no mention of whatever it was he wanted to discuss.

They reached the lane and turned to the right. The dirt road

curved through heavily underbrushed woods with no sign of habitation on either side.

About a quarter mile into the woods Colonel Diego suddenly ordered, “Pull over and stop.”

The chauffeur brought the car to a halt. Cedro examined the chief of the secret police in astonishment.

“Why do we stop here?” he inquired.

There was a peculiar smile on the colonel's face. “I never expected you to make it so easy, General. You didn't even question the substitution of your own personally chosen bodyguards for a couple of my men. today was only supposed to be a test, to see if I could get away with it. Next time my own men would have been in the accompanying cars too. But since you chose to dismiss your escort and direct us to this isolated spot, why wait? I've been wraching my brains as to how to get you into a situation such as this for months.”

The colonel drew his pistol. As it came from its holster, Raul Cedro had a series of rapid and despairing thoughts.

His first thought was resentment against the dead General Paz for preferring to leave his protection to others instead of carrying a weapon himself. His second was a belated realization as to who had really planted the bomb in the general's limousine. Cedro wasn't the only one who had planned

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a coup.

His third was a struggle between two equally hopeless decisions. If he did, surprise might gain him a few seconds, but he would just as certainly be shot.

Colonel Diego would be more pleased to learn the actual situation than to have the general in his hands, he realized. For then he could place himself in the situation of merely avenging the general's death, and afterward grab the reins of government without appearing to have plotted at all.

There was a touch of the same

vindictiveness in Raul Cedro that General Paz had possessed. In the last second of his life he decided it might throw a monkey wrench into his killer's plans if he didn't know who he had actually assassinated. He kept his mouth shut and stoically took the bullet.

Raul Cedro never knew it, but his decision did throw a monkey wrench into the machinery. After the body had been dumped from the car, Colonel Diego decided to drive on to Senora Cortez's and sample the new batch of wine himself.

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## THE LOSER

*Unless he came up with 800 bucks for the loan shark he could wind up in a cement coffin at the bottom of a river or under a truck wheel.*

by Percy Spurlark Parker



## THE LOSER

JESSE SAT IN THE back booth of the bar, waiting for one of Skyles' boys to come in and put a bullet in him. It was not that he looked forward to death, or greet it with open arms. He simply knew it would do no good to try to hide. Where the hell would he go anyway? He was busted, broke. He had blew his last thirty-five cents on the mug of beer that sat before him. He might as well go to the next world with a pint of brew in his gut.

Tranona's bar had never been a classy joint, but it had served as a place for him to sack-out a couple of times, when he had not been able to scratch up his rent money. It was dimly lit. If a guy did not know his way around, it could become an obstacle course until his eyes got used to the place. The floor was old and worn, the booths rickety, the half-door leading behind the bar hung crookedly from one hinge. But the people who floated in and out of Tranona's were a gambling crowd, a drinking crowd. As for fancy scenery, they could care less.

Eight hundred bucks. Eight hundred lousy, stinking bucks. Skyles was rough enough if you owed him a fin, and he had gotten into Skyles for eight big ones. He would have preferred to deal with any other bookie in town, but his credit had long ago ran out with them. Skyles was the only one who would take his markers. He knew the rules. If you owed Skyles, you either paid him or it was

going to cost you your ass.

He had broke fairly even at first, had hopes of connecting with one that would set him up real nice for awhile. But the whole thing fell apart last Tuesday. He had placed eight bets with Skyles for the races that afternoon, one hundred dollars each, to win. All he needed was one winner, just one, and Skyles would have had his money. But the nags acted like they were carrying four hundred pound jockeys.

He tasted his beer, it had began to warm, the zest of the brew flattening. Skyles had gave him forty-eight hours to come up with the dough. The Hamm's beer clock behind the bar read 5:35, and it meant he had made it five minutes past Skyles' deadline. He wondered how much longer it would take for one of Skyles' boys to locate him.

He had tried to get the money, but he had nothing to hock, and his friends suddenly did not know him. Even Tranona had turned deaf when he had asked for the loan of a few bucks. He actually could not blame them though, he had burned most of them once or twice before. They had plenty of advice though: rob a bank, leave town, kill yourself. Banks are loaded with hidden cameras. If he was able to slip a teller a note, walk out with a bag full of money and pay Skyles off, the cops would catch up with him sooner or later. and And how could he leave town without any money? Kill himself,

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he did that when he lost those bets.

He even thought of getting himself arrested for something, but he remembered Will McAdo had tried that scheme. McAdo got himself picked up for shoplifting. Somebody went down and bailed him out. That same night McAdo was found laying over on Pond St. with tire tracks across his chest. McAdo had only owed Skyles two ninety-five.

He tried a bigger swallow of the beer, searched his pockets for his cigarettes and found he only had one left. So, how many did he need anyway? He had been a loser all his life. He did alright for the day to day stuff, but anything important was a complete bust. He had been flunked out of high school, fired from most of his jobs, drafted and sent to Viet Nam, caught malaria while he was there, and got booted out of the army after doing six months in the stockade for rifling the supply tent. Yeah, he was a loser alright, and if it was not Skyles after him it would probably be someone else.

Resigning himself to his loser's fate, he found that he was not as nervous as he had been Monday when the last race was ran. In fact, he felt quite calm now, and this puzzled him somewhat. Maybe it was the only emotion left, he had done a hell of a lot of running around and worrying the past two days. He could not get the money together, and he could not escape

Skyles. His situation was hopeless. He could do nothing now but wait for them to kill him.

"Mind if I share this booth?"

Startled, he looked up at the tall gray haired man standing there. He had noticed the man when he came into the joint, taking a seat at the bar. He was not a regular at Tranona's, but he could have fitted in easy enough. His tan overcoat had that dull used look. His shirt collar fretted, his tie done in a loose knot. Yet, there was something about the groom of his hair, the clean even-teeth smile, that signaled the man may be a notch above the ordinary trade that came into Tranona's. The guy could be Skyles' hit man.

Jesse felt his heart pumping faster at the thought. Was this the way it was going to be done, the guy sits down, pops him one and leaves? He had been waiting for it. He took a long deep breath. "Help yourself," he said.

"Thanks," the man said, sitting down across from him, keeping his hands on the table encircling a partially filled old fashioned glass. "I'm Redmond Gropt."

"Jesse, just Jesse," he answered.

