

GUILTY

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DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER

BEATNIK WIFE

by DAN MALCOLM

**WALK
AWAY
FROM
DEATH**

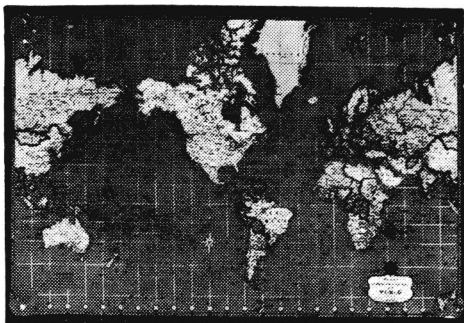
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DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

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CONTENTS

SHORT STORIES

THE NUDE IN THE DEEP FREEZE <i>by James Rosenquest</i>	2
Rigor mortis hadn't set in, the body was on ice	
BEATNIK WIFE <i>by Dan Malcolm</i>	14
When a wife turns beatnik it's bad, man, bad!	
SIDE JOB <i>by Carroll Mayers</i>	23
The killing had to be smooth and slick	
MAD DOG KILLER <i>by Neal Neitzel</i>	29
A human beast, he wasn't fit to live	
I DON'T WANT NO TROUBLE <i>by Ed Chase</i>	39
I had my mitts on some really big money	
ON WITH THE KILLING <i>by Dan Brennan</i>	48
I was a racket man, couldn't wince at murder	
DEATH CAN BE BEAUTIFUL <i>by Russell Thompson</i>	61
Mark had a neat racket. It concerned death	
THE UGLY WOMAN <i>by Michael Zuroy</i>	72
She wanted only one thing — but bad!	
STEPPING UP IN CLASS <i>by Henry H. Guild</i>	84
I wanted to get ahead fast, fast, fast!	
WALK AWAY FROM DEATH <i>by Harrison Smith</i>	97
I was scared but capable of violent action	

NOVELETTE

DEADLY CALL GIRL <i>by Ray McKensie</i>	104
Expensive, she could cost a man his life	

W. W. Scott — Editor

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THE NUDE IN THE DEEP FREEZE

by
JAMES ROSENQUEST

Rigor mortis had not set in
because the body was on ice



DEATH crashed the party.

It was out of place in a party celebrating beauty and talent. Death is talented all right, because it can come to people in so many different ways, and it's always pulling new gimmicks. But it's ugly. As a private investigator, I saw death many times but never got used to it. To me, it's always ugly.

A private eye shouldn't let sentiment interfere with business. But once in a while I have to follow through on something even though there isn't a fee involved. Like when

I happen to be on the scene, and the thing smells so rotten that I want to smash windows to let in fresh air.

So I wound up with a dead girl for a client.

The party started early and would probably end fairly early, because they were working models and needed their beauty sleep. I was on hand as a sort of guard and chaperone, just in case a wolf or two tried to crash the affair. So far, the only guests there were invited ones, and I was enjoying myself thoroughly.

There were some thirty people there. Me. Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Coburn, who owned the Coburn Model Agency. Their two assistants, Charlie Merritt and Ray Evans. The rest were gorgeous young ladies, with a handful of male models—but not enough to give me any competition.

I was surrounded by admiring lovelies, nonchalantly talking about some of the dangerous capers I had been involved in. But it was hard to concentrate, and at the same time try to take in red hair, blonde hair, brunette hair. Blue eyes, grey eyes, brown eyes. Figures

with slim, svelte curves and figures with full-blown—. Well, full-blown where it counts.

So I decided to change the subject and let the dolls talk for a while so I could relax and look into the beautiful faces and watch the inviting lips in motion. Besides, most of them did TV spot commercials and had musical voices, so it would be like hearing lyrics without music—no pianist was needed.

After a while, I got around to some of my pet peeves. "The main trouble with commercials is, they show you girls using something. Which is sort of misleading, because you don't come with the product."

A little brunette winked at me. "Maybe, but if we did, it might make the price too high for most people."

"Well, alright," I conceded grudgingly. "Another thing that annoys me is this inflation that most sponsors seem to be going in for lately. I mean, every product is double something or other, or it gives you twice as much in half the time, or it's two-in-one."

A startling blonde in a skin-

tight gown smoothed it down in places where there wasn't a wrinkle. "Good things often come in pairs," she said, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

I stared at the line where the top of the strapless gown left off and the milk-white skin began. "I get your point," I nodded gravely. "You win the argument." In that kind of debate, what man wouldn't give in?

I let them do most of the talking while I did an inventory, mentally ticking off the girls one by one against a list of names I knew by memory. And then I felt uneasy for the first time. Somebody was missing—Elaine Moran a blonde with a generous body; she should have been in the movies, wearing low-cut blouses and giving her all to an eager world.

Elaine Moran—the second reason, although unofficial—why I was there that night. I wasn't too sure what cooked, although, when she called me earlier in the day, she had hinted at something about unauthorized photos. She ex-

plained that she couldn't say much over the phone; she promised to take me aside at the party and spill the details.

But she wasn't at the party—not yet.

ELAINE made the kind of appearance that no one liked.

Mrs. Coburn had gone to the service porch at the rear of the big house, to get some more ice-cubes. I was in the middle of saying something unimportant, when a blood-curdling scream came hurtling into the living-room, knifing through the low hum of voices and ending in a crash of silence. Some one dropped a highball glass, and several models leaped to their feet. Heads jerked around. Ralph Coburn turned pale and called out to his wife what was wrong. There was no reply but a series of gasping sobs, as if Betty Coburn couldn't get her breath.

Ralph and I dashed for the doorway together, but I made it a little ahead of him and ran down the hallway that led to the rear of the house. Betty was leaning against the door

of the refrigerator for support, still sobbing, staring with bulging eyes at the deep-freeze in one corner.

The top of the big box was open, a small fog of chilled air hovering around the edges. While Ralph Coburn comforted his wife, trying to break through her daze, I decided it might be a good idea to look inside the deep-freeze. Two seconds later, I slammed the lid shut, the chill in my brain deeper than the cold in the box.

Elaine—nude and dead—had joined the party...

The next few hours were a dizzy, confused nightmare. Ralph had taken Betty Coburn into a bedroom and made her lie down until the doctor arrived and put her into a sort of open-eyed stupor with a powerful tranquillizer. Police milled around the grounds and through the rooms like a small army in blue uniforms. Questions were asked and statements taken down, but there wasn't a thing to be learned.

I stood in the center of the living-room, my hands deep in my pockets and my teeth grinding in frustration and

rage. I kept swearing to myself that somebody would pay for this, in what I thought was an undertone, until I became aware that somebody was staring at me. I looked up. My old buddy, detective-sergeant McKesson, loomed before me like the Rock of Gibraltar.

"Well, if it isn't Johnny O'Rourke," he greeted me sourly. "What's the matter, boy? You seem to be taking it hard. Did you lose out on a fee?"

In no mood for kidding, I took it straight. "No, Mac, it's not a fee that bothers me. I considered Elaine a friend."

"And one of many. How good?"

"What?" I snapped irritably.

"How good a friend was she?" He repeated patiently, as if talking to a child.

"I'd give my right arm to have her alive right now. And my left arm to nail the killer. That's how good."

"A trade like that wouldn't make it pay to renew your license next year."

I shook my head. "It would be worth it Mac."

He grunted. "So you do have

feelings, after all. But enough of the chit-chat. What do you know, if anything?"

I closed my eyes wearily and tried to think, and said shortly: "Not much. Not much, Mac."

Looking up again, I saw him fixing me with what was supposed to be a penetrating gaze. "Don't hold back on me, Johnny," he warned.

"Don't give me that withholding-information routine," I muttered, then sighed with resignation. "So all right. She called me earlier today. Said something about unauthorized photos, but wouldn't tell me more until she met me at the party. That's it."

"You mean she might have been working for another agency on the sly, and—?"

I waved away the question impatiently, not waiting for the rest of it. The first cog slipped into place in my brain, in a familiar pattern, and I hoped the rest would start meshing soon until I had the whole thing working.

"Of course not. You know, Mac, she did meet me here, and she did tell me something," I said slowly. I saw his eye-

brows shoot up, and guessed what he was thinking, so I hurried on.

"No, I don't mean that she told me something, in so many words. I didn't see her until Betty Coburn found her in the freezer. But the fact that she's dead tells me that they were the kind of photos a model wouldn't want peddled around."

The shaggy eyebrows went down again, frowning now. "I didn't think she was the type who would pose—you know what I mean."

I tried to rub the sudden headache out of my forehead with a weary hand. "She wasn't and she didn't. I'm sure of that. Somebody must have taken some nude studies without her knowledge or consent, and she found out somehow."

McKesson bit off the end of a small cigar and spat it out. "Got any ideas how and who, maybe?"

"Not yet, but I intend to find out. Mind if I look around some more?"

"Help yourself, but be sure to cut me in."

I nodded, and shuffled off through the crowd of scared,

crying models and busy police. Ralph Coburn was darting about among the models, clucking sympathetically, like a mother hen among her chicks. Charlie Merritt fumbled nervously with a shirt sleeve while he answered another round of questions, and Ray Evans was draining a glass with trembling hands. Betty Coburn was probably fast asleep by now—if they had a new tranquillizer that powerful.

A male model whom I disliked, a pretty boy named Rocky Shore, was fumbling in his wallet for something, and a wad of large bills fell out. He retrieved them quickly and stuffed them back in. I made a note of it.

WHEN I got back to the service porch, I had it to myself. The body was gone. The police photographers had taken their pictures—and few people would ever see *those*. The fingerprint men had done their stuff and left. So now the corpus delicti was established—which meant that any fool could see that a crime had been committed. So now all we had

to do was find out why, and more important: Who?

I inspected the scene thoroughly this time, searching every square inch of floor. I even looked inside the refrigerator. I forced myself to look inside the big freezer. I got down on my hands and knees.

Then I found something. I stood up slowly, turning it over in my fingers, then palmed it and put it in my pocket. I wasn't sure what it meant, if anything, but I was sure going to find out.

On my way out, McKesson looked at me questioningly, but I shrugged and held out my empty palms, and made a fast exit.

The next day turned out to be busier than I expected it to be. A call on McKesson just to verify the cause and time of death: Elaine had been struck heavily on the back of the head, then placed in the freezer. She might actually have been alive but died of suffocation, never regaining consciousness.

The thought made me even madder. The time of death could not be determined, be-

cause the freezing of the body threw everything off schedule, including old *rigor mortis*.

The vicious brutality of the murder started me thinking even harder, and I was busier than a bee on benzedrine. The next stop was the Coburn Agency.

The secretary, whose face was blotchy under heavy make-up, ushered me into Ralph Coburn's office—a swanky setup, but I didn't have time to admire the furnishings. I threw myself into a chair and regarded Ralph somberly. His forehead was creased and he looked sick, as if he had a hangover, and I couldn't blame him.

I had tentatively crossed him off my list of suspects because I knew him fairly well. Besides which, he was making enough from commercial photography without having to need a side-line in pornography. So I didn't beat around the bush.

I asked, "Did Elaine ever say anything to you about some nude pictures?"

He shook his head sadly. "No, but I wish she did. No telling how many other of our

models are being sold under the counter right now. Something like that, cropping up some day when one of our girls has hit the jackpot in Hollywood, might make it very embarrassing for her."

I thought that over—another angle. "They might not only be selling under the counter now—some of them might be held in reserve for the future, for a little blackmail. Did you think of that?"

Ralph Coburn wrung his hands, a gesture of distress and helplessness. "Good heavens, no! I suppose it's possible." Then he seemed to remember something, and reached into a drawer and drew out an envelope and handed it to me.

The envelope bore the message, "To be opened in case of emergency." Lifting the flap, which had already been opened, I drew out a photo of Elaine. She was completely naked and in the act of bending over. It would have been appetizing under other circumstances.

"It came in the mail this morning, in another envelope," Ralph volunteered. "Sergeant McKesson has seen it. He wants it as evidence, but said

to hold it for a while in case you dropped in."

"Thoughtful of him," I muttered, and returned the photo quicker than I would have done if she were still alive. "By the way," I added, "is everyone at work today?"

"Some of the models are home, with cases of the jitters. Some have no assignment today. My wife is at home in our town apartment, under the care of a nurse. We closed the bill house temporarily."

"Mind if I look around the studio?"

He had no objections, so I went over the place with a fine-toothed comb, as they say, ignoring the curious glances. Finally I found it. In a sort of large supply closet next to the women's dressing room, a wood support with a clothes hook on it slid aside in a hidden groove and revealed a small hole, but a hole big enough to let somebody take pictures with a miniature camera. This narrowed down the field.

I returned to the office and asked Coburn if he could give me a key to the closed bill house. He fished it out and handed it to me.

"Thanks," I said. "I don't expect to be using it until tonight though, after you close shop. There are some other errands first."

TIME went fast. I checked on some addresses. Men's addresses. A few skeleton keys got me into the apartments, as nobody was home to let me in. I searched carefully, but came up with a big zero. But I had found matchbooks in one of them, from a dive in the downtown area, and it gave me an idea. I got into my car and barreled down the Freeway, turning off on Spring Street.

I parked and walked a block to a big magazine and paper stand presided over by a crippled, sixty-year old news "boy." We were friends, and he had given me some valuable tips in the past. So we chatted for a while, and then I got to the point.

"Joey," I asked, "what's new in sexy photos lately?"

He scratched the stubble on his chin. "Don't handle the stuff myself, of course. But you might try the *Pot of Gold*, over on Third Street."

I bought a paper with a five-dollar bill and walked away without the change. It was cheap enough for the information.

The "Pot" was a cheap joint, reeking of cheap draft beer and cheap bar bourbon. There was a cheap-looking bartender, so I got what I wanted with another five. I reeled off three good descriptions of three men, and on the third one he nodded and said the guy came in fairly often.

"He always sits at the same corner table. Always alone. Then after a while he gets company. Funny thing. The other guy orders drinks, then walks out a few minutes later. I could swear that they leave a wad of change—I mean bills, not small change—and the fellow you described pock-ets it."

"Ever see anything change hands? Like photographs?"

"Nope. Told you all I know." The bartender walked down to the far end and began to make a project out of wiping the top of the bar with a rag. I knew that was all I could get out of him, but it was enough.

It was getting dark when I returned to my flat. There were still two calls to make. The first was the town residence of the Coburns. Ralph answered in a taut voice. I had one question: What made Betty Coburn look in the freezer last night? Simple enough—they hadn't used it in months. His wife thought she heard another hum over and above the one made by the refrigerator when she went back to the service porch. So she checked to see if the freezer was on, and why. And found Elaine.

I thanked him and said I wouldn't be needing the key after all, and would mail it to him. The first part was a lie, because I had a hunch, and would use the key after all—but nobody had to know that.

On the second call, there was no answer. I let it ring twenty times to make sure, then hung up with grim satisfaction. Strapping on the holster and the .45, I donned my coat and ran downstairs and out back to the garage. The car had wings as I urged it up the winding roads to the hill house. I thought I saw a small

light go out somewhere inside, as I braked the car in front of the house and leaped out. I checked the rear of the lot to make sure, but there was no other car in sight.

Of course not. He would have parked it far away, in a secluded spot, and walked to the house.

Using Coburn's key, I let myself in noisily and turned on all the lights after pulling the shades down. I walked around the living room with heavy feet, whistling, as if I had no idea that I had company.

My right hand was inside my coat, feeling the comforting metal of the .45. I looked in every room, first peering through the cracks of each open door to make sure I wasn't ambushed. I didn't miss the johns, even pulling back shower-curtains. Where the hell was he? Or had my hunch been all wet?

Gloomy, I returned to the front room and stubbed out a half-smoked butt in a clean ash-tray. *Clean?* I looked again, and really saw the other butt for the first time. It was out alright, but that wasn't the

point. After last night's murder party there should have been one of two things: either the trays should be full, or else they would all be clean if the Coburns or some friends had done some housecleaning before the place was locked up.

All the trays were clean except this one—and it now contained two stubs. Mine, and some one else's, here, *now*.

Whistling a low, off-key tune, I strolled casually to the service porch and stared at the big freezer. Then, with quick steps I crossed to the far corner, and turned the handle that fastened the lid down. After all, I didn't actually *know* that there was somebody inside it. I strode away fast, because I didn't want to hear any pounding noises.

But as I walked through the big house toward the front door, my steps got slower. And when I glanced into a hallway mirror, and saw the look in my own eyes, I knew it was all wrong. I found a telephone and dialed a number. Then I went back to the service porch, opened the catch on the

freezer, and threw back the lid.

I stood back with my .45 in one hand. "OK., Charlie," I said in a soft voice, "you can come out now."

The .45 and I kept him company until the police came.

McKESSON fingered the small brown leather button I gave him, shaking his head. "I don't know how they missed it," he growled, red-faced. "Somebody is going to get chewed out!"

I shrugged. "Don't take it hard, Mac. Like I said, it was wedged all the way into a crack in the wall behind the freezer, and it's the same color exactly. I wouldn't have found it myself if I didn't come back tonight"—which was sort of stretching the time-element, but no harm was done.

McKesson was already briefed on my leg-work in the studio and at the *Pot of Gold*, and was a little annoyed that I hadn't told him earlier, but he had no real beef.

"You see," I explained, lighting his cigar for him, "since I was sure that Elaine would never voluntarily pose

for nude pictures, I guessed that they must have been taken in the agency studio on the sly. Like when some model had to make a complete change—getting into a bathing suit, for example."

McKesson blew a cloud of blue smoke, and smiled wryly. "So then you found the peephole in the storage room."

It was my turn to be surprised. "You knew about that?"

"Naturally. Or do you still have the notion that the police just bumble through every case?" He snorted disgustedly. "Also, for your enlightenment, we deduced that Charlie Merritt must have arrived at the hill house first, so as to meet with Elaine by arrangement and put the first bite on her. She put up an argument and he conked her. He realized that if the body was found, all dressed up, we would know that she arrived before the party started."

Nodding, I broke in. "What I figured. So he stripped her naked and put her in the freezer, which had a double purpose. It served to hide the body until he could get rid of

it. By turning on the freezing mechanism, he fouled up the time of death." I frowned. "But how did you settle on Charlie Merritt?"

McKesson grinned at me. "We did some searching, too. But legally..." I avoided the sharp glint in his eyes. He went on, "There was nothing in his apartment—as you probably know, Johnny—so we searched his car. We found her clothes. Merritt removed the back seat and stuffed them in there and replaced the seat. We also found a stack of nude photos, same place."

"Never thought of that," I murmured. "Well, then I guess that makes us even up."

"That it does, Johnny. We found the clothes and the photos. You found the button, and remembered seeing Charlie Merritt fooling with his coat sleeve at the party. He realized where he must have torn it off, and came back to look for it—and hid in the freezer when he heard you come in."

"Some gall," I ground out bitterly. "Hiding in the same place where he hid Elaine's body!" Then I thought of

something else. I almost remarked that I never did find the jacket with the button missing, but caught myself in time. "Where did you find his coat?"

McKesson chuckled. "Oh, *that*. It wasn't in his apartment. We checked at the dry-cleaner's also—no dice. Guess where it was?"

The light dawned on me. "In his car, under the back seat?"

"Right." McKesson laid a hand on my shoulder. "A little fatherly advice, Johnny. We appreciate your help—but next time you find a clue, don't sit on it for twenty-four hours. Check?" He lumbered off without waiting for a reply.

So Charlie Merritt had tried to think of everything, but the fickle finger of fate still put the tag on him. I was very happy that I had decided not to play judge, jury, and executioner all in one.

It would take longer, but the State would take care of Charlie, after he sweated for a while.

Besides, a gas chamber is just as stuffy as a freezer.

THE END

BEATNIK WIFE

by DAN MALCOLM

When your wife turns beatnik it's bad, man, real bad!

IT was a warm night, and people were keeping their windows open. The sound of the party came filtering down from the fourth floor of the old apartment building. In the street below, Dennis stood looking upward, listening to the wild shrieks of laughter, the

shouted obscenities, the dizzy wail of jazz.

He scowled in disgust and contempt. Another beatnik party! Life was one long ball for them. They had no idea of responsibility, of obligations. They held a job for a few weeks, made eighty or a hun-



dred dollars, and then blew it on cheap wine and wild parties.

Maybe Marie is up there at the party, Dennis thought.

He had been out since coming home from work, looking for his wife. Actually, she had vanished the day before. When he got home from the office, at ten after six, their apartment had been empty and there was no note, no word at all.

It wasn't the first time it had happened, in the three months of their marriage. She had stayed out all night twice before. So yesterday Dennis had fixed a TV dinner for himself and had waited for her to come home, and by quarter to eleven he had gone to bed, alone.

She didn't come in during the night. She wasn't there at breakfast-time. He had gone to work, punctually, methodically as always, expecting to find her in bed and asleep when he got home. But, when he came in at his usual time of ten past six, the apartment was still empty.

It was serious, now. She had left some time Tuesday morning or afternoon, and here it was nine o'clock Wednesday night. Marie had never stayed away so long the other times.

Dennis had thought of calling the police. But he was afraid they would laugh at him. What could he tell them?

"My wife has disappeared, officer. No, I don't think she's been kidnapped. She just goes off to have wild parties with her old friends. This is the third time she's done it since we've been married. The third time in three months. Can you help me find her? She's at some beatnik party someplace near here."

No, he couldn't tell the police that. They'd laugh their heads off. Dennis hated to be laughed at. He hated to be a figure of fun.

The whole marriage was a mistake, he thought.

He looked up once again. A head was thrust out of one of the windows. There was a retching sound.

Vomiting out the window, Dennis thought. *How disgusting can they get?*

He wanted to go upstairs and find out if Marie was there. But he felt foolish about it. He didn't know if this was the right building or not. He couldn't remember, any more. All these shabby old houses looked alike.

After a moment of hesitation,

he walked on down the block, still hoping he'd meet Marie.

IT was the sort of marriage that had been doomed right from the start. Dennis had been twenty-seven, a book-keeper, a quiet, neat man who had lived by himself for many years without feeling the need of much feminine companionship. He had met Marie one night at the theater; they had each come alone and found themselves sitting next to each other, and began to talk.

She was only nineteen, a slim blonde girl with flashing blue eyes, a stunning figure, and a fondness for wearing old clothes. In a bolder mood than usual, Dennis had asked her out after the show. They had had a few drinks in a Greenwich Village bar, and then she had suggested going home with him.

He would never forget the first physical shock of seeing her naked body, with its full, high breasts, slim hips, flawless legs. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

Within a week, he had asked her to marry him. And to his amazement she accepted.

They were married at once,

in a civil ceremony at City Hall. He had few friends, and none were invited to the wedding. Some of Marie's friends came. They were a wild bunch, all of them badly in need of shaves and haircuts and baths. Bohemians, beatniks. Dennis didn't like them and they didn't seem to like him much.

But he didn't care. He had Marie. She moved into his little apartment and for a few weeks Dennis was tremendously happy. Then things started to get difficult. She was sloppy, for one thing, always leaving books and socks all over the apartment. And her friends tended to drop in now and then at odd hours.

There were conflicts. Dennis liked to come home from work and have a good meal and watch television and go to bed early. Marie preferred to sit in coffee shops till all hours, or to go to parties.

He went to a few parties with her, but he hated them, hated the whole bohemian atmosphere. She took to going alone, just as she had in the days before he had met her. He didn't mind too much.

He was afraid to criticize her

because he didn't want to drive her into leaving him. She meant too much to him. So long as she was there to share his bed when he wanted her, he didn't mind if she spent her time in the coffee shops and let him stay home to watch TV.

He didn't even object when she stayed out all night the first time. It hurt him, but he kept quiet about it. He was even willing to put up with that.

He didn't raise a fuss the second time, either. It was more than a month after the first. She didn't offer any explanations, and he didn't demand any. He was satisfied just to have her around, even if it meant sharing her with others occasionally.

But staying away two days in a row was too much, Dennis thought. He had to find her. He had to get things straightened out with her. After all, she had to give up some of her bohemian ways, now. She was his *wife*, after all.

HE walked down to the end of the block, turned, walked back the way he came, working up his courage. Maybe she was at the party, maybe

she wasn't. But he had to find out. He couldn't just walk the streets all night hoping she'd appear out of thin air.

The building was old and dimly lit and smelling of garbage inside. Dennis went up the stairs slowly, apprehensively. It wasn't hard to find the party. There was an open door on the fourth floor, and he could see the partygoers inside, the men with beards, the women with long pony-tails and faces devoid of makeup, and everybody wearing beat-up floppy old clothes.

Dennis walked in. He felt uncomfortable, in his good suit and tie. He had gone straight out after work, and these were his business clothes. He looked as out-of-place in this avant-garde gathering as a knight in armor would have been.

But nobody seemed to take notice of him. They laughed and joked and hugged, and ignored him. He looked around. There was a couple on the couch, and the girl's blouse was open.

There were others lying on the floor in drunken stupors. Half a dozen gallon jugs of cheap wine were arrayed on a

nearby table, and people were helping themselves liberally.

Dennis felt as though he had wandered into a madhouse. Half-naked girls on the couch, drunken men vomiting out the window. Two teenage girls were necking with each other on a couch in the corner, while an effeminate-looking young man watched with interest. It was practically an orgy, seven different kinds of orgy all at once. And the air was nauseating, with its stink of cheap wine and stale perspiration. He couldn't stand it much longer.

He walked up to a stocky, curly-headed young man with a full beard, who was temporarily by himself.

"Excuse me," Dennis said.

"Yeah, dad?"

Dennis moistened his lips. "I'm looking for a girl named Marie."

"Got lots of chicks here, dad."

"One named Marie," Dennis persisted. "Blonde—pretty—Marie Dennis—that's her married name—it used to be Marie Richards—"

"Don't know her, friend. Go get yourself some sneaky pete and have a ball. See you, man."

He went careening away. Dennis shook his head. She wasn't here, he was sure of it. He had to get out of here fast. He glanced around, searching for her in the beatnik maelstrom. Arms and legs and beards, bare breasts and swishing pony-tails and cigarette ashes and empty glasses, filth and disorder and sweat —

"Excuse me," he said to a tall, solemn-faced girl with straw-colored hair and a well-filled blue sweater. "I'm looking for a girl named Marie—"

"That's me, Sam."

"No. A different Marie," Dennis said. "She's short and blonde and—"

"I'm tall and blonde. What's the matter with me, huh, Sam?" Suddenly the girl grabbed him, thrust her breasts against him, wriggled her hips obscenely, stuck her lips against his. He tasted her mouth, cigarette-tasting, wine-tasting, and then after a stunned moment he recoiled as though he had just embraced a red-hot column of iron.

"What's the matter, dad?" the girl asked. "You don't swing my direction?"

"I'm looking for Marie Den-

nis," he muttered, shaken by the intimacy of the embrace with the beatnik girl. He turned quickly away from her.

He started for the door.

JUST as he neared the exit, someone cut in front of him—a lean, beady-eyed man in a torn white T-shirt. He looked familiar, Dennis thought. One of Marie's friends that he had met some months back.

"You say you were looking for Marie Dennis?" he asked belligerently.

"Yes! Yes, do you know where she is?"

"That all depends," the lean man said. "I know you. You're her husband, aren't you?"

"That's right." Dennis stared at him hopefully. "She hasn't been home in two days. I've got to find her. I've got to."

"Well, we'll see what we can do." The lean man suddenly shouted for quiet. His voice was amazingly loud. He boomed, "Hey, all you creeps, this here is Marie's husband."

Somebody laughed. Dennis felt his face turning beet red.

The man said, "He's looking for Marie. Seems she hasn't been home in a couple days."

More laughter.

"I'll say she hasn't!" somebody chortled.

The lean man went on, "He wants to find her real bad. Should we tell him where she is?"

"Yes! Yes, tell him! Tell him, Joey!" The shouts echoed from every corner of the room. Dennis felt dazed by the clamor, by the snickers, by the odd looks he was getting.

The lean man named Joey approached him and said in a low voice, "Okay, dad, they've decided to let you in on the news. Your wife's in the next room. Right down that way, past the john. You see the door?"

"Yes."

"Okay. She's right in there, pal. Right in there in that room."

Dennis didn't know whether they were joking or not. Maybe this was all a game they were playing on the necktie-wearing square. It was a big gag, and everybody was in on it but him.

Still, they had said Marie was in that room. He couldn't assume they were joking. He would have to go take a look.

Slowly, he inched his way

across the crowded room and into the foyer. He passed the bathroom and came to a second door. It was closed.

He knocked gently.

"Go on, just open it!" someone shouted raucously behind him.

Dennis turned. They were all watching him. Twenty, thirty people staring.

He opened the door.

He looked in.

Marie was there, all right, and there was a man with her. Making love to her.

DENNIS' first impulse was to slam the door shut and flee. But there were too many people watching him, too many people ready to laugh and sneer at him if he did anything ridiculous.

He walked in.

"Marie," he said.

She didn't look up. The man who was with her swivelled around and said, "Can't you see we're busy?"

"Get away from her," Dennis said thinly. "She's my wife."

"Okay, okay, take it easy, pal. Everybody else had their turn with her. You might as well give me another couple

minutes and let me get my fun first."

"Get away from her!" Dennis cried. It was a high shriek that astonished him. Evidently it surprised the man, too. He sprang up from the bed.

Dennis approached the bed. Marie was lying there, a kittenish smile on her face. She was dead drunk.

"Marie, don't you know who I am? Look at me! I'm your husband!"

She opened one eye a little wider. "Imagine that," she said. "Hello, hubby dear. Come to have some fun too?"

"Put your clothes on!" he blustered.

"Don't carry on that way," she said, grinning. "I was just having a little fun."

"Some fun. You've been here since yesterday, haven't you?"

"Sure I have."

Dennis gaped. They were all watching, watching his humiliation. He snarled in anger and grabbed at her, trying to hit her. But she sidestepped him. Drunk as she was, she managed to elude him.

She laughed prettily.

"Mad at me, sweetie-pie?" she taunted. "Mad because I

came here for some fun? I been making all my old friends happy. You want me all to yourself? That isn't nice, you know. When I can make so many people happy."

Dennis uttered a strangled sound of rage. He grabbed at her, started to chase her. It was a wildly comic scene, the outraged husband chasing his naked wife round and round the bed while dozens of amused onlookers watched. She reached the head of the bed and stuck her tongue out at him. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly from her exertions, but she could still laugh mockingly at him.

"Why did you marry me if this was what you wanted to do?" he asked her.

"For a joke, silly! It was fun being married, keeping house! But it's all over now. I'm tired of you, you goddam square! Tired! Tired!"

He leaped at her again. This time he caught her, grabbed a wrist, pulled her toward him. He tried to get his hands around her throat. He was wild with rage. He wanted to throttle her, to kill her for what she had done to him.

"Let—go—of me—" she grated. "Hurting me—"

"I'll strangle you!" he cried.

HE tightened his grip on her. He half expected that one of the beatniks would intervene, pull him away from her. But no, no, they were still watching, standing by, taking in the fun. It was all the same to them whether wife cheated husband, whether husband strangled wife.

Marie brought her knee up suddenly. It erupted into Dennis' groin with savage fury. He let go of her and went to his knees, clutching himself in agony. She stood above him, laughing at him even as she rubbed the bruises he had made on her lush body.

"Marie—" he mumbled.

"Goddam creep," she said. "Busting in here trying to rough me up. Who the hell you think you are?"

"Your husband." The words came out as a barely audible croak.

"You think you own me, huh? Well, get this, creepo: I'm staying here till Saturday. I want you to apologize, now.

Apologize for causing all this fuss. Apologize for trying to hurt me."

He looked up, anguish contorting his face. She stood above him, naked, desirable. He wanted to shield her from all these eyes looking on.

He realized he still loved her. No matter how she degraded him, he would come crawling back for more.

"I—apologize—" he said hoarsely.

She looked down. "That isn't enough. Here. Kiss this. Then go home and wait till I'm ready."

She had extended her foot to him.

He stared at it, at the tiny toes, the delicate instep. No, he thought. She wasn't going to make him do it. Wasn't going to force him to kiss her foot in front of fifty strangers, here as she stood naked above him. It was too humiliating. She couldn't do it.