"Well, Mr. Jesse, nice to meet you."

"Yeah, sure."

Gropt looked about sixty. Soft bags hung leisurely under his light blue eyes, faint lines traced the sag of his jaws. His nose was

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thin and a little long, a patch of dark gray hair sprouted above his top lip. He had an overall fresh scrubbed look, a gentleness, a quality. Maybe Skyles had not sent him.

"I hope you don't mind me barging in on your privacy, but I'm a talkative old coot and I wasn't getting much attention from the bartender."

Tranona was behind the bar mixing a drink, his dark hair pasted flat against his fat skull, his lips set in their permanent frown. "Don't think it's you, that's just his way," he said.

"Oh," Gropt said, his smile leaving. "Well, I haven't time for people, who haven't time for me. My father taught me that a good many years ago."

"Catchy."

Gropt laughed. "Do I really sound that bad, Mr. Jesse? Sometimes I think I love to hear myself more than others care to."

"Naw, it ain't that, Mr. Gropt." Maybe he was not so calm after all.

"Troubles?" Gropt asked, peering across the table.

"The whole world's in trouble."

"Ah, a philosopher. That calls for another drink, and from the looks of your beer you could use a fresh one."

He accepted Gropt's offer. He had never cared for warm beer anyway. Gropt went to the bar, brought back a beer and another old fashioned for himself.

He took a big slug of the fresh brew, it was light and chilled, somewhat uplifting. "Thanks."

Gropt shrugged. "My pleasure. Personally, I never could acquire a taste for beer. I served in the European theater during WW II. German breweries are suppose to be the best in the world. But I gagged everytime I tried the stuff. Were you ever in the service?"

"Yeah, army, three years ago. Did some time in Viet Nam."

"War is a very unpleasant business," Gropt said, taking a sip of his drink. "Did you ever kill anyone?"

"I scored alright on the range during basic training, but I couldn't say for sure if I hit anybody in combat."

Gropt nodded. "Yes, same here. I honestly can't say if I've killed anyone myself. Most of the time I was trying to dig a deeper foxhole."

He was pretty well convinced Gropt was no more than what he appeared to be. But what happened to Skyles' muscle boys? It was forty-five minutes past the deadline and he had not spotted anyone.

Gropt sprung for two more beers and another old fashioned for himself. Their conversation went from compact cars to sports. Gropt was football fan, a real national leaguer, and he only gave the new WFL three years before they crumbled. He did not want to argue with Gropt, not when the free beers were rolling

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in, but they got into a heated discussion over the pros and cons of a new football league.

Gropt sat back, smiling widely. "Well, at least you don't look as down in the dumps as you did when I first came over."

"I didn't know it showed."

Gropt nodded. "Oh, it did, my friend. Yes indeed." Then his face got serious, his light blue eyes narrowing, and he leaned slightly forward. "I've become quite an expert with people and their problems lately. Would a thousand dollars settle your problem, Mr. Jesse?"

He heard it but he could not believe it. Gropt was offering him a grand. He had a way out. He did not have to sit and wait for one of Skyles' boys to bump him off. He could go on breathing, damn. All that running around he had done, the worrying, and now the dough was being offered to him. Why?

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing that you can't do," Gropt said, looking at him directly. "Kill me, that's all."

"What? But I—I mean—" He was fumbling, he could not get the words to come out right. He was not even sure what he wanted to say.

"You've seen combat," Gropt reminded him, "and its certainly more than what the army paid."

"But why?"

Gropt hesitated, sighed deeply. "I'm going to die anyway. I've got cancer. The doctors give me six months, maybe a year. I'd

rather not linger on in a hospital with a bunch of tubes protruding out of me. I have a younger sister, well, she's in her forties. If I die a violent death, she'll collect double on my insurance policy. She's never married, devoted her life to taking care of me. It's the least I can do for her. What do you say?"

The conversation had changed on him too fast. He was confused. He wanted to live, sure. But could he kill to save himself from Skyles? Viet Nam was different, nobody walked up and asked to be shot.

"I've been visiting taverns nightly for the past two weeks," Gropt said, "trying to find someone compassionate enough to help me. I've met many people recently, but you are the first I've asked."

"You'll be doing my sister and myself a favor, Mr. Jesse. Please."

"You said a thousand dollars?"

Gropt smiled again, a warm fatherly smile. "Yes," he said, reaching inside his coat and taking out an envelope. "There are ten halves, of one hundred dollar bills inside."

He picked up the envelope as Gropt slid it across the table to him, examined the contents. The half bills were somewhat soiled and wrinkled. Only one half of Ben Franklin's face was showing, the edges smooth as though cut by scissors. Even though they



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were only half bills, he liked the look and feel of the money. All he had to do was help a dying man.

"How do I get the rest of the dough?"

"When you've killed me," Gropt said. "Do you have a gun?"

"No," he said, he had never owned a gun.

Gropt reached into his pocket again, this time he brought out a package, brown wrapping paper and tied with twine. "Thirtytwo calibre revolver," Gropt explained. "Fully loaded, although I think three shots will do good enough. After it's done be sure to get rid of the gun in some permanent place. I wouldn't want the police to catch you, and wring from you the reason you've killed me. I'm afraid my sister would lose all the insurance in such an event."

"Don't worry," he said. He was already thinking of places to ditch the gun, there were the sewers, the lake and a hundred other spots.

"Good," Gropt said, and he began to relate his plan in detail. At exactly nine-thirty Gropt would be at home in his library, which was his nightly custom. Jesse was to enter the library through the French doors at the side of the house, first making sure he trampled through the freshly seeded flower bed Gropt had been working on all week. Once inside the library with gun in hand he was to turn right,

where Gropt would be sitting at his desk, and fire. Gropt would be wearing a green velvet smoking jacket, and the remainder of the money would be in his left hand pocket.

"The police will surmise that a rather amateurish burglar broke into my home, became frightened at having killed me and ran off. My home is right in the landing path of Crown Field. At nine-thirty there's always a plane overhead. No one should hear the shots and your escape should go without a hitch."

Gropt had put a lot of time in his plan. Even if the police became suspicious of Gropt's sister, he would have the thousand dollars, would be able to pay off Skyles and be in the clear. How could he lose?

He reached across the table. "It's a deal, Mr. Gropt."

They shook hands. "Fine," Gropt said, and he told him his address, having him repeat it over and over until it was memorized. He got enough change from Gropt for bus fare there and back. They both decided he had a better chance of going unnoticed using public transportation rather than a cab. Gropt looked at his watch. "Now I must be going," he smiled. "Thanks again, Mr. Jesse."

He put the envelope of half bills and the wrapped gun in his jacket, continued to sit in the booth as he finished off his last beer. Gropt lived on the other side

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of town, by bus it would take him an hour to get there. He had a little time to spare. He thought of borrowing Tranona's phone and calling Skyles, tell him he would get his money in a few hours. But he knew Skyles would not go for anymore promises. He thought of taking the half bills to Skyles, to show for a fact he was not just stalling. But he dropped that idea too. Skyles would want to know the whole story, and he could not admit murder, not let Skyles have that on him. They had missed him so far, he had to make sure they did not catch up with him until he was ready to pay.

Sweet Tiny came into the joint, brushing against a couple of people who sat at the bar. Tiny worked for Skyles, he was three hundred pounds of concrete that took sweet pleasure in making a guy die slow.

He was out of the booth and heading for the back exit before Tiny made it half-way down the bar. He thought he heard Tiny call him, but he did not take the time to make sure. A black Chevy turned into the alley as he bolted out the back door. The car's headlights switched to brights and it accelerated toward him. He ran across the alley, through the narrow passageway between two apartment buildings, hearing the screeching of tires behind him.

He cut through other alleys, side streets, stopping long enough to unwrap the gun Gropt had given him. The blue-black re-

volver as Gropt had said was fully loaded. It felt cold to him, and a mite heavy. Shooting one of Skyles' boys would not do him much good. But if he had to, maybe he could use the gun to slow them down.

He stayed in the shadows of the Quality Hotel, watching the streets for the black Chevy, only emerging as the west bound Blake Street bus approached. He would transfer at Hemmel Boulevard, taking Hemmel to first Avertue and walk the one block to Gropt's home. Twice on Blake he thought he saw the black Chevy, sliding down farther in his seat to make himself a smaller target. But there was no sign of the Chevy on Hemmel, or First Avenue.

The block that Gropt lived on was full of large stone houses, set back on their property, exposing long lawns. The lawns held a faint coat of green, like the trees which had began to bear leaves for the coming summer. It was a money block, one that had had better times but was not giving up so easily. It was a quiet block, except for the distant sounds of airplanes and an occasional car.

A black sedan turned the corner at the far end of the block and he felt himself stiffen. Had he gotten this far for nothing? He dug into his pocket, his hand tightening about the revolver. The car turned into a driveway disappearing behind a high fence. He relaxed, at least he loosened his hold on the gun, but he knew

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he was breathing heavy, knew his palms and forehead were wet with sweat.

He found Gropt's house, a two-story structure of gray stone, the second floor windows dark. Shrubs lined the walk and nearly surrounded the house, they hampered him as he made his approach to the French doors. He looked about, trying to detect if anyone was watching, then he drew his gun. He heard the plane as he tramped through the flower bed. Three shots Gropt had said. He would try to place them all in Gropt's heart, it would be quicker that way. He did not want to make Gropt suffer, and he did not want to take the risk of simply wounding him.

He stood on the marble slab before the French doors. The doors were ajar, but curtained so he could not see inside. He had doubted he would make it this far, he usually lost the big ones. Now it looked like he was going to wind up a winner for a change.

He looked up as the huge twin engine jet flew overhead, framed against the dark night sky, lights flashing on its wings, flying amazingly slow and noisy. He pushed open the door with his foot, stepped in, turned and fired. The first slug threw Gropt against the back of his chair. The book he had been reading fell to the desk, his glasses slid down his long nose. By the third slug Gropt's glasses had fallen completely off. He sat straight in his chair, his dark eyes

wide, his mouth open, the lines across his clean shaven face more deeply etched, then he fell forward.

His hand tingled from firing the gun. The sound of the gunshots rung in his ears, yet he had a sense of the quiet that now prevailed in the room. He had done it, he had actually done it. He rushed to Gropt laying his gun down and began to search the green velvet smoking jacket.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Jesse."

Gropt was standing in the doorway bordered by a row of bookshelves. The gun Gropt held was much larger than the one he had given him.

He looked from Gropt to the body sprawled on the desk, then back to Gropt.

"My brother, Alfred," Gropt explained with a shrug. "I'm afraid I lied to you earlier. I've never had a sister. Alfred was my only living relative."

He looked at the body more closely now. There was a resemblance, but Alfred's hair was thinner, his face more weathered with age and he did not have a mustache. He had been too hurried to notice the difference.

"Do you still have the money?" Gropt asked.

He tried to speak but his throat was too dry and he only nodded.

"Good. It will save me from destroying my half. Toss it on the desk, will you?"

He hesitated, then dropped the

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envelope on the desk next to the gun.

Gropt was smiling as he stepped further into the room. "You've really done me a great favor, Mr. Jesse. Alfred controlled the family estate, and he wasn't very generous with my allowance. You know how long it's taken me to save a thousand dollars? Well, never mind. By necessity I can't prolong this very much." Gropt leveled his gun.

"No, wait," he said, stalling, trying to think of some way out. "The gun. The police will trace the gun you gave me."

Gropt shook his head. "No, Mr. Jesse. I purchased it from a man with a reputation in selling untraceable weapons. I'm sorry but—"

He dove for the gun on the desk. Gropt fired. He heard and felt the impact of the slug as it tore into his chest. The slug knocked him back onto the bookshelf. It was as though he fell back into a padded wall, he felt completely numb. Gropt weaved hazily before him, the room darkened. He coughed up a laugh as he slid to the floor. What could he expect? He had always been a loser.

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## UNDERSTUDY FOR MURDER

*A good play needs many careful rehearsals.*

*So does a good murder.*

by Jack Matcha



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AFTER THE FIRST game of checkers the old man yawned. I tucked him into the comfortable recliner in the parlor and heated some coffee. We'll have a cup and then play again after a rest, I told him. He was delighted of course. Our daily meetings in the park, our games were the most important things in his waning life.

As I expected, he was soon asleep. He must have been dreaming because a smile played over his pale lips. I was curious about the dream. What does a man dream of on his last day I wondered? Of love? Food? Of a time when he could clench a fist and destroying rivals, seizing any woman he wanted? Is he King Lear at the play's end or Lord Byron? I never found out because a moment later I crushed his skull with a brass candelabra.