"I—won't—"

Snickers from the onlookers.

"Kiss it," she said. "Or I won't ever sleep with you again. I'll parade around the house naked and scream if you try to

touch me. Kiss it!"

He rebelled. He had been driven too far, humiliated too much tonight.

I've got to get out of here, he thought.

He rose wildly to his feet. Marie stepped to one side. He raced forward.

Toward the open window.

Out into the night. The only escape from this mocking girl who had enslaved him. Head first, four stories down.

There was a long silence. Then someone laughed and pointed toward the open window.

"Hey, dig that cat!" someone yelled. "Musta thought he was Superman! Up, up and away!"

"Like crazy, man!"

"He musta really been stoned!"

Marie giggled. She walked toward the bed. "Up, up and away!" she repeated. "Like crazy, man. I knew he was a kook. All the time. Takes a kook to do a kookie thing like that. Come on, who's next to have some fun?"

The party went on, far into the night.

THE END

SIDE JOB

The hit just had to go slick and smooth for a good reason

by CARROLL MAYERS

THE dame was a redhead, wearing a tight black dress with a revealing bodice. She was probably on the wrong side of thirty-five, but her skin was flawless, her thrusting figure vibrant. As she eased onto a bar stool with a flash of sleek nylon, there wasn't a male eye in the place cocked anywhere else.

"I'm looking for an Edward Lasco," she told me quietly.

It was only a little after nine on a slow, rainy night. The bar wasn't crowded and I could have given an immediate answer. But I stalled, rinsing out a shot glass, while I covertly studied her. If she meant a potential job for Eddie, he might want my opinion.

"I beg your pardon?"

Her hazel eyes sought, held mine. "Edward Lasco," she said. "I understand I can contact him here." The "here"



conveyed just a hint of distaste as her gaze flicked about briefly.

I gave the bar a hard swipe. My spot wasn't the Ritz, but it was neat and clean and had a nice take, which the Syndicate let me keep. Plenty of wise-acres will tell you the Syndicate has no heart, that nobody ever pulls out. All I know is, after only twelve years service—when my heart began acting up—the Syndicate let me quit, financed the bar one hundred percent. Sure, once in awhile they'd use my place for a numbers drop for a month or two, or maybe a small book, but mostly it was all mine, with no strings.

The dame completed her survey, brought her gaze back to me, waited. Irritated, I said shortly: "I don't place the name."

A grinning Marine sergeant took the stool next to her, sharp eyes expectant. She glanced at him coolly, then told me: "A daiquiri. Please bring it over." Leaving the bar, she crossed to one of the booths.

The sergeant shrugged off the snub, watching the smooth undulation of svelte hips. I

served him a rye highball, fiddled with the TV, still stalling the dame. Finally, I built her drink, took it across. Regardless of my irritation, I knew I had no call to obstruct Eddie from picking up some extra dough, if that was what the red-head represented.

And there was another point for the Syndicate; they liked Eddie, were well satisfied with his work. So long as he took care of the big jobs that came up periodically, they had no objection to his turning a G or so for himself if the occasion presented. Don't ever run down the Syndicate to me.

The dame smiled faintly as I served her. "You're positive you don't place Mr. Lasco?"

"Who's asking about him?"

She sipped the daiquiri. "I am."

"I should've known."

My sarcasm at her name skirting was wasted; she relaxed in the booth, eyeing me calmly. "I've made certain inquiries. Discretely. As I said, I understand Mr. Lasco may be contacted here."

I glanced back; the bar was filling up. I said shortly: "He's not here. You want to wait,

I'll tell him if he shows."

Those hazel eyes were steady over the glass. "Thank you."

For the next hour, aside from ordering another drink, the dame ignored me. She lounged back, discouraged a couple of pickups, watched the TV.

Eddie came in around thirty. He was a good-looking kid, with lean features, sombre black eyes. Only twenty-three, he'd achieved his special niche in the Syndicate in just four years.

That was what I admired about Eddie. When you're fifty and going nowhere special, you've got to hand it to the young bloods who are. Sure, I'd had to drop out after only twelve years, but even before quitting I'd been just an average muscle; I'd never had Eddie's ambition and drive.

When the Syndicate set up my bar, Eddie'd been one of the neighborhood gang, but he'd done more than hang around. Before long he was running some numbers, shoving a little H. At nineteen, the Syndicate took him on in earnest. He'd risen fast, become real slick at his job. And he'd climb higher.

"Don't look around," I told

Eddie as I drew him a beer, "but the redheaded dame in the booth's been asking for you."

He took a swallow. "She say who she is?"

"No."

Eddie grunted. "Job?"

I nodded. "Could be."

He drank again, "I'll check her."

A bleached blonde along the bar called for service. I moved down, satisfied to see Eddie finish his beer, then leisurely strolled into the men's room. When he returned, I knew he'd carefully scrutinized the dame both going and coming.

"I've seen her," he told me. "Or her photo. But I can't tab her."

"She can be tailed."

He grinned at me. "Let's have another beer."

A few minutes later, Eddie left. Shortly afterward, the dame signalled me. I went over.

"Apparently Mr. Lascio hasn't come in."

"I didn't say he would."

She drew two bills from her purse. "I can't wait any longer," she said, swinging stunning legs from the booth. "Perhaps tomorrow night?"

I picked up the bills. "Come in anytime," I said.

THE dame didn't come back the following night, but Eddie dropped by around eleven, quietly filled me in. "I knew I knew that redhead. I hung around, tailed her to the Beverly Arms on Seventy-ninth, checked her out afterward. She's Elaine Waldron. Mark Waldron's the diamond magnate."

I knew the old boy; he'd been in all the supplements. Upper brackets, socially and financially, with a swank salon on Madison. A hard-bitten character, pushing sixty, close with a buck and inordinately proud—probably damned jealous—of his recently-wed and considerably younger wife.

I said, "Go easy, kid."

He shrugged. "I'm not going anywhere until she spells it out." He finished his beer, tossed me a dollar. "Maybe tomorrow night."

Eddie called it. The following night Elaine Waldron came in just before nine, took the same booth. Eddie showed a quarter-hour later.

When Eddie braced the bar, caught my eye, I nodded slightly, went on with my work. At the first lull, I walked across to the dame. Eddie sauntered after me.

I said, "You were asking for Edward Lasco?"

If she recognized Eddie from the first night, she gave no sign. Crushing a cigarette, she smiled at him briefly. "Sit down, Mr. Lasco."

Twenty minutes later, Elaine Waldron left. Eddie hung around until closing, watching TV. As I swabbed down the bar he remarked casually: "It's a big one." He tapped his pocket. "Two G's now, two after. And one for a bonus."

"You want to tell me any more?"

He grinned. "I usually do. The dame was on the make when she married Waldron. Now she's heated up with some younger talent. Struggling artist type. They're already playing house. She wants Waldron's dough and the business. And she thinks the old boy's getting suspicious. That's why the bonus."

"For quick action?"

"Right. For that kind of

dough, it'll be damned quick."

I said, "Watch yourself, kid."

Eddie's grin spread. "Relax. It'll be clean." Then he tossed a bill on the bar for the beers he'd had. "See you," he said.

After that, I didn't expect Eddie to drop around for awhile. Usually, he kept out of circulation when he was setting up a job. Two nights later, though, he came in early, took a stool at the end of the bar.

I drew his Schlitz. "Everything okay?"

He nodded, smiling. "Perfect." He took a swallow, turned his attention to the TV.

I didn't press Eddie. Nobody did. As a matter of fact, trade picked up immediately afterward, and I practically forgot about Eddie—until Mark Waldron came in.

I recognized the old boy instantly from those newspaper articles. Thin lips set, sharp eyes probing, he didn't approach the bar but settled into the farthest booth.

I shot a quick glance at Eddie, caught his placid expression, knew the score. As the dame had intimated, Waldron had become suspicious.

He'd had his wife checked, learned of her visits to my place. Probably believing them assignments, he was now waiting to catch her with the young buck who was steaming Elaine.

And Eddie had done some checking himself; he'd known Waldron would show. This was the night.

I felt vaguely uneasy. Eddie was tops at his job, but he'd never before worked out a set-up certain to bring the law snooping around my spot. Because I suddenly knew the site just as though Eddie had tipped me: the narrow alley adjoining the bar. Convenient. Sparsely traveled. And dark—

Business grew still brisker; the bar was jammed. I had my hands full building drinks, including a gin and tonic for Waldron. I had no time to talk to Eddie, wouldn't have bothered if I had. Eddie was working on schedule; he relaxed on his stool, nursing beers and watching TV, waiting for Waldron to leave.

The old boy had only that one drink. He hunched tensely over the booth table, scanning everybody who entered. An

hour went by. An hour forty-five. Then, apparently giving up for the night, Waldron abruptly came to the bar, paid his tab, walked out.

I'd just brought Eddie another beer. He slipped casually off the stool. "Sit tight," he muttered. Then he followed Waldron. I wiped my palms on my apron...

Two teen-agers cutting through the alley discovered the body. The cops got around to my place twenty minutes later. Some of the customers still there remembered Waldron; some didn't. Those who did weren't certain just when he'd left. And nobody tied in those five minutes I'd ducked back to the stock room.

That's right. Like I said, I was uneasy; I wanted to check. The stock room had a door admitting to the alley. I slipped

back, glimpsed Waldron crawling on hands and knees toward the street. A weak bulb over the stock room door glinted off the half of the knife Eddie'd buried in the old bastard's back.

"H-help me!" Waldron wheezed.

In all my years with the Syndicate, I'd never given anybody the big shove, but this was different. This was one job Eddie'd slipped on. Eddie rated high in the Syndicate; I wanted to see him climb higher. But he wouldn't if he tripped up here, if Waldron had seen his face, lived long enough to blurt a description—

So I saved Eddie, finished off Waldron with two more stabs.

I figure any father would do as much for his own kid.

THE END

MAD DOG KILLER

He wasn't fit to live, and I
wanted to blot out his life!

by NEAL NEITZEL

“WITH or without a badge. I'm going looking for Floyd Wallace.” Mark Jordan spoke tersely, raw, naked hate bunching the muscles of his lean face. He shoved himself out of the chair and turned to leave the office.

“Sit down!” Captain Bill Richter's stern voice was a hoarse bellow. “Nobody said you could walk out of here.” The wiry, thin-lipped homicide officer glared at Mark. His eyes were narrow slits beneath his thick grey eyebrows.

“I mean it, Captain. There's a debt to be settled,” Mark growled, moving slowly back toward the desk.

The veteran officer nodded wearily. He flicked his hand down at the manila file folder open in front of him. “You went through this stuff a half-dozen times while you were in



the hospital, Mark. If you got any notion where Floyd Wallace might be holed up, spit it out! This isn't just your party; every man on the force thought a lot of Ed Kuenzi."

Mark's wounded left shoulder began to throb. He supposed he was a damn fool for ignoring the doctor's advice and getting up too soon. He awkwardly fished a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket. While he was fumbling around in search of a light, the older man leaned across the desk, supplying it before Mark could thumb the match book open.

"Be sensible, kid. Suppose you did get lucky and run across Wallace. With only one good arm, he'd polish you off, easy."

"It wouldn't be like it was on the train, Captain. Not this next time."

Mark's dark, rugged features wore a brooding anguished scowl. Every time he closed his eyes, he could still see the wolfish grin on Floyd Wallace's sensual lips. He could hear the harsh, taunting laugh and the explosive blasts of a .38 calibre police special.

"Quit blaming yourself for something that wasn't your fault," said Captain Richter, heatedly. "I lost one good man last month. I don't want to lose another one. Keep on like this, and you'll wind up in a sanitarium—or if you don't get over the notion of making this a personal thing with Floyd Wallace, you could wind up dead."

"He butchered Ed; deliberately shot low. Three slugs in the guts and one in the groin," Mark was shouting now, brown eyes almost wild. "With Ed's own gun! That dirty, sadistic bastard laughed while he did it! He stood over Ed and butchered him like it was the funniest thing in the world!"

"Jordan! Knock it off!" snapped Bill Richter, coming out of his chair. His small but powerful hands dug into Mark's uninjured right arm. "Blowing your stack isn't going to help Ed Kuenzi, or his family—or you, either! Now start talking some sense for a change. I asked you before if you had any ideas of where Wallace might be. You didn't give me an answer."

The big, still-trembling man

slowly raised his head, and stared at his superior. "Thanks. The first thing we learned at the academy was to forget about sentiments and personal feelings. Thanks for reminding me, Bill."

Quietly, then, Mark admitted that he had no idea of where the vicious, lantern-jawed killer might be hiding. Floyd Wallace had one of the worst, most brutal records ever accumulated, however there was nothing in any of the papers in the file to give any indication of his present whereabouts.

"It'll be another three, four weeks before that cast comes off your arm," said Captain Richter. He walked with Mark to the door. "I want you to take a vacation."

"Not until—"

"I mean it! Dammit, man! You're still taking orders. I can't wet-nurse you, and I won't try, but if you ever want to be of any use to the force, again, you'll ease off! Now get back to your apartment and get some rest—you look ready to keel over."

"There's only one thing wrong with me. I'm taking that

vacation, Captain. Just like you ordered." Mark strode down the corridor, while Bill Richter watched from the doorway. Both of them knew what sort of a vacation it would be. Bill Richter's stern face looked tired, and very old.

A month before, Floyd Wallace was being delivered to the state prison, to await execution for the brutal slaying of an elderly couple during a grocery store holdup. On the train, he'd grabbed detective sergeant Ed Kuenzi's revolver.

Mark leaped across the compartment. The first shot knocked him backwards, burning through his flesh inches from his throat. Bleeding, only semi-conscious, Mark witnessed the horrible butchery of his friend and fellow-officer.

There was nothing he could do then, as the killer made his escape, disappearing without leaving a trace. Somewhere, Floyd Wallace was having himself a time; laughing every time he read about the fruitless efforts of the law, or every time he looked at Ed Kuenzi's .38 revolver.

Mark hadn't known how fiercely bitter hate could be. Two weeks after the session in Bill Richter's office, the hate remained, strong as ever, but now accompanied by bleak, leg-weary frustration.

None of the leads pointed to anything except blind alleys. None of the hungry-for-a-buck stoolies were of any help. Mark drove to the small town where Wallace had been born. He questioned relatives, friends of the family, and found all of them ashamed.

"My son?" Mrs. Wallace was a gaunt, poorly-dressed woman of 55, although she appeared much older. "I haven't any son," she said, tonelessly.

The small, drab house was little more than a shack. Mark glanced at the half-rotting porch posts and flooring. One of the planks creaked beneath his feet. It hadn't been much of a home to begin with. Now, it was only a matter of time before the sagging roof and decaying walls collapsed.

He asked Mrs. Wallace to re-examine her memory, to try to recall something—anything—that might be a clue to the brutal killer's whereabouts.

"Look, I know you've been asked these things before, but if there's anything you can remember that would help...."

"If there was, Mister Jordan, I'd tell you," she replied. She opened the screen door and walked out on the porch. Mark believed her quiet, simple statement. He caught a glimpse of the neat but painfully shabby interior of the house.

"I believe you, Ma'am."

"Last time Floyd came here, he killed Tippy," she said, staring out across the weed-covered, uncared-for yard. "Just because she liked to bark and play. She jumped up against his legs, just tryin' to be friendly. He kicked that poor little terrier of mine right off'n the porch, just about where you're standin' now, Mister. Then he shot her."

The thin, haggard woman's eyes were dry. All of her tears had been used, long ago, Mark thought. His impulse was to comfort her, but instead he awkwardly got a cigarette lit. He could have bought a lighter, instead of using book matches; with only one hand, it would have been much easier. The same stubborn streak

that kept him after Floyd Wallace prevented him from changing his habits.

"This isn't much of a place, Ma'am. No close neighbors, either. Why don't you move to town? There must be places you could stay."

"I've lived here for 35 years," Mrs. Wallace replied, quietly. "It's all the home I got, and I don't want no charity."

"One of these days, the roof is going to cave in—if it doesn't blow off, first."

"Folks around here are real nice to me. They give me sewin' jobs to do, and I've got a few dollars saved. Later this year, I'll have enough to pay for having some repairin' done. I won't take somethin' for nothin', Mister."