I spent the next hour ransacking his apartment, smashing his furniture like Attila the Hun, hurling empty drawers across the room, emptying suitcases, acting like an enraged and frustrated thief searching for valuables. It was vitally important that the resulting mess look like a robbery, a robbery moreover that had ended with murder.

I DECIDED FINALLY that the only way I would get the money Grandfather had was to kill him. There seemed no alternative. In all the years I had lived with him, he had given me nothing. I had to beg for money to go on a date, money to fix my car, money to

buy clothes. That was hard enough to swallow but to be told ten times a day that he had taken me in when my parents died, that I was a stupid fool who could barely stay in college, who was lazy and who would never be able to hold a job—it took all the control I had to keep from strangling him.

Night after night, I would lie awake in bed thinking of all the ways I could kill him. He was in his seventies and lame. I could easily push him over the cliff fifty yards from our house. I could drive a pair of scissors into his back. I could poison the fool by giving him an overdose of the medicine he took for his heart. I could shoot him with the gun he kept for prowlers.

For a long time I merely thought about the ways. I got an enormous pleasure out of planning his death, but I did nothing. The old man was ill with a heart ailment. He had high blood pressure, asthma. He would die soon enough and I was only twenty. I could wait for the four hundred thousand he had in cash and securities.

Then he cut me off.

He had threatened it a long time, his favorite ploy being to tease me with it.

“One more stupid remark and you're out,” he'd bark after a quarrel or “God only knows why I don't cut you out now. It kills me to think of settling over a third of a million on a fool even if he is

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my grandson.”

Then one day after an especially bitter quarrel, he did it. It was after a replay of his insane accusation that I was drunk when I drove the car in which my parents had died a year earlier. I screamed at him again that I had had only three drinks, that my father had distracted my attention by fighting with me about my school grades and that I had swerved into a truck.

No matter, the old man yelled hoarsely at me. I had killed his only child, I deserved to be locked up and I did not deserve a nickel of his money.

Ordinarily I would have turned my back on the wheezing, choleric old fool. I had been through this too often. But I had just lost a date with a girl I really liked because he wouldn't advance me twenty dollars. I was furious. I lost my head and told him to take his money and go to the devil.

“Fine. You'll never see a cent of it,” he yelled.

“Go ahead,” I retorted. “Why don't you throw me out too while you're at it you cheap skinflint. I'll leave tonight, if you want me to.”

“That's too easy Philip,” he said coldly, his jaw hardening. “Too easy, I'll do it my own way. One that will satisfy me much more than putting you out like that. Much more.”

I didn't take his threat too seriously but a few days later I got a call from his lawyer inviting me to

come to his office. He had a message for me and it would be awkward to give it to me over the telephone.

Matthews was obviously embarrassed by the whole thing.

“I don't like this. I like you both. I've known you ever since you were an infant. And I've known John since I worked for him twenty years ago. You have to understand that He's getting a little eccentric as he gets older.”

“Senile's the word.”

“No matter. The point is he's come up with some odd bequests in the past few months and now he has a strange plan for you. He'd like to disinherit you completely.

“Then why doesn't he?”

“He promised your mother to care for you as long as you behaved properly to him and stayed off drugs.”

“I'm not on drugs,” I said, “and I behave fine. I just won't grovel to him and nothing he can do will ever make me.”

Matthews stirred uneasily in his seat. He was a big, tweedy man who hated handling things like this. He spent most of his time golfing with his wealthier clients or playing bridge. My grandfather and he had played together once a week for ten years. Most of the detailed work in the firm he left to several younger assistants.

“I'm afraid he's found a way to make you grovel,” he said softly. “Under his new will, you are

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automatically disinherited if you earn a hundred demerits."

"A hundred what?"

"Just hear me out. A demerit will be earned each time you call him a name or storm out of the house after a quarrel. Two if you scream at him."

"He's crazy," I said. "He's really become senile. When does this nonsense start?"

"It's already started. He's given you fifty demerits to begin with for past fights and he thinks he's been lenient."

"He's crazy! He's the one who starts all the fights."

Mathews played with his gold lighter.

"It's also his money and there's a lot of it. If he doesn't give it to you, he's giving it to a host of schools and museums. I'd hate to see you lose four hundred thousand dollars, a good deal more really if you were to sell that huge house which you don't need. I really think it's worth your while to hold back from now on."

"I'm sure you do," I said.

He flushed deeply at the sarcasm in my voice.

"I know what you're thinking. That under the old will I was in charge of the trust and am losing my fees. I'd be a fool to deny I'd hate to lose it, but I still wouldn't lose as much as you. Will you at least try for both our sakes?"

I COULDN'T. In many ways I was exactly like the old curmudgeon. I had the same hair-trigger temper,

the same pride, the same inability to back down in a fight.

I tried as hard as I could but it was useless. After the first week of biting my tongue everytime we squalled in that dim, airless dining room, I found myself screaming louder than ever. And each day afterwards, as he had ordered, Matthews would call to tell me the new demerit score.

After the first week it went up to fifty-five and then to sixty and a week later to seventy. When it rose to seventy-five, the lawyer called me in to see him again.

"Are you out of your mind?" he began crossly. "You are tossing close to half a million dollars with real estate sales out the window. Can't you swallow your bile for a couple of years for God's sakes. He's a sick man. He hasn't that long to go. Indulge him. Bite your lip, put cotton in your ears when he yells at you. Do anything you can to keep your mouth shut or you'll lose the whole thing before the month's up.

"One thing more," he said quietly. "In case you haven't noticed, jobs are scarce. I know you're thinking of quitting and going on your own. Well they're not snapping up college boys who've flunked out of three colleges in three years. I suggest you take this matter very seriously. Or get ready to live on canned cat food in your friends' attics. You just can't afford to muff this chance."

The talk sobered me up. I knew

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he was annoyed at losing the fees in administering the trust till I was thirty, but what he said made sense. Under the will if I inherited the money I would get a hundred a week allowance till I was thirty and then the whole capital sum. Without it I might end up as a dishwasher. The dean at my present college had already warned me of that when I had flunked three courses a month ago.

By forcing myself to bleed inside, I took Grandfather's insults. I would listen politely while he accused me for the hundredth time of killing my parents, of being stupid, lazy and irresponsible. I took care never to disagree with him, never to cross him in anything. I stopped calling my girlfriends for dates. On the measely weekly sum he gave me all I could do is take them to a movie and a neighborhood movie at that.