The drive back required nearly two hours. It had been another dead end, Mark thought. The only accomplishment was increased hatred toward the vicious killer he sought, and increased determination to dig away, under every rock, if need be, until the slimy hulk that passed for a human being was blotted out of existence.

Sleep was a long time coming, despite his tiredness. He found two pictures etched in his mind; the horrible one that had been there since Ed Kuenzi died, and now, the image of a gaunt, gallant woman who had nothing left except pride.

HE awakened slowly, by stages. Then, hearing the shrill, insistent ring of the phone in the next room, he flipped back the covers and hurried to answer.

"Jordan? I wanted to call you before you got any notions about chasing upstate," Captain Bill Richter said, tersely, bringing Mark to full alertness. "You'll hear it on the radio, later, but I'm telling you now because I don't want you in the way. Floyd Wallace came out of hiding last night. With a gun in his hand."

"Where?"

"He hit a loan company office, just outside of Milwaukee. One man dead—the manager. Another man and a woman were wounded. The woman might not make it."

"How can you be sure it was Wallace?"

"One of the other employees

made positive identification. The point is, I don't want to have you in our hair, Mark. We got roadblocks set up, and it's just a question of when. He's heading this way; he got gas at a station about 100 miles north, early this morning. All the main and secondary roads are covered, and he's in a circle."

"Where can I do some good, Captain? You know I'm not just going to sit here."

"Yeah, I know. Come on down. I'll give you plenty to do."

"Paperwork? No thanks, Captain."

"Jordan!"

"I won't get in the way. Goodbye, Bill." Mark could hear Bill Richter's angry sputtering as he hung up, walking swiftly back to the bedroom. Insubordination. That meant a suspension, or worse. Mark shrugged, momentarily forgetting the bulky plaster cast and sling on his left shoulder. He winced, cursing the cumbersome rigging as he hurriedly dressed.

There wouldn't be much time; he knew Bill Richter well enough to know that in a few

minutes, a husky pair of his fellow-officers would be there, to take him in protective custody. He buckled on his shoulder holster, slipped awkwardly into his suit coat, and started out of the apartment.

At the door, he paused, frowning. A dozen quick steps took him to the closet. He reached far back on the shelf, groping for the small leather case. Opened it. Took out the stubby .25 calibre automatic. It resembled a toy, compared to the heavier .38.

He hefted it, grinning. No self-respecting cop would want to be discovered toting such a baby, but then, all the self-respecting cops he knew had two good, usable arms.

Just as he dodged out through the rear of the apartment building, he heard the front door open, and the clump of purposeful footsteps mounting the stairs to the second floor. He slid into the sedan and got out of the neighborhood fast.

Twenty minutes later, he was through the suburbs, traveling west. A special bulletin interrupted the music, and Mark turned up the volume.

The announcer said, "Less than fifteen minutes ago, escaped murderer Floyd Wallace crashed through a police barricade on State Highway 79, about 60 miles northwest of the city....."

The announcer's voice droned on, giving details, but Mark scarcely listened. He tromped hard on the accelerator, driving toward the small town where Mrs. Esther Wallace lived.

Her son had broken through, punched a hole in the net. If the demented killer's cunning ran the way Mark feared, Floyd Wallace would angle off the highway, taking side roads. It should have been the last place he'd try to reach; certainly no one would expect such an obvious move.

'And that's just why he'll make for his mother's house,' Mark thought, grimly. 'He knows it's the last place we'd look. He'll ditch that hot car and hole up, waiting for a chance to slip out of the state in a few days, when the roads are clear.'

A state patrol car was parked in front of the shabby, isolated structure when Mark

pulled up. Two uniformed men were leaving the house. They started toward him.

"Let's see some identification, Mister," one of them said, hand hovering above the holster on his belt.

Mark carefully dug for his wallet and gave it to the taller patrolman. "I know Mrs. Wallace," he said. "I was here yesterday. When I heard that her son got by the roadblock, I had an idea he might just be crazy enough to come here. Guess you fellows had the same notion."

"That's right," said the patrolman, returning Mark's billfold. "He ditched the sedan about 15 miles north of here. We figured he might just be crazy enough to do something smart—like hiding out here, right under our noses."

"We went over every inch of that old joint," said the other patrolman. "There's only four rooms. No cellar. No attic."

Mark nodded. "How is Mrs. Wallace? How's she taking this?"

"I don't know how good you know her," said the taller patrolman, "but she don't consid-

er him as her son. She dies a little bit, everytime he uses that gun of his."

"It beats me how two people can be so different and have the same blood in their veins," Mark said, slowly. "She sure deserves better than this. It's a bad enough life being stuck in a crummy old shack like this, without having a no-good bastard like him adding to her misery."

"Well, if you're gonna be around for awhile, Dave and me will probably see you, later. We've got an idea he could be hiding in the woods between here and the river," said the smaller, older patrolman. They climbed into their car and drove away while Mark moved toward the front porch.

ESTHER Wallace looked anything but happy to see him. She pushed open the screen door, and he entered the gloomy, barren living room.

"I wish you hadn't come," she said, staring at him. He wasn't sure, but he thought he detected a note of fear.

"Would it be better if I sat in my car?"

"No." She walked toward

the windows and stared out across the lawn. "He won't come here. I pray to God he don't. He's not the kind who'll surrender, Mister Jordan." She turned partially, looking at Mark. "After you left, yesterday, I went through the newspapers. I found your picture, and I guess you got plenty reason to hate Floyd."

"Right now, I'm not thinking about him, Mrs. Wallace. I hope he stays away from here, too. For your sake."

Mark walked to the window. A light drizzle had started falling. From the window, he had a good view of the road and of the woods beyond. "That gun Floyd Wallace has belongs to the widow of one of the best men I ever knew. I hope that if there is any shooting, it isn't here where you have to watch. But one way or another, this thing has got to end."

"When it does, you won't be breathing!"

Mark and the gaunt woman stiffened, hearing the harsh laugh. Mark recognized the voice. Floyd Wallace had somehow managed to come in behind them.

"Raise that arm, copper! Both of you stay just like you are!" Floorboards creaked as the hulking fugitive crossed the room. Rough hands tore the .38 from Mark's shoulder holster, then savagely spun the detective around.

"You're crazy to have come here," Mark said, through clenched teeth.

"There wasn't no place else I could get to—what's your name again?" Floyd Wallace snapped his fingers, grinning wolfishly. "Oh, yeah—Jordan, ain't it? I always like to know how to spell the name of the creeps I bump. Sort of to keep things neat and business-like." He laughed, holding both weapons.

While he was pocketing the revolver in his left hand, Mrs. Wallace rushed wildly forward, clawing at his face. He clubbed her viciously across the forehead with the barrel of the other gun. She toppled soundlessly to the floor, blood pouring from the gash above her eyes.

"Freeze cop!" One more step and you get it," snarled Floyd Wallace. His eyes were pinpoints, and his thick, sen-

sual lips were drawn back to reveal yellowed teeth. He looked at that moment like what he was. A brutal animal, crazed by the lust to kill.

Moving carefully, Mark stooped to examine the motionless, deathly pale woman. "She's still breathing. You could have killed her. Your own mother." Mark's hatred was a cold fury. He spoke calmly, almost in a whisper.

"Shut up, Jordan. Leave her be; we're gonna walk out to that car of yours. Now!"

Mark shook his head. He got up slowly, his eyes steady and unyielding on the killer's bearded face. "This is the end of the line for you. Right here. Right now."

Floyd Wallace laughed hysterically. "Funny, cop! Funny! How do you want it? In the guts like I gave it to that big-bellied bull on the train? Yeah. Yeah, I think that's how I'll do it, cop." Naked hate and blood lust flicked in his hooded eyes as the revolver in his hand came up, centering on Mark's middle.

"Splat!" the tiny .25 calibre automatic concealed in Mark's bandaged left arm spoke first.

The bullet bored through the narrow bridge of the killer's nose. Mark's second shot took Floyd Wallace in the throat. It wouldn't have been needed.

The .38 calibre police special slipped from lifeless fingers and landed on the carpet. Horrible, wide-eyed surprise was frozen on the slayer's brutal features as his hulking body crumpled.

Mark picked up the revolver. He stared at it for a long moment, then pocketed it

and turned to take care of the injured woman. The captive gun had been recovered and the debt had been paid. "I'm sorry it had to be this way," he said gently after Mrs. Wallace had revived.

She looked past him at the body of her son. "I'm sorry, too," she said quietly. She began weeping as Mark walked to the phone on the wall. And there was nothing he could do or say to comfort her.

THE END



I DON'T WANT NO TROUBLE

by ED CHASE

I had my hands on big money,
but I just couldn't take it

I don't want no trouble. But a guy's got to eat, he's got to have a bottle now and then, he wants a woman from time to time. And when you're out of work and can't find any more, and when those government checks finally run out, you got to go out and find yourself some money. It don't grow on trees.

It grows in cash registers, though.

I was starting to feel like I was up against the thin edge. Here it was November, and I hadn't worked two days in a row since some time last Feb-



ruary. The government gives you checks and the state gives you checks too, but neither of them go on giving you checks forever. My checks had run out. I was up against it.

Not that I didn't *want* to work. I ain't any drifter, get me? But you can't just walk into a place and say, "Gimme a job." You got to have skills. Well, I got a few skills, I guess, but what I don't have is a union card, so even if I know how to drive a truck it don't do me any good to go around asking for a job. They got plenty of paid-up Teamsters to do that kind of work.

And another thing. I ain't married. That automatically puts me down at the bottom of the list when they hand out the jobs. If two guys are out of work, and one of them has three hungry kids at home and the other guy's just got himself, who do you think they're going to give the job to? Right. So I was up against it, but hard.

I pulled this grocery store job in August and got me ninety bucks. Not bad. Enough to keep the rent paid for a while, enough to buy a few plates of

baked beans and hot dogs, enough to pay for beer.

I did another grocery store in September. Sixty-eight bucks. Okay, I didn't starve in September.

Don't get the idea I'm a crook. I'm just an ordinary unemployed citizen. A goddam statistic. Free, white, twenty-seven years old, never convicted of a major crime. And hungry. A guy's got to eat, don't he?

In October I did this liquor store job. A hundred forty bucks. Okay, pretty damn good. But I owed this guy sixty bucks, and he came first, and the rest didn't last too long. So now it was November, the cold weather closing in, and jobs about as easy to find as left-handed unicorns, and all the papers I find in the park full of big talk about how an upturn is coming any month now.

Yeah. Prosperity was just around the corner.

Meantime I was down to six bucks, and nobody I knew had any dough I could scrounge. So I was going to have to pull another job. That was all there was to it.

IT isn't hard to get money out of shopkeepers. You pick the right neighborhood, you pick the right time of day, and you make sure you jam your gun in their face before they get a chance to start trouble. I had this .45, it looked like a goddam cannon.

I hadn't ever fired it, not once, and I had but one box of bullets and when those were gone I wouldn't have any more. A shabby guy buying bullets can get looked at funny, so I didn't want to have to replenish my ammunition if I didn't have to.

I picked out this neighborhood one dark night in the middle of November. There was a liquor store down the block. Liquor stores are better than grocery stores. They take in more money in the cheap neighborhoods than grocery stores do, and they sometimes get a little careless.

There wasn't a cop in sight. There wasn't *anybody* in sight. I walked up to this liquor store. Big stack of wine-bottles in the window, a nice bright display. Trouble was, there was so much of a display

in the window that a cop wandering by couldn't really look into the store through the window to see what was what. Which was fine.

I went in.

There were two guys in the store. They looked like brothers. One was about fifty, the other one around forty, and they both had this tired, washed-out look. They both had glasses. They both had grayish-purple shop-coats on. It wasn't cold in the liquor store. It was warm and nice in there.

They looked at me like I was the first customer who had come into the place in the last three days.

"Can I help you?" the older one said. The younger one was busy arranging some bottles on a shelf behind the cash register.

I nodded. "What do you have in the way of a good brandy at about three bucks a fifth?"

"Something for a cold night, huh?"

"That's right," I said. "Something for a cold night, you bet."

He turned around to point to some bottles on the shelf behind him. Now both brothers had their backs to me. That was just fine. I reached into my inside pocket and took out the .45.

The sound of the safety slipping was awfully loud. Two washed-out faces turned around in a hurry.

I moved the gun on a long, slow arc from one brother to the other. They were standing about twelve or fifteen feet away from each other.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," I said. "Just keep them up here and nobody'll get hurt. Start walking toward each other. I want to be able to cover both of you at the same time."

They wet their lips with the same expression. "Listen, mister, we don't want any trouble," the younger one said.

I smiled. "That's my motto too, friend. I don't want no trouble. Now let's make this quick, and suppose you open up the register and get the dough out."

They were so scared they were shivering. The younger one punched the NO SALE

key on the cash register and the drawer shot open. I leaned way across the counter to make sure he wasn't going to pull any guns out of there, all the while keeping my eye on the other one also, and watching the door with quick little glances.

No gun in the register.

Just money.

He started hauling it out. His hands were shaking like he had all of a sudden caught a bad case of palsy. I watched the bills piling up on the counter. It came to about a hundred twenty bucks. Not bad, not bad at all.

I leaned forward again to make sure he had cleaned the drawer out. Then I looked down the counter toward the side, and there was a little curtain half parted in front of a smaller room.

I saw something that looked mighty like a safe in that other room.

I pointed to the curtain as I pocketed the hundred twenty bucks. "What's in there?"

"The back room."

"I know that. What's in it?"

"N-nothing much."

"There's a safe in there, isn't there?" I said.

Neither of them answered. They looked like a couple of ghosts. I gestured with the gun. "Come on," I said. "Let's go see what you've got back there. Both of you. Move it."

They went on ahead of me into the back room. Sure enough, it was a safe, a square green one with a big dial on it.

"What's inside?" I asked.

"J-just our record books and ledgers," the older one said. "Nothing you'd be interested in."

"Maybe I would be," I said.

"Open it up."

"But—"

"Open it!"

They were turning fifty different shades of green, and I began to see that I was on to something big. But I didn't dream just *how* big. I prodded the younger brother with the gun, and I thought for a second he was going to puke just out of sheer funk. Then he got down on his knees and started twiddling the dials of the safe.

"You'll be sorry you messed with this," the older brother told me.

"Shut up." I was getting

pretty fidgety. I had already been in the store almost five minutes, and there was no telling when a customer might come in. Or a cop. But I wasn't going to make a panicky exit, not with a safe here.

The big door swung open.

I looked in and damn near flipped my lid. The safe was full of money. Stacks and stacks of it. I pulled one package out and riffled through it. There were about a hundred five-dollar bills in the package, with a paper band holding them together.

I tried to stay calm. "How much you got here altogether?" I asked.

"J-just over fourteen thousand."

I was wigged. Fourteen grand! Jeez, with that kind of dough I wouldn't have to worry about government checks for a long time to come. I could go to Florida for the winter, if I felt like. It would take a hell of a long time to spend fourteen thou. It was more money than I'd ever seen in one place in my life.

But I had to keep cool. I wanted to dive into that safe

and grab all that money in my arms and hug it, but that wasn't smart.

I said, "Get a carton, and some twine, and a carrying handle. Pack all this stuff up for me, and make it fast."

"You better not fool, buddy," the younger one said. "You don't want to touch that dough."

"Keep your trap shut. I—"

Just then there was a tinkling sound, the sound of the bell hung over the door. Somebody had come in. A cop or a customer. I sneaked a peep through the curtain and saw that it was a big guy in a dark coat, with his hat pulled pretty far down.

I pointed at the younger brother. "Go out there and take care of him," I said, "and get rid of him fast. If I hear you say one thing that's out of line, I'll blow a hole in your brother's head big enough to stick that safe through. You got me?"

He nodded nervously. He slipped through the curtain and went outside.

I was starting to get the shakes. But I thought of all

that dough, all that beautiful dough. I kept my gun pointed at the older brother's green face and waited for the younger brother to get rid of the customer.

"HELLO, Tommy," I heard the customer say. His voice was deep and tough.

"H-hello, Mike."

"Slow night, huh?"

"Pretty slow."

"Got the package ready yet?" Mike asked.