It worked for about two weeks. He took it with a stunned silence for that length of time. He stared at me incredulously as I turned the other cheek and smiled every time he called me a name. His eyes widened with astonishment as I continued to sit opposite him, hands in my lap, my face serene. I could see that it irritated him but he was silent.

The week after that his lawyer told me jubilantly that I had won. "He asked me to subtract a demerit yesterday and he said he would do the same every night you held your tongue. But be careful Phillip. He's a bad loser.

The pressure's going to get worse. I know John."

The next evening I saw what he meant. As I sat opposite the old man, beaming at him, he stared moodily at his plate. Suddenly his head shot up and faced me angrily.

"What are you smirking about you idiot? Wipe that grin off your face you stupid murderer. I'm sick of looking at it."

I colored quickly but clenched my fists under the table and froze the smile on my face. It only served to infuriate him more.

"I told you to wipe that smirk off, you stupid fool! That's all you've done for weeks, flashing that painted grin no matter what I say. Who the hell do you think you're fooling?"

"No one Grandfather," I answered meekly, holding my smile.

"You're making fun of me," he insisted.

"I'm not," I insisted.

"Don't lie to me! What do you take me for? No one could take all I've said to you and keep smiling. Don't pretend to be a spineless jellyfish. I know you too well. You're a conniving, contemptible little sneak who'll try anything.

"You think I'm a senile fool and that all you've got to do is take all I throw at you and keep smiling. Grin and bear it till I run dry? Is that it? Well we'll just see how long you last the course. I haven't really started with you."

The next few days were the



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worst I'd ever experienced. His attacks were not only stronger, they touched all bases. He not only called me a murderer, he made fun of everything I cared for: my taste in music, my clothes, my friends. He maligned my girlfriends describing them as nitwits and finally he insulted my manhood. I took it as long as I could but when finally I could not stand it any longer, I exploded.

"You senile snot!" I screamed at him after one of his endless tirades, "let me eat in peace. Shut your stupid face for five minutes. Give your asinine brain a rest from a change or you'll wear it out."

My grandfather beamed. "Thank you grandson. Thank you. That will be three demerits. One for 'senile', one for 'stupid' and one for 'asinine.' Would you care to add anything else?"

I stared at him helplessly, wanting to shout more insults. They died in my throat.

The following night the same thing happened. He screamed insults at me throughout the meal, building up the tension in me until I cracked and fired back. Then he would smile gratefully and make a note for his lawyer. The next week saw a daily replay. I did everything I could to hold back. I would think of the money, I would come to the table primed with tranquilizers or several glasses of wine. It was no good. He knew that if he kept insulting me long enough my boiling point would be reached. I had had a

quick temper all my life. I could not change now.

The attorney was furious. "What the devil's the matter with you," he cried when I went to his office. "Can't you beat him at his own silly game? That's all it is to him don't you see that? A game. You're playing for half a million dollars. Maybe more. For God's sakes control yourself. Another week like this and you may have to apply for welfare. He doesn't have any legal obligation to support you, you know."

I tried harder but it was useless. He knew me too well. He knew exactly what combination of insults would rile me to the point of eruption. I could have taken a flood of insults if I could have left afterwards. I could have endured his noisy diatribes if he had at least allowed me to eat. But I could do neither. He set the rules and I had to obey them. If I ate when he told me to listen or to answer a sarcastic question, I earned a demerit. If I did not look him in the eye, I earned another. If I fled the room in the midst of his diatribe, I got a third. In the end he outlasted me and I hurled my chagrin back at him. Just as he wanted me to.

As the demerits got closer and closer to the hundred mark, I realized at last that there was only one way to save my inheritance.

I had to kill him before the demerits reached the hundred mark.

But how? For several days once the thought came to me, I racked

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my brains for the right way to do it, a way that would leave me safe from suspicion. Then one day I read that some young hoodlums had befriended an old man and then killed and robbed him. They had met him in the park, had done him small favors and won his confidence. One night he had invited them to his home for a makeshift dinner and they had killed him. It was a common enough story in today's urban jungle life and I had read it several times during the past few months. Now it suddenly provided me with what seemed to me a way of removing the old man, a method that would point to some unknown street gang.

A couple of days later, disguised in a wig and dark glasses, I visited several parks and looked for lonely-looking old men. Finally I saw one sitting alone on a bench and went over to talk to him. I gave him some fruit I carried and cigarettes and talk to him for an hour, pretending that I was a painter. The next day I came back and chatted with him again, taking time to sketch the landscape as we sat on the bench.

We continued to meet daily at about the same hour. Each time I would bring him something. Food, reading matter or some cigars. The old man was very grateful. He was a welfare case living on a combination of relief payments and his social security. He had little to do all day and he genuinely looked forward to our

talks as the high point of his day. One day, he invited me to his home. Thirty minutes later I killed him by crushing his skull with a stone he used as a paperweight. I ransacked the room and stole the few dollars in his pocket.

A week later I killed another man I had come to know in a park near my home and over the next few weeks I killed three more. In each cast I was careful to follow the same pattern so that police would see it at once. The rest was easy. The old men I selected as victims were so eager to talk to me that getting to their homes was absurdly simple. They were so grateful for my attentions in fact, that some of them tried to gift me. Naturally I gave them the wrong address. But I encouraged them to think of me as a close friend and to talk to their landladies and neighbors about their youthful companion. Setting a track record was important.

As I expected the papers soon saw the pattern and played it up. The headline, after the second killing read POLICE ON CITY WIDE HUNT FOR GERIATRIC KILLER. I succeeded, in fact, far beyond my wildest expectations. The hunt for the Geriatric Killer became a running story carried daily and I would turn the pages eagerly to find it. It filled me with a curious excitement to read the detectives' guesses about my identity, about my motives in killing the old men, of how and why I had acted in certain ways in each

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murder. It was a feeling that was almost theatrical in its way. I felt as if the police reporters and the investigators were like drama critics commenting on a mystery play in which I was both star and author.

It became so enjoyable in fact that I wanted to continue indefinitely just to see how wild the police guesses were. They were no way near me. Even the descriptions of me varied so much that they could have been several other people.

I was tempted to continue, throwing false red herrings in the police path just to enjoy their consternation when they led to dead ends. But I knew I had to act on my grandfather without delay when he began to worry aloud about the killings and speak of leaving town.

When the old man's doomsday arrived I made my preparations very carefully. We dined late as usual and I took care to bring him his favorite wine having purchased it at a gourmet shop where I talked at length about needing a rare vintage to please my grandfather. It was a nice dinner—his last—I gave him everything he loved. There was duck a l'orange, a mountain of saffron rice, waldorf salad and mousse chocolate. And the wine, a good Chambertin. The meal delighted the old man and he beamed at me as I offered him an expensive Churchill to smoke made of the fine Baja Vuelta leaf he loved.

"I guess I've been wrong about you Phillip," he said, puffing on the cigar. "The death of your mother . . . I guess it just colored everything. I've treated you badly. I'm sorry."

I smiled at him as if in forgiveness and he sighed. "Things are going to be different from now on," he said. "Actually I've already taken certain steps. Oh and you can forget that silly demerit thing. It was a silly notion on my part."

He looked at the white ash of his long cigar and sighed. "Get me the ashtray Phillip," he said.

As I rose to get the heavy cut-glass ashtray behind him, he added. "You know what I'd like us to do Philip?"

I never found out because they were the last words he ever said.

I left the house ten minutes later and went to two Laurel and Hardy movies in a theater close by. When I returned, several hours later I telephoned the police. By the time they arrived, I was almost prostrate.

It was as if I had written their dialogue.

"Chalk up one more for the Geriatric Killer," the detective told his companion. "Everything exactly the same. Everything turned upside down, money stolen, same type of killing and the old man was fond of going to the park and talking to strangers."

I waited a decent interval to call the lawyer. When I did he sounded embarrassed.

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"Come along any time," he said.

"I'll be there in an hour," I told him.

There were two men in his office when I got there and I knew immediately that they were police. One of them removed an envelope from his pocket and began to read from my grandfather's will. It had been made out in final form a month earlier.

"I do not know how it happened Phillip," the old man wrote, "But your behavior changed completely four months ago and I began to see that I was wrong about you. Suddenly, after years of reviling me, humiliating me, hating everything about me, the way I ate, dressed, talked, you changed completely.

"You showed me how much you loved me. Not only did I notice the change. Everyone around us did. How could anyone help but notice it? While some young maniac was murdering old men they met in the parks you used to run to, to get away from me, you were being kind to me and taking every insult I threw at you. I am glad finally to see the wrong I did you and to leave you all my money.

"I owe you an apology for another reason. At first I imagined that the killer of those men might be you. This will show you how angry and how distorted my thinking about you had become. I thought it might be you because whoever killed those poor, lonely

old men, hated the elderly. I thought that perhaps you were killing them in order to ward off suspicion from yourself when you chose finally to kill me. Then I realized that the description of the killer was very different from you. He had long hair and dark glasses. Besides with my then low opinion of your intelligence, I thought you were frankly too dumb, to think up such an ingenious plan."

When the detective stopped reading, he took out some handcuffs and asked me to hold out my hands.

"I don't understand," I said. "What am I charged with?"

"Murder. The old man was wrong. You weren't too dumb."

"Murder," I repeated in astonishment. "Are you crazy? I was in a movie when the killing happened. I can prove it. I have several witnesses, I had nothing to do with his death."

"Not your grandfather's death," the detective said. "One of the other men who was murdered. Perhaps some other as well."

"But why charge me with that? I had nothing to do with those. I never even saw them!"

"Because of what your grandfather said in his will," the other detective said. "And. . . ."

"Wait a minute!" I shouted. "Are you going to listen to the crazy meanderings of a senile fool? You're telling me that you're accusing me of murder be-

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cause he raved some nonsense when he was furious with me?"

"Not quite. There's something else too," one of the police said quietly. "This."

He stooped and picked a small package from the floor near the lawyer's desk. As I stared at him in bewilderment, he opened it. It was a cardboard box filled with fifty and hundred dollar bills. On top of the money was a note addressed to me.

"Dear Philip,

"I know now that your real name is Philip Bassett, not Arthur Moore as you told me. Please accept this money as a small sign of my gratefulness to you in coming to talk to me every day, for gringing me food and cigars and helping me to clean my apartment. They money will do you more good than it will me. I have an incurable illness and not much longer to live. I don't trust banks and I've always kept the money with me. But lately there have been too many robberies around here. I would hate to have the money stolen before I can give it to you.

"I went to the address you gave

me but they did not know you. I decided that you simply wanted to keep your privacy or perhaps you were too shy to let me see your home for some reason. In any case, since I wanted you to have this money, I followed you discreetly one day and discovered where you really live. I also learned your real name from a neighbor.

"I am mailing this because I do not want you to have to undergo the rigmarole and red tape of a probated will. I hope it brings you more happiness than it did me. Perhaps you can use some of it to see an eye specialist who can relieve that eye ailment that compels you to wear dark glasses. Or perhaps you do not even need the money. Your real home seems like a mansion to me though you told me you were very poor and lived in a small room in a boarding house. If you do not need this money, please give it to some deserving charity."

I looked at the letter numbly, barely hearing the detective's words as I finished it.

"Poor fellow. It was found in his bedroom. He passed away before he could mail it." ●

# WHEN DADDY'S GONE

by Margaret Maron



EVERY EVENING BEFORE bedtime, if Daddy wasn't there, Mama used to go around the house and lock up: screens on the front and side doors, another on the back porch and then the kitchen door itself. She tried to set us a good example and pretend like it didn't matter whether they were really locked, but I was eleven and I could tell.

Barefoot like Kessie and me those hot summer nights, she'd wander down the wide-planked front hall. "Thought I heard a car," she'd murmur, peering through the screen as if to see Daddy parking his car beyond the long veranda, while all the time her fingers were fitting the brass hook into its little eye.

Then she'd say something about wanting ice water, but she

didn't fool me. If she was really thirsty, she'd have gone down the front hall into the back one and straight to the kitchen. Instead, she took the long way—through the living room and sitting room, where me and Kessie were watching teevee, and into the dining room to hook the side door. I always heard the bolt slip home on the kitchen door before she opened the refrigerator.

Kessie never noticed. She was only four and still a baby. Small help she'd have been if something happened. Once in a while, when Daddy was gone, I almost wished we lived in a new brick house with such skimpy little windows that we'd need air conditioning. Then we could lock all the outside doors, pull the drapes tight, and nobody could get in or look in.