"N-not yet, Mike. We—we had something come up. Something a little out of the ordinary. That's why we didn't get it ready in time."

"The car's waiting, Tommy."

"I'm sorry. We couldn't get it ready in time. Maybe if you came back in around half an hour or so, Mike—"

"What kind of crap is this?" I heard Mike say. "It's nine o'clock, second Monday of the month. You're supposed to have it *ready*. You aren't supposed to give me crap about not having time."

"Can you make it back here in half an hour? It's—it's

something out of the ordinary tonight."

"Like what?"

"I—can't tell you, Mike."

"Hey, what's going on here? You sick or something? You look goddamn peculiar."

"Please, Mike. I'm not trying to cheat the Syndicate, anything like that. But you got to come back later. I can't get the collection ready for you now."

A long silence.

Then Mike said, "Well, we got this pickup at the laundry on St. Martin Avenue at half past nine. I'll go over there and come back here by ten. And God help you if that collection ain't ready, Tommy. You hear me? We don't fool around in this operation."

The bell tinkled again.

The door closed.

The younger brother came back through the curtain to the back room. He was dripping wet with perspiration. He looked greener than ever.

"He gone?" I asked.

"Till ten."

"Yeah. Yeah, I heard." I looked at the safe. The older brother had gotten out a carton, and he had stacked about

five inches of bills into it.

There was a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball. I patted the hundred twenty bucks in my pocket, and then I looked down at the stack of money in the safe and at the layer of green that was rapidly filling up the carton. All I had to do was stand around till they filled up the carton, and then pick it up like I was picking up a case of beer, and walk out.

Fourteen grand.

Enough to buy a new Cadillac and have plenty left over. Enough to stand me a year of eating steaks at the best places in town. And the women! I ached all over when I thought of the dames I could buy for that kind of money. The slick blondes with the Marilyn Monroe figures. The sharp operators who knew how to give a man a thrill he'd never forget—for a price.

And I would have the price.

I said, "Was that guy who was just here who I think he was?"

"That all depends," the younger brother said warily. "Who do you think he was?"

"This is a numbers drop," I

said. "You two run a real big business here. A *real* big business. And he was a Syndicate man, coming around to make the monthly pickup of your collections. Right?"

"You hit it, pal," the younger one said.

"And he'll be back in an hour," I said. "What's he gonna do to you when he comes back here and finds the safe's cleaned out?"

"It isn't what he'll do to us," the older one said in a hoarse voice. "It's what he'll do to *you*. That's what you ought to be thinking of."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm thinking of it."

I looked at the safe again, then at the carton. At the stacks and stacks of bills.

I ached for that money.

Even for some of the money. Two hundred, three hundred—that was my idea of a real fortune. More than that got unwieldy.

I let my breath out slowly.

"Okay," I said. "You can put the money back in the safe."

"All of it?"

"All of it," I said.

I felt like somebody had

sewed some lead weights into my stomach. I don't remember when I ever felt so sad before, so completely miserable.

The younger one looked up at me. "You're a smart guy. Smarter than you look."

"Yeah," I said, hating myself for chickening out. "A real Einstein."

I watched them unloading the carton's contents back into the safe. About a thousand bucks flashed under my nose, and then it started to make me sick.

"So long," I said.

I turned and headed out into the street. It was cold and empty out there. There was a hundred twenty bucks in my pocket that I hadn't had fifteen minutes ago. So tomorrow I'd have a good meal. Not steak, but at least I'd be eating.

I wanted to sit down somewhere and cry.

Fourteen thousand bucks.

But I wouldn't be robbing a couple of shopkeepers. I'd be robbing the Syndicate. And the Syndicate don't put up with stuff like that. The cops wouldn't catch me, but the Syndicate would. And I knew

what they did to guys who tried to cut themselves in. Hot wax dripped into the eyes, and a lot worse. They didn't kill you. Not the Syndicate. When they caught a guy who had crossed them, they did a job on him, and then they turned what was left of him loose to hobble around and beg for nickels.

I turned up my collar. *Fourteen grand*. And I didn't have the guts to touch a penny of it. Not a goddam penny. I let them put it all back.

I walked into a bar on the next block over.

"Beer," I said.

The barkeep drew one for me, and I gave him one of the liquor store's bills, and he gave me change. And I told myself that I could have been drinking champagne now instead of beer.

Fourteen grand.

But it wasn't worth it. Not heisting the Syndicate's dough, it wasn't worth it. Like I said, I'm no crook. I'm just an ordinary unemployed citizen. A goddam statistic.

I thought of all that money in that safe.

All the money that could have been mine.

Then I started to forget all about it. Dough like that wasn't for the likes of me. I'm small-time.

So now you know how I held up a liquor store for fourteen grand and then didn't take it. Maybe you think I was dumb. Maybe I *was*. But I still think I did the smart thing.

Like I said, I don't want no trouble.

THE END

ON WITH THE KILLING

by DAN BRENNAN

I was too long in the rackets
to turn my back on the murder



"IT took you long enough,"
Stutz Gandler said.

So I was supposed to sprint all the way from Florida to Minnesota. I looked at him.

"Planes were grounded," I said, "I took a train." He hadn't changed much in fifteen years. Little less hair on the head, but what was there was black and curly. He still had a chest like a truck driver, big, wide, and a voice to match. If he'd gone to school another four years after eighth grade he'd have owned all of Cereal City. But he hadn't done badly. He owned half the town, the liquor and bookie joints, that is.

He was smoking an English cigarette. Fifteen years ago he'd had that touch, too, but whoever taught him to buy English cigarettes shouldn't

have stopped there. Because Mr. Gandler's clothes made him look exactly like what he was, Mr. Hoodlum. Strictly a meat head when it came to clothes, from his orange sports shirt to the matching slacks and dark blue suede shoes.

But I should yap. Fifteen years ago I thought his clothes were hot stuff, but the years in Palm Beach taught me a few things about clothes.

"Why didn't you drive?" he asked.

"Why?" I said. "Well, one, five years in stir didn't make my eyes any younger. And two, it's a long drive."

He jerked a finger at the chair in front of his desk.

"Sit down," he said sharply.

Why all the hard talk? He didn't have to talk hard to me.

"I been sitting all day," I said slowly.

"Listen, Jim." He got up from behind the desk. I had never liked him, not even when he smiled. He paid good money when we were hi-jacking and driving moon, and he took care of his friends, but I still didn't like him. Always wanting to show you what a big shot he was. He was smiling now. The

trouble was he was big.

He came around the desk, offered me a cigarette. I shook my head.

"Jim," he said, tapping the cigarette on the edge of the desk like he thought all the tobacco was going to fall out on the floor. Strictly the big executive gesture.

"Sure?", he extended the pack.

I shook my head.

Then he picked up the silver cigarette lighter, snapped the trigger up slowly and blew on the wick like he thought maybe the Sahara desert had settled there.

"Jim," he said. "I got a job for you."

No kidding? All the time I thought he was homesick for my personality.

"Yeah?" I said. "Trouble?"

"Not yet," he said. Then thoughtfully: "When'd you get in?"

"This morning."

"Where you staying?"

I looked at my suitcase on the floor.

"Get a room on east side," he said. "Johnson's Hotel."

I picked up my bag.

"We close about one," he

said. "Come on around after we close. I'll be in the office. Use the stage door."

"Sure," I said. "How're the boys?"

"No complaints. Steve's in Arizona. We're thinking of getting a spot out there. Looks like it might go."

I looked around the office. The modern furniture and lighting and carpeting must've cost him five thousand dollars. Good enough for a Florida night club. But Cereal City, Minnesota, wasn't Florida. These square heads here knew how to pinch a buck nine ways.

"How do you make this go?" I asked. Out front it was all indirect lighting and chromium plating and trick bars and a stage that rose out of the dance floor. The Club Cay. Not bad.

"Names," he said. "Big names. Give 'em a few broken down Hollywood names and these farmers'll pay."

I turned to go.

"See you tonight," I said.

"Hey," he said as I put my hand on the doorknob. I looked over my shoulder. He was grinning. "Where'd you get that lousy rag?"

I looked down at my suit. Plain grey flannel with a ticket pocket. Hundred and fifty bucks tailor made.

"Don't you like it?" I asked.

"Jim," he shook his head in disgust. "When you gonna learn how to dress?" He went on shaking his head and waving me away and I went out.

IT was more like one thirty when I got back to the Club that night. The Johnson Hotel wasn't bad but it was more like a flea bag when I started thinking of my house in Florida. But the hotel was a good bet; nobody would know me or care to around the Johnson. It was that far off the beaten track, away over on the old east side.

"You always this slow?" Stutz asked. "You used to hurry a little."

The tall guy next to him looked at me. We were in Stutz's office.

"Got out of the habit in jail," I said.

"In ten years you shoulda got it back." Then: "Stretch, this is Jim Porter."

"Hiyuh," Stretch said. He was big, tall, young, with a

wide good looking face and sleepy eyes.

"Stretch, I want you to show Porter a couple friends."

"Sure," said Stretch and yawned, and looked at Stutz.

"Them guys. Dutch Henry and Flea Dixon?"

"That's right," Stutz said.

"Jim, I want you in the Magic Box. Noon tomorrow."

"Magic Box?" I said. Maybe he thought a town didn't change in fifteen years.

"Yeah. yeah," he snapped.

"Sixth and Selkirk. Small joint. Just a bar. No booths."

I couldn't even remember what the street looked like now.

"All right," I said.

"Stretch'll stand behind them at the bar. You pick it up from there, Jim. Okay?"

I nodded.

"All right, Stretch," he said.

"That's all. Noon."

"See yuh, pal," Stretch said to me and went out.

"How about a drink?" Stutz asked. "I got a lot to tell you."

He wasn't kidding. I figured up till now he must've forgotten I wasn't exactly a mind reader.

We went out front. The

lights were turned off. The tables were covered and the chairs were stacked. The stage was dark. There was a raised bar above the dining room and we went up and he snapped on the bar light and mixed a couple of drinks.

"Well," he said with a shrug, lifting his glass. "Here's how." We touched glasses. He took a long drink and set his glass down and leaned forward with both big hairy forearms flat on top the bar.

"I'll give you the pitch, Jim," he said. "It's like this." He paused. "Well, maybe you know what it's like. I still got what I always had. The joints and a couple off sale liquor spots and the club and some pretty solid slots and pin ball routes going. That's all. What more do I want? I'm no kid anymore, Jim. I know it, and I don't want nothing more'n I got. I don't want no trouble. I pay my income tax strictly on the level. The feds don't bother me. You know Archie's still got his end."

I nodded. Nothing had changed too much in fifteen years. Only bootlegging was gone. Archie Harris had the

Combination and his half of the town and Stutz still had the Syndicate and the other half of the town. Just a couple of aging business men no longer interested in new fields.

"What's happened?" I said.

"Like I said, Jim. I don't want nothing new. We got the town nice. Everybody thinks it's clean. I got the slot machines in the private clubs and the bookies only handle stuff on the phone. It looks nice and quiet. I don't want no open town. It's better this way. No squawks. I been putting my money in stocks last couple years. Got a nice piece of the street car company. Might even be able to peddle the whole company some day to the city."

"Yeah," I nodded. "What's happened?"

He picked up his glass and took another long drink. He put the glass down.

"Jim," he said. "You feed a guy a little when he's hungry and you make a pig out of him."

"Flea and Dutch?"

He nodded.

"They came into town about a year ago. Flat. They were

on the rock ten years. Bank job. They're rough. Asked me if I had anything for them. Job or anything. I didn't have the kind of job they wanted. So I kept them eating a couple weeks. First thing, I know they put the bite on a couple bookies. My bookies."

"Did you pay off?"

"What the hell, Jim, they were big once. They'd spit in your eye and shoot you for kicks. I know. I checked. I figured what the hell a couple hundred a week was better than having them rip the phones out of a couple bookies and work the bookies over. Like I said, the town's quiet. I want to keep it that way. You blame me?"

MAYBE the town hadn't changed, but Stutz had. Was this the guy who used to sit with me in the truck with the shotgun on his lap while we ran alcohol into Dakota? He was right; he was getting old.

"You blame me?" I said.

"What?" He looked at me surprised.

I shook my head slowly. No dice.

"Listen, Jim," he grabbed my arm. "I been taking care of you a long time."

"Then we're even. Five years in the can for ten years at five hundred a month. You ought to do five years if you don't think we're even."

I stood up.

He didn't move.

"How's Mary?" he asked, looking down into his glass.

It was my turn not to move. What a jug head. All the time waiting all these years to tell him off, to think I could afford to say no.

"She's all right," I said.

"Joan?" he asked. "She must be about fifteen now."

"Eighteen," I said and my stomach felt tight and hollow.

"Jim, tell me something." He poked a finger into his glass, and drew it out and started doodling the liquid into a small pattern on top the bar. "What've you been doing since you got out?"

I knew he had me, the jerk. What would you do for ten years while drawing a five hundred a month pension? Take up a trade? Sure, I could get a job making book or hustling dice. But I'd never make

five hundred at it. I'd been out of practice too long.

"How long since you racked pool, Jim?" he smiled.

"All right. What's the deal?"

He rubbed his chin.

"Like I said. Stretch'll finger 'em. After that it's up to you. What do you want?"

I never seen anybody yet shoot doubles with a rifle.

"Shot gun," I said. "Sawed off. Way off."

"Jim," he said seriously. "I always knew you were a real stand up guy."

"Sure," I said, but I felt all mixed up, lousy and good at the same time. Lousy because I was scared a little. But good because I knew I was doing it for Mary and Joan. There was no limit I wouldn't go for them. Sure, that was it. Sure, that's why I felt good. Sure, that was it. For them.

I didn't get to the Magic Box until twelve-fifteen the next day. Fifteen minutes late. But that was all right. It wasn't good, getting there the same time as Stretch.

The bar wasn't crowded, one of those long oval shaped bars that almost filled the length of

the room, but there were drinkers on most of the stools. I moved around to the middle, and found a stool, sat down and ordered a beer.

I was half way through the beer before I gave the faces a solid once over, and then I saw Stretch. He was leaning, with both elbows on the bar, and a drink in front of him, and space on each side of him, across the way and a little to the left. I hadn't put my eyes on him a second and he picked up his glass, finished his drink, and started walking down the length of the bar.

Where the bar curved at the far end of the room, he paused, and leaning forward, between two men, he called the bar man over and asked him for a package of cigarettes.

While Stretch was waiting he glanced briefly up and for an instant our eyes met, and then, his head nodded almost imperceptibly.

I looked at the men. Even at the bar they looked short, middle aged. Their hats were off, sitting on top the bar, and beside each hat stood a bottle of beer and glass. They were not well dressed. Even from

across the room their top coats looked thin and faded, and their hats looked old and soft and out of shape.

They drank slowly, taking small quantities of beer, staring straight ahead. They appeared to see nothing. Then Stretch got his cigarettes and walked around the bar and past me from behind and went out the front door.

That was about twelve-thirty. They sat so, staring at nothing, saying nothing, for two hours. Now and then the juke box played from the rear of the room; six times they re-ordered bottles of beer. The juke box blared.

The short man on the left had a round white face, with bright pink cheeks, like a healthy young boy; his hair was almost entirely white. He looked at nothing with two small eyes, separated by a small straight nose.

The other man was taller, with a boney, long farmer's face. His eyes had a queer bright steady color, as though he were staring into light, though all the light in the room was arranged to shine indirectly, and none shone at the rear

of the bar. His nose was long and boney, crooked; it looked broken, and he had a big cleft chin.

Without appearing to move swiftly they slid quickly off the bar stools, and standing erect, slanted their hats simultaneously.

I looked straight ahead, called for another beer, and paid for it while they went along the bar behind me, and then outside.

I drank half the beer, glanced at my wristwatch quickly as though I had an appointment. I slid off the stool and left.

They were half way to the corner, walking slowly, their hands in their pockets.

They waited for the traffic light to change, then crossed. I stayed a block behind all the way, down Selkirk Avenue, past the theaters, pool halls, hardware stores, and then the big pile of dirty sandstone known as the Cereal City Public Library rose up against the sky, and they turned the corner.

I waited, checked my watch for a fifteen second interval. They might have turned the

corner to see if anybody turned with them.