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Instead, our big old house had eight-foot windows and ceilings so high it'd cost a fortune to air condition, Daddy used to say.

Besides, we're Thorntons and Thorntons have always lived here. It's not the biggest house around, but it'd done us for a hundred and fifty-three years. After Granddaddy died and Daddy married Mama, Grandma Thornton moved in with Aunt Flossie on the other side of the farm. "You're the lady here now," she told Mama, "and you'll fare better without a mother-in-law watching every change you make."

Except that Mama changed nothing. She said it was too big and old-timey to mess with, and she used to plague Daddy for a house like Aunt Flossie's till he told her to shut up about it.

When Aunt Flossie married Uncle Billy, Granddaddy deeded her that little field where cotton used to grow and built her a new brick house on it. Air conditioned, too, but Aunt Flossie talked spiteful once in a while because she really wanted this house. She had no cause to be jealous of Daddy getting it along with most of the land. He was the only living Thornton man, wasn't he? I'd not have been spiteful if Mama'd had another baby like Daddy wanted and it was a boy instead of one more girl like Kessie and me.

But Mama said she wasn't going to ruin her figure having a

yardful of girls just to get Daddy a son; so he treated me like his boy and he put it down in his will that someday this would all be mine.

Of course, if Daddy was there, Mama never locked up and the house felt nice and safe; but when he was gone, she jumped at every little noise and even got me to thinking someone might be hiding in the bushes outside looking in. Mama was a town girl and she wanted Daddy to rent out the farm and live in town after they got married, but he wouldn't. He said she'd never have to help out in the fields, but he couldn't live no place else.

I guess she never got used to not having street lights and car noises all night long. She didn't know that special belonging Daddy and I felt because she was a Riggs and the Riggses never owned a thing till Mama was almost grown. We used to drive around town and little bits of her life were scattered all over the place amongst the different houses they'd rented. Maybe it was her lonesomeness for town noises that made all the night sounds around our house so scary when Daddy wasn't there.

Even with the teevee going, it was creepy and quiet that night. Kessie's eyes were stuck to the screen tighter'n a tick to a hound's ear and Mama wasn't talking to me again. Times like that, me and Mama and Kessie used to have a ball. She taught us all the yells she did when she was

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head cheerleader at the town high school and Aunt Flossie said she could hear us all the way across the farm. But ever since my body started changing and Mama started fooling around with Joe Rex Austin, we seemed to hate each other. That night Mama was still mad at me for getting Daddy mad at *her*, so she just sat there staring at the teevee till it was Kessie's bedtime.

Like always, Kessie whined it wasn't time yet, but Mama turned off the teevee and scooped her up and by the time they reached the stairs, Kessie was giggling. Mama always liked her better tjan me, but I didn't care. Kessie's got her curly red hair and pale skin, but I'm just like Daddy and the rest of the Thorntons—straight brown hair and skin to match.

As Mama came back down, we heard a car drive up outside and a door slammed. I turned on the front light and there was Joe Rex Austin running up the veranda steps. "Are you all right?" he asked Mama. "If that madman hurt you—"

"My father's no madman," I yelled, "and he's never once raised a hand to her!"

"That's enough out of you, Miss Blabbermouth!" said Mama, her green eyes flashing: so I marched upstairs like I was going to bed, but instead I sneaked out to the balcony over the veranda where they sat talking.

Joe Rex said Daddy'd been all

over town that night threatening to smash his head in if he didn't leave her alone. Then Mama said I'd blabbed about her letting him buy us a milkshake in town that day and Daddy'd got in another of his black rages. "Sammy's right, though. He's never hurt me with his hand, Joe Rex; just his tongue. After he says all the nasty things he can think of, he goes over to Henry's Garage and gets drunk. Sometimes he'll spend the whole night there and then the next day, act like nothing happened."

She sounded so sorry for herself that he said, "Dammit, Debby! Why do you put up with it? When're you going to leave Sam and marry me?"

"If only I could!" she said in a soft little-girl voice. They were quiet for a couple of minutes, then she said, "Stop it, Joe Rex! Didn't you know they branded a big T on me the day I married Sam? I'm the Thornton wife and I'm going to live in the Thornton house and keep having Thornton young'uns till one of us dies! He'd kill me before he'd let me go. Especially to you."

I got mad then and even if his voice hadn't dropped too low to hear, I wouldn't have stayed to listen. I stomped downstairs and turned on the teevee. I could've shot them both. Joe Rex Austin may be rich and own all three drugstores in town, but Mama made her choice back in high school and she should've stuck to it.



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Folks still talk about that time and how, almost overnight, Mama went from being a scrawny little carrot-top to the prettiest thing in three counties, with all the boys swarming after her. Joe Rex had the edge because he was in her class in town and captain of the basketball team that she cheered for, while Daddy played for a country school. They were both big and dark and they both wanted Mama so bad they nearly killed each other on the ball court whenever the two teams played.

Joe Rex was the best prospect, him being an only child and Mr. Austin owning two drugstores and dickering for the third; but Mr. Austin squeezed every dollar three times before he turned it loose and he kept Joe Rex on a short rope. Granddaddy Thornton wasn't much better, but he went and died just before they all finished high school. That made Daddy a man and owner of a big farm, while Joe Rex was still an errand boy; so Mama married him right after graduation.

For a time, they stayed friendly. When Daddy'd tease Joe Rex about getting him a wife, Joe Rex would say, "No way, Sam. You stole the pick of the crop right from under my nose and I'm going to wait till you fall under a tractor or somehting!"

They'd all laugh and laugh; but Daddy quit laughing about two years ago and told Joe Rex he wasn't welcome at our place any more. That was right after old Mr. Austin died of a heart attack.

Folks had started talking about Mama and Joe Rex; some of it got back ot Daddy; so when he heard about them meeting in town, he'd get in a black rage and light out for the back room of Henry's Garage. I'll never understand why he didn't take a firm hand just once. Either beat some sense into her or throw her out. He could have been so much happier with her gone. I knew enough about cooking to take care of him and Kessie.

Besides, Mama purely hated living on the farm. She wasn't lazy in the house, but she wouldn't even walk out to the fields to see how the tobacco was growing. She acted like the land had nothing to do with her pretty clothes and new car; and every time Daddy said something about trying one more time for a son, then *she'd* get mad and say she wasn't a brood sow. "You'll have to make do with Sammy. You've turned her into such a tomboy she'll never get a husband!"