I reached the corner and looked down the short block. The street was empty. Even the street straight beyond the short block was empty. I walked down to the corner and turned into a wide street of faded red brick buildings with glass show windows filled with used cars. The two men were a block and a half ahead, still walking slowly, side by side.

From the next corner, below the curve of the street, came a glimpse of Chippewa Park—trees, black, leafless, like clusters of antlers; at the next corner they crossed and entered the park.

I walked along the edge of the park. I could see them down below on the strip of sidewalk through the snow. When they came out of the park I was across the street and still a block behind.

They stopped in front of two dingey dirty sandstone apartment buildings. Between the two buildings there was a sidewalk. In the grimy snow before the buildings two children, like dogs, one in a blue snow suit, the other, wearing

a red snow suit, rolled about shouting and laughing. The two men vanished between the buildings.

I tailed them for three days and nights. Always the same schedule. Breakfast in a cafe down the street, then down town to the Magic Box. Then home in the afternoon, where they stayed until it was dark, and then about nine they returned to the Magic Box.

At one each morning they walked home, stopping for coffee in an all-night hamburger stand. They always used the rear entrance of the apartment building. They were living on the third floor. I left them alone for a day and studied the alley and rear of the building, and then I was set. I checked with Stretch. They were the guys. Flea and Dutch. I know the business.

I called Gandler. The phone rang. A moment later there was a man's voice on the wire.

"Yeah?"

"Stutz?"

"Yeah."

"This is Mr. Carlson," I said. "I have your policy worked out."

"Fine," he said. "If you'll bring it around tonight—"

"All right. Thank you very much."

That was all. I hung up. It was the best way. You never knew who was tapping the phone. Even if the only way to tap was on the lead out wire from the building, you still couldn't be sure. At least, not about the Feds.

I remember twenty years ago how the Feds handled it. They put a guy under the old post office where all the circuits in the Cereal City connected, and they tapped the whole town without even the telephone company getting wise.

I walked to the Club Cay from a beer joint six blocks away at about twelve-thirty that night. I stood outside the stage door entrance for a moment, and then I went in and along the hall between the stage to the front office. Stutz was standing behind the grilled window, looking out across the front bar room.

"Hello, Stutz," I said, shutting the door, and keeping back against the wall, away from the grilled window.

He turned and worry showed in his eyes.

"How'd she get here?" he asked sharply.

"What the hell are you talking about now?"

"Your daughter," he said.

I stared at him as though I didn't quite believe my ears. Then I started to laugh.

"Don't be a sap," I said, "Somebody's conning you. Joan's in Palm Beach."

"Yeah?" he said, taking the cigarette out of his lips. "Listen, Jim." Then he stepped away from the window and came over to me. "Listen, tell her to use the other half of that ticket. Hell, this is not the time—, get that kid out of town."

"Listen, Stutz," I said in a low, steady voice. "Don't get your water hot. If it's Joan, I'll take care of it."

"You can start now. She's out front."

Well, one thing was sure; the wife must have spilled her guts a little. Joan hadn't ever known anything about the rackets, nor my being in them. She'd always thought I was a retired broker of hides, like we'd told her. Brother, I was

going to straighten out Mary when I got back to Palm Beach. Spilling her guts like this! The jug head! I was boiling.

I went out to the dining room entrance and stood there a couple minutes looking the room over. Joan was at a table along the wall, near the dance floor, looking up at the orchestra. Her soft round chin and full lips were set, and she sat looking straight ahead.

The lights overhead made her hair shine like there was a glow around her head. She was as beautiful as Mary had been when I'd first met her more than twenty years ago hoofing in a St. Louis night club. She brought the gentleness out of you that was always looking for some place to go but always afraid to show because it might get its ears knocked off. But I was sore as hell at her for putting her young nose into this.

It was for her and Mary I was doing it. Did they want to try living on fifty bucks a week? Were they nuts?

"Hello, kid," I said, sitting down beside her.

She turned her face and caught my arm.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "Why don't you go home?"

"Alone?" She looked up calmly, coolly, taking her hand away.

Now I was getting the sophisticated craperoo. I'd give her a lesson in that, if she wanted it.

"I'll order you a drink," she said. "What do you want, Dad?"

"I want you to get your coat and hat and get out of here and on the first train to Palm Beach."

She looked at me quietly.

"Dad," she said, "It doesn't matter. Whatever it is, forget it. Mother wants you to forget it. Come home. She thought you might listen to me. Yes, she told me, about everything. Darling, really, your daughter isn't so stupid. After all, I've grown up a little in the past two years."

Wait'll they've tried living on fifty bucks a week. They'd both grow up.

"Listen, baby," I said. "You've got a car. Mother's got a car. We've got a nice big home. It's not all paid for. You

gotta realize a guy just can't quit. If I quit those cars and that house'll never be paid for."

"Don't you understand?" she said quickly, putting her hand on my arm. "We don't care. Mother and I don't care. It's you we care about. Look, Dad, we don't know why you're here. We don't want to know exactly. We can guess, and we don't even like to do that. Because whatever it is it won't do any of us any good. Mother is scared."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I said. "You never had to live on fifty bucks a week."

"Quit!" she said. "Quit! You don't owe Gandler anything."

She also needed a lesson in arithmetic. Five years in the can equals ten years at five hundred bucks a month? Not bad pay. I know a lot of guys'll do five years in the can for money like that, like I did when the grand jury was going to blow the town off twenty years ago and I took the fall.

The grand jury was after Stutz, so I took the fall for Stutz. They had me on the

stand. I had to take the rap. Either that or spill my guts about the whole set-up in town and how Stutz had the town with all the cops on his pay roll. But I didn't talk.

I stood up and pushed my chair back against the table.

"Where're you going?" she asked quickly.

"It looks like I'm leaving."

"Where are you going?"

She ought to get a job in the district attorney's office. I could tell her how to ask him some good questions, too.

"I'm going out to get a new suit of clothes," I said. "Stutz thinks I've lost my taste."

"Dad," she said in a quick scared voice. It was no use, she would never understand. "Dad, please! Listen!"

It was no use. You couldn't help them by trying to explain it to them. A big house and cars and college and no worries, and you were only trying to keep it for them.

"Don't jump to conclusions," I said. "I'll see you in the morning, baby."

I turned.

"Dad!" she cried in the

same scared voice. "You'll—you'll—"

I thought she was going to scream, but she couldn't because she didn't know what to scream about. Mary hadn't told her about this job, because Mary didn't know about it. She knew only that I'd been called back to Cereal City but that was all.

I went back to the office and got the suitcase with the sawed off shotgun in it from Gandler. I went out feeling more alive than I'd felt in twenty years.

But it wasn't until I was half way to the apartment building that I knew why I felt so alive. This business about doing it for the family was wrong. That wasn't reason. How much can a guy kid himself?

I saw now that I'd always kidded myself on that score, and feeling the handle of suitcase now I knew why I was wrong, and why I felt proud at this moment. I'd never squealed. I'd never told. That was the thing.

I'd never told anybody about what went on in the town, about the gang and the

take and the fixes and who paid off and who got the ice. Nothing to anybody. Not even when the grand jury put the heat on me twenty years ago to bust the town wide open.

I'd been a stand-up guy then. I'd always been a stand-up guy. That was what count-

ed. That was the only thing. A real stand-up guy. Jim Porter. I felt pretty good thinking about it, and I started whistling, and whistled almost all the way through the park. On with the killing!

THE END

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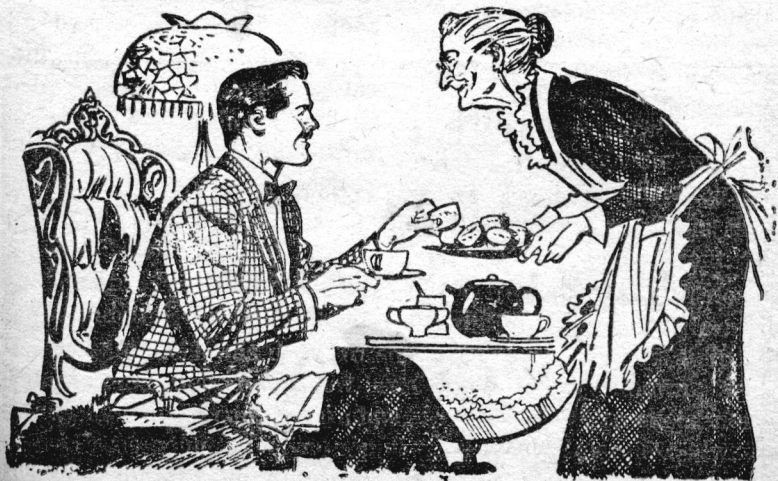
by RUSSELL THOMPSON

Mark had a nice neat little racket. It concerned death

MARK Prentice remained on the stage until the small auditorium was empty, watching the suckers leave. He wore a benevolent smile, but if anyone had been close enough to see his eyes, they would have

been startled by the look of contempt in them.

There had only been a couple of dozen in the audience, but that was usually enough for his purposes. Only certain kinds of people attended his lectures,



and out of those few there would be some who would get in touch with him later. He was satisfied to see that about six of his listeners had thought enough of his pitch to pick up one of the cheap booklets on the table near the exit, and to put a buck in the collection box. The percentage was right. If things went according to plan, one or two of them should be calling him at his hotel the next day.

The idea was all his, and he was proud of it. When the calls for his magic act got fewer and fewer, Mark began to think hard of other ways to use his talents as a magician. Not only was the hand quicker than the eye, but he could talk faster than people could think.

Part of his act had been a sort of seance on a dark stage, with bells and trumpets flying through the air, a table walking across the stage on two legs, and ghostly faces appearing and disappearing in the middle of the air.

He got the idea at the last stage performance he ever put on, when an old woman in the audience jumped up and screamed that one of the 'faces'

belonged to her dear, departed husband. After the show was over, she came backstage and begged him to 'contact' her husband for her at a private sitting in her home, and offered to pay him well. He had to turn down the offer, but it got him to thinking.

So, Mark the Magician vanished from sight after the act folded. Not long after, 'Professor' Prentice began to tour medium-sized towns in the mid-West. Often, he used a phony name.

Sometimes he had a beard and a mustache, or dyed his hair, or wore tinted glasses, until he crossed the border into another state and started all over again. Whether he disguised himself or not depended on how rough a deal his latest 'client' got from him.

In the last caper, for example, in another state, he had even managed to get away with the old "pigeon drop," where he convinced a woolly-brained old lady that he could help her materialize a small fortune—but first she had to turn over her savings to him so he could 'meditate' on it, while she held the thought. While she was

holding the thought, he packed up in the middle of the night and did a disappearing act.

Usually, though, he managed to make a good living from charging for his services. He had worked out a routine. He looked for towns that were big enough to have at least a weekly newspaper, a public library, and a small auditorium or an empty store that he could rent for a night.

Before he did that, though, he would use the reading room of the public library, looking just like any other citizen with time on his hands. He would get several back issues of the town's newspaper, not too old and not too recent. Then he would read the obituary columns carefully and take down notes.

It was amazing what you could learn about the deceased and their surviving relatives from a short notice. He would add to his knowledge by casing the joint where the departed one used to live, and watching to see who went in and out.

A week or so later, he would make his grand entrance into town. He would pay some kid to leave handbills at the front

doors of homes in the better part of town, then wait for the suckers to appear at his meeting on the following night. He always gave the same lecture on the Beyond, and the ones who fell the hardest for the pitch would always pay out a dollar for a copy of the little book with the so-called spirit-photographs, reproduced from old standard books on ghosts and mediums. His current address was always typed at the bottom of the front cover.

He could almost always count on getting a call next day—a call from somebody in mourning, begging him for a private interview.

Mark Prentice thought of himself as a sort of traveling ghoul, and got a big kick out of it. His conscience never bothered him, because he believed in never giving a sucker an even break.

As for the local cops, even when they got curious about him, they were no problem. After all, he was just giving a public, free lecture on the Beyond, not telling fortunes. And if some private citizen chose to call him in for a private sitting or a comforting talk in their

home—why, it was nobody's business but theirs.

He always got it across to the customer, delicately but firmly, that his time was precious, and that he counted on loving gifts from his clients to make a living—just so that he could go on spreading his message of hope, of course. Once he got inside somebody's home, he would warn the sucker not to tell anyone else about what went on. Some unbeliever might destroy their faith and prevent contact with the loved one.

Then he would hold the seance in a room with one candle for light, and pretend to go into a trance. With his training as a stage magician it was easy to make knocks come out of a table, or to make the table seem to rise by itself while his hands were on top, in full sight. Or he would use a ouija board, and tell things he had learned or guessed from the old obituary and other sources.

The poor dopes were so amazed and happy at getting a message from Beyond that they tripped over themselves to press money into his hands. They implored him to come back—and he did, again and again, until

he figured that the cow was milked dry. Then he moved on fast, and never left a forwarding address.

Mark Prentice liked his profession. The hours were short, the work easy, and the pay pretty good. Every so often, when he was really in the money, he gave himself a vacation. He would drop the "professor" act and hit some big city, where he would rent a fancy new car and make like a traveling salesman with a generous expense account.

He would turn on the charm—and flash an impressive roll of bills—in some swank bar, and before it closed up some dame with a classy chassis would be hanging on to his arm to make sure he didn't get away from her.

Yes, Mark thought, life can be beautiful. Or maybe it should be (and he chuckled at his own joke), "death can be beautiful"—as long as it was someone else's.

SO, he gave his prepared pitch in dear old Oakville on Sunday night, as usual. Sunday night seemed to give the whole

setup an air of respectability and reverence. Sometimes he almost felt like a preacher up there on the platform.

He spent the whole of Monday in his hotel room, passing the time by practicing sleight-of-hand in order to keep himself in top form. He had solemnly warned the desk clerk not to put through any telephone calls until evening, to tell callers that the "Professor" was in meditation. He knew that would impress the suckers so much that they could hardly wait until it got dark so that they could start calling up again.

Mark had dinner in his room. Then, at seven o'clock, he called the desk clerk, sounding as if he was doing the whole town a favor, and said he was ready to take calls.

In order to get numb enough to talk to the local yokels without the feeling that he wanted to puke at their whining and begging, he downed exactly two straight shots of vodka from the bottle hidden in the bottom of his trunk. Then he chewed on a piece of chlorophyll gum, just in case he got an early appointment for that night.

He didn't have long to wait. The telephone began to ring about five minutes after he gave the glad tidings to the stupid desk clerk. He picked up the receiver and announced himself in his deepest, most cultured tone of voice. He also managed to sound sympathetic and comforting at the same time.

The voice at the other end was that of an older woman. She beat around the bush, until Mark gently coaxed her into coming to the point. She said that she and her sister had heard his talk and read his book on the Beyond, and they were terribly interested in his message.

Mark frowned, because he could still detect a sort of hesitation or nervousness. But then, a lot of people were like that the first time, so he used his best sales talk and got the old girl around to asking him to come out to the house that night, in such a way that she thought it was her own idea.

When he finally got her off the line, Mark consulted his little notebook and smiled with satisfaction. It had been Hilda on the line—the older of the

two Dusenberry sisters. The younger one was named Tilda. Hilda and Tilda—now there was a pair, and both were spinsters. It seemed that their big brother Sam had passed to his reward a month ago, leaving them alone in the big house.

Mark had already cased it. It was really outside the town limits, set way back on a big lot and hidden behind trees and walls, and reached only by a dirt road that branched off from the highway. Still, it looked as though the family that had built it once knew what real money was—and there might be enough still left for the taking.

He put on his dark blue suit and black tie, and the thin rimless glasses, and practiced in front of the mirror until he found just the right expression—a sort of cross between a preacher and a family physician. Picking up his large, professional-looking briefcase, he left the hotel and got into the modest but clean-looking second-hand car he used for these occasions. He always tried to look respectable without looking like he made money.

It was completely dark by

the time he set out, but he remembered where to turn off the highway and just how far to drive up the dirt road to the big house. When he saw the yellow light glimmering through the trees, he turned on to the winding driveway until he came to the front steps, stopped and got out. The sisters must have been looking out of one of the heavily curtained windows, because the front door opened as soon as his foot touched the top step.