As if I cared about a husband! I could drive a tractor, shoot a copperhead through the eye and already knew as much about growing and curing tobacco as most full-grown men; but Daddy wanted a real son and it wasn't fair of Mama.

IT WAS ALMOST AN HOUR before Joe Rex left. When Mama came back inside, I couldn't help thinking how much prettier she looked than those pictures of when she was head cheerleader. I didn't

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mind how all the men still turned around to look at Sam Thornton's wife when we drove into town, but the way Joe Rex looked at her like she was his special Christmas present or something burned me up.

"You going to run off with him like he wants?" I asked. She didn't answer; so I said, "Daddy won't let you. He'll come after you and kill Joe Rex and everybody'll say good enough 'cause you belong to Daddy and you always will whether you want to or not!"

She slapped me hard. "You've got a fresh mouth, Samantha Thornton, and a mind as dirty as your Daddy's! Get to bed!"

I started to answer her back about throwing off on Daddy, but something in her face made me stop.

Lying in bed, I began feeling edgy again. It was the wrong time of month for the moon and the sky had clouded over so that there wasn't even any starlight. Everything was pitch black and all the noises I never heard when Daddy was across the hall were there to plague me. I could hear Mama tossing on their bed in the front room and hoped it was because she was afraid. That made me feel better. Maybe she'd think twice before she gave Daddy cause to get mad again. I hoped she'd lie awake all night feeling scared and sorry.

As I drifted off to sleep, I decided that if Mama was nice to me

the next morning, I wouldn't tell Daddy about Joe Rex being there. It seemed like I'd only slept a minute when I felt Mama's hand on my shoulder and came wide awake. "Sh!" she whispered. "Get up quietly and come on."

"Where're we going?" I whispered back. "What's wrong?"

"Somebody's prowling around out back. I'll get Kessie and we'll sneak out the front and run over to Aunt Flossie's."

"It's probably just an old dog," I said; but I was scared; because you don't have to be born in the country to tell the difference between a dog scrounging for scraps and a man trying not to be heard. "We can't just run off and let him steal anything he wants."

"Will you do what I say just once without arguing?" Mama hissed, getting mad at me again. "There's nothing in this house worth fighting for even if I knew how. I've never shot a gun."

"Well, I have!" I said, getting mad myself. "Daddy didn't teach me how to shoot just so I could kill snakes!"

I slipped away from under her hand and ran tiptoe down the hall. Daddy kept the guns on a rack at the head of the stairs and I grabbed the .22 repeater which was always loaded for emergencies. As I crept down the stairs, I half-expected Mama to call me back and it surprised me that she didn't.

I hated her for being a cheating

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town girl with no backbone and I hated Daddy for being drunk at Henry's Garage instead of home where he belonged; but most of all, I hated whoever thought he could just walk into our house and take whatever he wanted.

It was too dark to see when I reached the kitchen, but I could hear him trying the back door. After a minute, he gave up and started around the house toward the front. From window to window, I tracked him along the length of the house and when he came up the front steps, I was waiting for him.

A big tall man was briefly framed against the dark sky and suddenly I was sure it was Joe Rex, coming to get Mama to run off with him. Red hot rage poured through me. Did he think Thorntons wouldn't keep what was theirs? As his pocketknife ripped the screen beside the hook, I let him have it right through the chest three times.

Slowly, Mama came down the stairs, took the rifle from me and turned on the outside lights. "Why, Sammy," she said in an odd voice; "you've killed your Daddy!"

"You're lying!" I screamed and pushed her aside, but she wasn't. It was Daddy all crumpled up on the veranda, not Joe Rex. And then, by the veranda lights, I saw Daddy's car parked down the drive, right under their bedroom window; and all at once, I knew what Mama had done to

me.

She knelt beside him, still clutching the rifle, and looked like she was about to cry; but she didn't fool me. She'd deliberately tricked me into shooting Daddy; and suddenly, like in a vision, I could see her married to Joe Rex and all of us living in his new house in town while our house stood empty.

That's why when Aunt Flossie and Uncle Billy and the sheriff got there, I told them Daddy woke me up begging Mama to unlock the door. That he'd apologized for getting mad but Mama said she was going to marry Joe Rex. "Daddy said it'd be over his dead body and Mama said that suited her and then she shot him. When I ran down, she tried to get me to take the rifle and say I'd done it because I thought he was a robber breaking in." Aunt Flossie put her arms around me and said, "There, there, honey."

When they took Mama away in the sheriff's car, she was still screaming, "Liar! That's not the way it happened! She's lying!"

That was two months ago. Kessie and me'll probably stay here at Aunt Flossie's till the trial's over, but her brick house is too small to hold us all for long and we'll soon be back where we belong. The house will never be scary again with so many kinfolk around all the time, but it's sure going to feel lonesome with Daddy gone. ●

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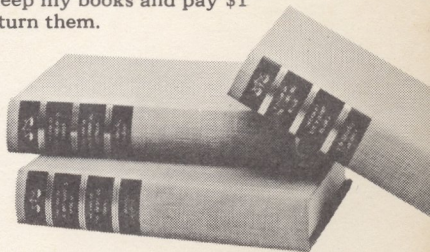
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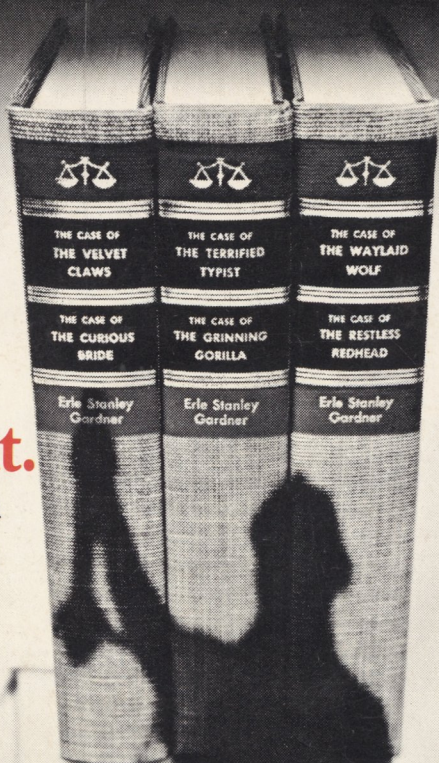
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