A tall, thin, grey-haired woman stood in the light of the vestibule. Mark remembered her as one of the suckers who came to his talk the night before. "I'm Hilda Dusenberry," she said. It was the voice he had heard earlier over the telephone. He bowed his head solemnly, stepping inside as she opened the door wider and stood aside for him.

He waited while she bolted the door, then followed her through dim, musty halls until they came to a big room that used to be called a parlor in older times. A smaller, plumper woman was sitting in a rocking chair, but she got to her feet as Prentice entered.

"Tilda," the older sister announced, "Reverend Prentice is here." The plump one did a sort of curtsy and mumbled something. Mark Prentice chuckled tolerantly and wagged one finger at them.

"No, no, dear ladies. It's not Reverend Prentice—just plain Professor Prentice, as I said before. I regret that I am not a man of the cloth, although I do have a calling and a message—a message of comfort for the bereaved." He put the tips of his fingers together in a pious gesture, and watched the hopeful expressions on their faces through lowered eyelids.

THEN Tilda finally found her wits and invited him to sit down in a hard, uncomfortable chair. Hilda bounced off to a remote corner of the house that must have been the kitchen, because she returned in a few minutes with a tray of cookies and iced ea. Mark hid his distaste and forced down two cookies and half a glass of iced tea while the two women stared at him.

"That was delicious," he lied, wiping his lips delicately with a napkin. "But now let us see

if there is a contact here." He closed his eyes for a moment, then said: "I sense the presence of Sam Dusenberry—yes—that is his name. He is very close to you—he is—he is your brother!" He opened his eyes to see what effect he had created, and almost laughed at the look on their faces. It was as if he had just told them the biggest secret in the world.

"Oh, yes, yes," Tilda sighed.

"My goodness," Hilda gasped.

As a matter of fact, Mark thought, they even looked a little scared. But that wasn't really too unusual, even in people who were anxious to contact their dear departed. So he thought no more of it...

"Perhaps he has a message for his beloved sister," Mark added, and opened the briefcase and took out the ouija board and set it up on the table at his elbow. He put his fingertips on the indicator. "Does either of you ladies have a question for the soul who has passed Beyond?" Through his slitted eyes, he could see the sisters exchanging scared looks.

Then Tilda spoke up, her voice a little shaky and hesi-

tant. "You might—you might ask him—ask Sam, I mean. If—if he wants to tell us—about the money. Yes—ask him about the money..."

Mark's ears pricked up at the mention of money, but he kept his face calm and his eyes closed. He began to think furiously. Since old Sam had no other relatives than his two spinster sisters, everything had been left to them. Then why the question about money?

Could it be that they wanted dear Sam's advice on how to invest it, perhaps? But he quickly rejected the idea. The question wasn't phrased as if they wanted advice—although he wished he could con them into some "investment" that would route the money into his greedy hands.

No, he reasoned, it wasn't that. It sounded more like they had expected to inherit more money than they actually got from the estate. He recalled that often an old-timer didn't trust banks completely, and liked to put aside cash in some private hiding place—and kept it a secret even though they knew they couldn't take it with them.

He remembered a story about an old beggar who died, and left thousands of dollars sewn up in the mattress of his bed. He decided to take a chance.

From long practice, Mark knew where every letter of the alphabet was on the ouija board. With his eyes shut tight, he moved the indicator around with his fingertips, spelling out a message slowly, letter by letter, so that they could follow it. He knew what they must be thinking—that Sam's spirit must be guiding his hands, since he couldn't see the board for himself.

The "message" was short, but it said that there was money hidden in the big old house. Then, Mark's hands slowed down, and stopped, as if the message was fading. He sighed and opened his eyes, and saw the sisters sitting on the edges of their chairs, looking at him with bright eyes.

"I'm so sorry, ladies," he said. "Your brother's spirit can tell us no more for a time. But perhaps I can help you. I am a sensitive, you see."

Tilda's eyes watered, and she smiled a sad little smile. "That

would be wonderful of you, Reverend—I mean, Professor Prentice.”

Mark looked down at his carefully manicured hands. “There is only one drawback,” he said regretfully. “My time is so limited, as you know. I have pressing engagements elsewhere...”

The sisters looked at each other, then Tilda spoke again. “If you help us find it, we would be very glad to give you a large donation—to aid you in carrying on your great work.”

Mark pursed his lips. “Perhaps—yes, it might just possibly be arranged. I shall have to send word ahead and cancel my next two or three lectures...” The women babbled at the same time, expressing their thanks for his great sacrifice, and again promised a generous donation to The Cause. Mark stood up, tall and dignified.

“Perhaps we could start tonight,” he suggested. “If you ladies would be so kind as to show me the house? I would like to feel the vibrations...”

They almost fell over each other in their eagerness to take him on the grand tour of the old house. They started with

the cellar, leading him down a long, steep flight of stairs. It was cold and damp down there. There were no windows. The floor and the walls were made of solid concrete. There didn’t seem to be a likely hiding place anywhere.

They took him through the rest of the house, while Mark memorized every room. He was already forming a tentative plan of coming back late at night when the sisters were asleep, in order to search the place for himself. If he found the money before they did, he would have it all for himself—not just a “donation.”

FINALLY, they completed the inspection of the house and came back to the parlor. The condition of some of the rooms showed that the greedy sisters had already done some searching on their own, but with no luck. But Mark was sure he could do better. He was a trained magician, familiar with all sorts of illusions and gimmicks.

He had formed some ideas about where the sly, suspicious old miser might have concealed a hoard of cash—but he wasn’t

telling the spinsters. So he just assured them that he felt mon-ey-vibrations in the house, and the greedy look on their pasty faces startled him.

He said he was too tired to go any further that night, but would return tomorrow. He didn't bother to mention that "tomorrow" meant the small hours of the morning, when they would be tucked in their beds.

Their gratitude knew no bounds. They insisted that he have a nightcap before he left. The offer surprised him, but he almost laughed when Tilda brought in another tray of cookies and cup of hot tea, and he realized that this was their idea of a nightcap. They insisted, and he wanted to keep them happy, so he managed to down some more of the stuff. Then he decided it was time to leave.

He was surprised to discover that he couldn't get out of the chair. He felt so relaxed. One of the sisters—it might have been either Hilda or Tilda—was asking him something. He had to concentrate to answer. No, he assured them, nobody knew that he had come out to see them that night—he re-

spected their grief and their privacy and would never expose them to the ridicule of unbelievers.

He said goodnight, and his mouth felt like it was full of cotton. he tried to get up, but was annoyed to find that his arms and legs refused to obey him. As a matter of fact, the next minute he felt like he had turned to wax, and slid from the chair to the floor. He lay on his back, his open eyes staring up at a ceiling that was going slowly around like the floor of a merry-go-round. He remembered the strong, bitter tea, and a terrible thought struck him. He managed to get out a strangled whisper.

"Poison," he croaked. "You poisoned me..."

"Gracious, no," one of the sisters protested. "We only drugged you a little."

The other sister added: "Just like that old skinflint, Sam, when he went for a drive and lost control of the car..."

Then he was aware that they were dragging him across the floor, puffing and panting. Then bumpety-bump on his spine, down the stairs to the basement where they left him

on the cold, damp stone. He heard the heavy door slammed shut at the top of the stairs, and then the sound of a bolt shoved home.

Mark didn't die. He recovered the next day, feeling as if he had the biggest hangover of all time. When his legs weren't so wobbly any more, he mounted the stairs and banged on the solid cellar door and shouted to be let out. In a few minutes somebody answered cautiously on the other side—it could have been Tilda or it could have been Hilda.

Whoever it was, she told him he would have to stay there until he could tell them just where the money was hidden. They were taking no chances on his leaving town for one of his important lecture engagements. And no, they would not let him out to help them search. No man could be trusted. He could tell them through the door, and when they found old Sam's money, they would let him go.

He tried to argue with them, telling them that he was just a fake. But of course they knew better—it was only an excuse

to get him out of his prison.

Later that day—or maybe it was the following day, as Mark lost track of time—he banged on the door and complained that he was hungry and thirsty. But they only scolded him like a bad little boy, saying that he would get nothing to eat or drink until he told them where the money was hidden.

Desperately, he began to make wild guesses, and he could hear them scurry off to look where he told them. Then, later, he would hear heavy steps approaching, and a shrill voice would come through the thick panelling, complaining that he was wrong—or else Sam's spirit was lying to him.

Mark's pitch had been too good this time, and he had found the perfect, completely believing suckers...

The sisters never gave in, and they never gave up trying, but they never did find old Sam's money.

And Professor Prentice never gave another lecture on the Beyond, although he learned all about it for himself...

THE END

THE UGLY WOMAN

by MICHAEL ZUROY

She wanted just one thing, it was something she wanted bad!



BRUCE woke up to darkness and a sense of being misplaced. Where was he? Where was a window? A wall?

A fuzzy thought came to him. There had been a blonde. He tried to visualize her, but her face was dim and her form unstable.

Another thought, more concrete, came to him. He'd been kidnapped.

He was lying on something soft. A bed. He pushed up, peering into the darkness. A rush of dizziness hit him. It was frightening to be dizzy in the dark. His head swivelled, seeking a gleam of light. If he did not find it, he felt he'd go crazy.

The dizziness blew up into a storm and he fell back, his head sinking into soft warmth. He rested in warmth and comfort. He was not oriented.

There was no relief to the darkness.

He resolved not to go crazy. Although frightened, he would hold on and think. Try to remember what had happened. Search for a fact.

Cocktail party.

A fact. The cocktail party had been a fact.

It opened up. He remembered.

"So you're an architect," the blonde had said, eyeing him up and down. "I don't think I've ever met an architect. What do you build?"

He'd liked the way her eyes ran over him. It produced a nicely creeping skin and a hollow below his stomach. He liked her type anyway, tall, with very light blonde hair and a milky skin, her body a utilitarian structure. She was not hard or sophisticated or blatantly sexy, but forthright and artless, a daughter of the earth at a cocktail party, which sometimes happened because anything could happen at a cocktail party.

He met her eyes and did not try to think an answer to her question. Instead, he thought of what he would like to do

to her. He thought it at her, eyes sounding eyes, and knew that she was receiving his communication. A little smile appeared on her lips.

He promised himself that before the evening was over he would have that pinkish gown off her.

He knew that his own animal appeal had reached her. He was not six feet two, solid-necked and haughty-featured for nothing. He closed his fingers on her arm, firm and hard, and said, "We'll talk that over. Let's pick up a couple of drinks and find a spot."

The apartment was owned by a wealthy stock-broker who derived a producer's enjoyment from gathering prominent, beautiful, eccentric or unusual people and watching the resultant lather. Harman's parties were always lavish.

Bruce had come to hunt, for a client or a girl or both. He had found that very few clients stumbled into his office or girls into his bed by chance. This was still a hunter's world, the way Bruce saw it, and if you weren't willing to go on safari after what you wanted you had better learn to be sat-

isfied with the leavings of fortune.

The party deployed before them, a human barnyard full of ragged sound, disguised under cloth and trappings, tinted, scented, lotioned; flashing teeth and eyeglasses with the spasmodic abandon of fireflies. It chomped, swallowed and worked facial muscles. From behind the governed words, silent emotions and thoughts peered.

BRUCE, twisting through the crowd with the girl, picked up the drinks and found a retreat against a wall. Her name was Wendy, Wendy Thomas. He worked on her slowly and lightly. Pleasantly, he could feel the beat pick up. A few more drinks and the rapport came, tense and exciting. They looked at each other, both feeling it, but not yet ready to plunge together.

A woman edged out of the throng and regarded them. She was short, thin and stoop-shouldered with a face that puckered to a focus at the short, broad nose. Her eyes swam behind heavy lenses. Her hair might have been built

from bankers-grey broadcloth. She wore rings on her fingers and jewels at her throat. She might have been anywhere between forty and sixty.

Wendy cried, "Oh, Emma. Bruce, I'd like you to meet a dear friend of mine, Emma Gilman, Bruce Reilly."

Bruce rose and acknowledged the introduction politely.

"Will you excuse me?" Wendy said suddenly and walked into the crowd.

Bruce looked after her, aghast. He'd been sure of her. Was this a brush-off?

"Do sit down." Emma tugged at his sleeve gently.

Mechanically, he sank back, following Wendy's progress with his eyes.

"Very attractive girl, Wendy," said Emma.

"Yes, Mrs. Gilman."

"Miss. Miss Gilman. Do you know, I've been watching you two for quite a while. What a lovely spark I discerned! Do you mind my saying that?"

I mind you butting in altogether, you fig-faced hag, thought Bruce, not saying it. After all, she looked monied. Where there was money a cli-

ent might lurk. "No," he growled.

Her hand touched his arm again, resting on it. He turned his head and found her eyes glowing into his face. "Not that I blame her," she said. "You really are a magnificent specimen, you know. We women do admire the brute male."

Startled, Bruce said, "Well, thank you. But she doesn't seem too interested in me right now." Wendy was on the other side of the room, smiling at a hawk-faced man.

"Oh, she'll be back. She likes you. I know Wendy. You'll be taking us home."

Bruce swung around again. "Us?"

Miss Gilman's laugh tinkled. "Don't look so dismayed, dear boy. Wendy and I live in the same house. That is, I own the building and Wendy has quarters there. It's a large house, I assure you, and I shall disappear at once. As a matter of fact, I have a chauffeured car waiting. Why not use that?"

Bruce eyed the woman warily. Too much interest here. Too much intrusion. Too much arrangement. He didn't like nosy,

ugly friends. Why was it that so many attractive girls seemed to chum with these plaintive blemishes? And they were invariably confidants, who avidly plucked for the most intimate details. Might as well have Emma Gilman looking over his shoulder after he got Wendy's pink gown off.

Well, the hell with Emma. If Wendy wanted him in her bed, he wasn't going to worry about Emma.

Through the smoke obscured crowd, he saw Wendy returning to him, her eyes liquid and desirous.

The chauffeured car had taken them to a narrow, five story house on Riverside Drive. Keeping her promise, Miss Gilman had immediately left them. Wendy had taken him to her apartment, and he remembered sitting in a chair so soft that his posterior seemed afloat, watching her hips swing as she prepared the drinks.

Then she had given him his drink, and he had finished it and that was where his memory ended.

Now, lying in the dark, he realized that the drink had been spiked. It must have been

a wicked drug to make him feel this miserable. He'd been taken, and while he was wondering for what purpose he fell back into unconsciousness.

THE next time he awoke, the darkness was gone. A pastel ceiling stretched above him sending down gentle indirect lighting. He was lying on a large bed in silky sheets. The feel of the sheets on his skin informed him that he was nude.

He looked around, and it became glaringly evident that he was a prisoner. The room was windowless, crossed at one end by closely spaced iron bars into which a barred door was set. Beyond the bars he could see a smaller room, sealed by a solid metal door. Actually, the whole was one large chamber, partitioned by the bars.

There was no other resemblance to a cell. The rooms were harmoniously furnished in the modern manner, discharging a feeling of quiet opulence. Deep broadloom covered the floor.

Experimentally, Bruce sat up. There was no dizziness. He left the bed and prowled about

the place. There was a small bathroom adjoining, windowless too, containing every toilet article a fastidious man might require, including shaving equipment. A little closet held just one article of clothing, a deep blue man's robe that smelled fresh and new. He put on the robe and felt better.

He also discovered a pair of fur-lined slippers in a plastic bag near the bed, and opened the bag and put his feet into the slippers. Comfortable.

There was no trace of his own clothes or personal belongings. The drawers of the twin chests held nothing but linens and another new robe, folded.

So.

It was evident he had been deliberately baited and trapped. Why?

There was a painful wound in his self-esteem. He had been a fatuous peacock, imagining that Wendy Thomas was panting over him while instead she'd been coldly plotting this. And undoubtedly her eye-sore friend, Emma Gilman, was involved too.

Why? He was sorely puzzled.

He meditated.

Giving it up as an idle job, he went into the bathroom and washed. Refreshed, the desire for food sprang into being. There was no clock in the room, and no way of knowing whether it was night or day. Judging from his hunger, he must have been out a long time.

The outer door opened, and Wendy Thomas walked in.

He regarded her through the bars, silently attempting to re-appraise her. It was difficult; she showed no mark of perfidy. Her eyes were as candid and blue as he remembered, her surface as fair and fresh, her hair as light as young summer squash. She was wearing an aqua sweater that dilated over hill and dale and coal black tights that delineated her rounded bottom and hips. The long calves of her legs swelled bare below the tights.

Smiling, she looked back through the bars at him.

Bruce spoke roughly. "What the hell is this, Wendy?"

"I can't tell you."

"What?"

"I'm not here to talk. You'll get an explanation from some-

one else. I'm supposed to entertain you."

"Entertain?" Bruce croaked. "Damn it, I'm in no mood for entertainment. I want to get out of here. I've got a business to take care of."

Wendy's voice took on a lulling timbre. "Bruce, honey, I really can't discuss this with you. You'll have to wait, but I'm going to make the waiting enjoyable. Why don't you just sit down and watch?" She moved to a cabinet and flicked a switch. Slow, throbbing music crept around the room. She whirled suddenly and struck a dancer's pose, arms upraised.

Mystified, but enticed, Bruce stared.

Wendy undulated. She wiggled before him in a leisurely, sensuous manner, eyes hooded and grown darkly violet. Her back arched and her limbs formed tender curves. Lazily, she swayed about the room in various craving postures.

The beat picked up. She whirled faster. Her hair tumbled and flew. Her mouth slackened and opened. Her eyes tranced. Her breasts loosened and bounded.

Bruce felt blood beating at

the base of his throat.

Wendy stopped the dance abruptly. Her eyes brooded into him and she smiled lingeringly. Her hands fastened on the hem of her sweater and rose slowly over her head, slowly uncovering.

Bruce saw that she was large, yet shapely.

She waited before him, still, nude, lovely, loose-lipped.

Fair and white.

Woman.

Bruce had known hot emotion before, but this was different. This was more. This was overwhelming, pounding, destroying control, belittling everything but this woman.

"Wendy," he rasped thickly. "Open that damn door and come in here."

Her smile grew brilliant. Her eyes absorbed his.

She turned her back on him and walked out of the room.

Heat grew under the blasting draft of frustration. Heat grew. Heat waned. Rage came. Waned. Longing came and stayed. Longing.

And bewilderment.

Why?

LATER, two bulky men appeared, bringing him food, drink and cigarettes, which they slipped through a wicket. They eyed him curiously, but refused to speak. His questions and requests might as well have been directed at empty air. They left.

He had nothing to do but think. There was no radio or television set in the room, no reading material, no writing paper. He was totally severed from the world he had recently been living in.

Bruce was not introspective. His mind was accustomed to coping with changing realities, sometimes dwelling briefly, but moving on. Now it was being forced back upon itself. It was being forced to mull.

It lingered upon the image of Wendy. Although it drifted, it kept returning to Wendy. The longing persisted.

After a while, he slept.

When he awoke, nothing had changed. He had found the light switch, and when he flipped it, the soft light returned him to his situation. Another meal came. Time passed. He walked, sat, cursed, thought. And waited.

She came again. This time she was wearing a demure, pearly gray dress. She began disrobing at once.

An angry flush spread over Bruce's cheeks and he strode to the bars. This was funny, but appealing, but insulting. Work him up, then let him down. He was being played with, manipulated, for some reason. Just as, from the moment he'd met her he'd been manipulated. He'd never played the helpless fool before. Resentment pulled him taut.

He spoke tight, hard words to her. She put on her accustomed smile, but making no answer, went on disrobing. He stopped talking when her skirt came off. Knowing what was under this day's prim attire, he found himself growing hot to see.

The flouncy underwear came off. For many minutes she displayed her glorious body to him, standing so near the barrier that he could almost touch her, walking lithely about, turning, posing sensuously, reclining and wriggling on a couch.

Then she left him.

Was she going to make a routine of this strip-tease? He couldn't take it too long. He'd explode.

He tried to put Wendy's body out of his mind, but there was nothing to do but speculate and think and dream. Desirous thoughts grew until nothing else had meaning. What the hell did she want of him? What the hell was behind this?

He had no way of tracking time, but it seemed that many days must have passed before she returned. When she did, he was reduced to gratitude; he was actually grateful that she had come back to break the tedium if only to tantalize him more.

This time she was nude when she walked in. She began to dance, wildly, passionately.

She stopped dancing and looked at him, flushed and breathless. She made a hesitant motion towards him, and he could have sworn that she was feeling as much desire as he was. But she turned and went away.

Was there going to be an end to this? Would she eventually

give to him? There was nothing to do but wait.

She came again. And many times, enough so that he lost track. But between each appearance the waiting was always long, so that suspense, tension and the power of the animal passion in him grew unchecked. She entertained him differently each time, but always ended by leaving him in a state of sickening frustration and raging libido.

Once, he refused to look at her. She began to talk then, and in her sweet, low voice told him in detail what she wanted him to do to her. When, at last, he turned his head, he saw that, nude, she was regarding him from the couch, her hips writhing. Hypnotized, his resistance broke.

The last vestiges of control and dignity seemed to leave him. The world he had known seemed hazy and unreal. There was only this soft room with its soft lights, and this woman, and the greedy desire within him. He had no other thoughts, no other emotions. He had been rendered into a blob of pure passion.

THEN came the time that the outer door opened, and it was not Wendy.

It was Miss Emma Gilman.

Her thin body clad in a sheer negligee.

The outer door clicked shut behind her. She walked to the bars, took a key from her pocket and unlocked the inner door. She entered and faced Bruce. Her eyes, behind their thick lenses, were intent and sharp.

"You need a woman," she said. She opened her negligee.

He looked at her. Her body was scrawny and angular. Her legs were straight sticks. But ... she was a woman.

"Not you," he said thickly.

"Me." Emma Gilman came closer. "The way you're feeling now, any woman will do. Even me, dear boy."

Lord help him, Bruce thought. It was true.

Her voice suddenly went higher and a look that was a little mad came into her eyes. "Take off your robe."

He obeyed her.

She stooped towards him, as though following her sharply seeking eyes. "You brute," she bit out. "You strong, magnifi-

cent beast. Quick. I won't wait."

He went at her hungrily, and she clutched him, moaning and whimpering, nails raking. Once, she sunk her teeth into his ear lobe. In his desperation, he minded nothing....

Afterwards, he looked at the puckered face next to him where he lay sideways on the bed and at the too even false teeth in the thin, dry mouth, and bleak depression and disgust pumped through him. But, at last he was clear-headed. He was himself again.

"So you're responsible," he said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For this."

"Only for this?" he regarded her morosely. "I can't believe it."

She sat up abruptly. "Only? You weren't feeling that way a while ago."

He was silent.

"I'm not an attractive woman," she said. "I'm ugly. Even repulsive, a man might say. I've always been that way. Wouldn't you say I'm repulsive?"

He was silent.

"Women need to be wanted," she said. "It's very important. What man would want me? Could a handsome brute like you ever desire me madly, desperately, terribly, unless...."

"Unless he were kidnapped, imprisoned and brain-washed. With the help of a piece like Wendy."

"Why not? I'm a rich woman. I can afford to satisfy my needs. My people are very loyal and tight-mouthed. I know how to keep them loyal. High pay, pleasant light work, luxurious environment. But more than that, I've discovered that people value their loved ones above themselves. I'm very benign towards their loved ones. Wendy, for example. I saved her mother's life by providing fearfully expensive medical attention. The girl will do anything I say. Anything."

"Apparently."

"That holds true for the rest of my...staff."

"Very interesting. But you've had your fun. Will you give me my clothes and let me go now?"

Emma Gilman regarded him

with a secret, mocking look. "No, dear boy, I have other plans for you."

"You can't keep me locked up forever. The police..."

Emma looked contemptuous. "The police. Very ineffectual about missing persons. Thousands of cases every year and almost none of them solved."

Bruce made a sudden violent motion and seized the woman by the throat. "I could throttle you right now."

"Delicious!" gasped Emma. "Part of the thrill. Danger from a dominating male."

Bruce stared at her, tightening his hands slightly.

"You can strangle me, of course. But my people know what to do in that event. You will die too, soon afterwards. Horribly. Very horribly, I assure you."

Bruce released her. She rose and put on her negligee. "Come," she said. "A little patience."

"I won't be kept here like a stud horse."

"Oh, I have better than that in mind. You might even be a little proud, if you knew."

SHE walked rapidly to the outer room and pressed a button. Almost immediately, the outer door began to swing open. Hastily, Bruce donned his robe.

Three men entered. Two of them were the burly attendants who brought him his meals. This time they were armed with wicked looking automatics. The third man was a stranger, tall, wearing a drab bow-tie under a long, narrow face.

The stranger looked towards Bruce with pale eyes that seemed to show appreciation. He stepped over and ran his long fingers through Bruce's thick dark hair. He caressed Bruce's neck. Stunned, Bruce was unable to move for a moment, during which the man pulled open his robe and ran his hand down Bruce's deep, broad chest to his flat, hard stomach.

"Beautiful," said the man in a melodious voice. "Wonderful physique."

Bruce regained the use of his muscles and shoved the man violently away. "Get this fruit out of here!" he roared. "What kind of a den was this?"

"That will do, Mr. Tipham,"

said Miss Gilman curtly. She motioned towards the attendants. They locked Bruce back in his cell, guns discouraging resistance.

"Now, will you gentlemen kindly wait outside?" requested Miss Gilman. "I won't be very long." The men left.

Emma looked very scrawny and withered and her eyes very large and swimming as she regarded Bruce. He couldn't figure this, he was thinking... He couldn't figure it at all. But, by God, when he got out of here, he was going to make this hag pay....

"Bruce," Emma said softly. "I really don't want to use you as a stud horse. What I wanted from you, I've already gotten, your sincere, uncontrollable desire for me. Dear boy, we had that moment together, didn't we? You'll never quite attain that with me again, will you?"

"D a m n right," growled Bruce. "You won't use me twice."

"Of course. Even if Wendy works on you, you'll know I'm waiting; it won't be the same.

So you see, I really don't want you anymore, except as a memory."

There was something about the way Emma said this.

"I have quite a few memories," she went on vacantly. "They're floating in brine in the tanks downstairs."

Something cold lightly touched Bruce's spine.

"You aren't the first," Emma said. "I like to look at them. My memories, I couldn't let them go, could I? They would have talked."

She's mad, Bruce thought. She couldn't mean this.

Emma smiled, her flat nose spreading. "But don't you worry, darling. I wouldn't put you into a tank. You're too strong and magnificent. I want you to be one of my special memories."

She regarded him fondly. As she turned to leave, she said, "By the way, I'm afraid you did Mr. Tipham an injustice. He's not what you said. Mr. Tipham's my taxidermist.... Good-bye, dear boy...."

THE END

STEPPING UP IN CLASS

by HENRY H. GUILD

Al wanted to advance himself,
be head man, fast, fast, fast



THE only nice thing about Al Nicely was his last name. Although openly scornful of most of the guys he'd gone to school with, he didn't avoid them, but they usually kept out of his way. They wanted no part of him.

That was okay with Al. He'd served a hitch in the army with most of those honest Joes, but when they all got out most of the other guys took a different outlook on life.

They got jobs, mainly in factories; most of them married and started raising families at once. Al Nicely used to watch the squares leaving with their lunch pails in the morning and returning at night to squawking wives and squalling brats.

Not Al. That kind of life was strictly for jerks, he reasoned. Al had never earned a so-called honest buck in his life and was

proud of it. Too many ways of making a fast buck and Al Nicely knew all the tricks. In his racket a guy didn't have to use his fists. A .45 carried the only real authority.

Al was born and raised on North Broadway in Los Angeles and got an early start in the rackets. At the start of his hitch in the army at eighteen, he was a tough, ruthless hood with the experience of a much older guy. What he learned in the army about self-defense added to his experience.

In Al's book nothing could beat the effectiveness of a .45, especially to a guy who had the guts to use it. It was inevitable that the word would get around and that meant becoming a member of the Northside crime syndicate.

Al had caught on with the syndicate a year ago, gradually stepping up from slop details to the big assignments. But oddly enough, being the top gunman in the organization run by Louie Martinez didn't satisfy him completely.

Al Nicely burned with an intense ambition to be the top man in the syndicate. He want-

ed to really step up in class; not only be a big wheel in the outfit, but the king of the hill.

Of course, the big problem was Louie Martinez. Louie was the headman and intended to stay that way. The big guy was no soft touch; he was tough and ruthless and ran the outfit with an iron hand. It looked like he'd be around for a long time.

That was the thing that really bugged Al Nicely. He was not a big wheel in the outfit, but did command respect and a great deal of fear as the top gunman. That wasn't enough.

Al was determined to step up in class; some day he'd be the king of the hill. When that time came, he would not miff the chance. He would use any means to attain that objective.

Now the idea was to play it cool and handle the assignments in an efficient manner. He'd go along with the strict and rugged discipline handed out by Louie Martinez, play it cagey and smart, then move fast when he had the opportunity.

When the big chance came along nobody would stop him. Al was sure of that. Not even Louie Martinez.

THE word reached Al late that Friday afternoon. Louie Martinez wanted to see him that night at seven; a private deal in the headman's office at headquarters on North Broadway.

The headman never had private interviews with punks. A real important assignment, Al decided. He carefully checked his .45, then slipped it into his shoulder holster. Al too, had something real important in mind.

He arrived at headquarters shortly before seven that night. He went upstairs to Martinez's private office, knocked sharply on the door, then entered when he heard the gruff voice.

Louie Martinez looked up as the big kid walked in. He was sitting behind a big desk in the middle of the room. The headman had black hair, bushy eyebrows and smoldering black eyes that stared right through a guy.

"Hello Al," he said. "Pull up a chair. Let's talk."

Al nodded. His eyes ran over the tailored suit the headman was wearing and glued themselves to the glistening rock on

the ring finger of his right hand. He waited.

The man behind the desk smiled as he watched the big kid. He wasted no time in getting to the point. "Al, you want to be a big wheel in my outfit?" he asked.

"That's what I want," Al said.

"You don't like being my top gunman? You've handled the job pretty good in the past year," the headman said.

"It's okay, Louie. I only want to get ahead, become one of your real big wheels. I can handle it."

The dark man smiled. "Yeah. I think you can. I've been watching you for a long time and now I think you're ready."

Al frowned. "Ready for what?"

"Ready to step up in class, Al."

"You got me interested, Louie. Keep talking."

The headman's lips tightened as his eyes hardened. "First, you've got to handle one big assignment at ten o'clock tonight. You handle it right and you're in, kid."

"I'll handle it right, Louie. What's the assignment?"

"I want you to blast Sid Benson!"

"Sid Benson?" The name came out of Al's mouth like an explosion. "Jeez. The top man of the Eastside outfit?"

"Yeah, that's the guy. You know him. We all know him."

"Sid's a real tough cat," Al protested. "He's got a real rough mob back of him. I ain't talked to the guy for a long time. It ain't healthy for us guys to go into the Eastside."

The dark man frowned. "I said it was a real rough job, kid. It ain't going to be easy. That's why I picked you."

The big kid's face paled. "I can handle any assignment," he snapped. "But I don't feel like walking into Sid's Eastside headquarters and blasting the guy. I still want to live. I don't feel like committing suicide."

Louie's face flushed. "Listen, kid. Give me credit for having some brains. I got this whole operation all planned."

"I'm sorry, Louie. Just give me the setup."

"That's better, Al. This is a tough assignment that takes a lot of guts, but I figure you can handle it."

"I can handle it, Louie.

What's the deal?"

"You gotta take some chances on a job like this, but I want you to come out of it alive. After you blast Sid Benson I'm going to make you my number two man in the organization."

"That's fine, Louie. That's what I want."

"Okay. I said the whole operation was planned, so listen real close." Louie handed the big kid a small card.

"What's this? This ain't the address of their headquarters," Al protested.

"That's right, Al. That's the address of a bungalow near Soto Street. Every Friday night, at ten o'clock, that lousy punk Sid Benson goes there. He stays all night."

Al grinned. "A broad?"

Louie returned his grin. "Right. A broad and what a dame. A smart little piece. She works for me."

Al sucked in his breath. "A decoy to set up the pigeon?"

"You catch on fast, kid. She's been playing the sucker for the last three months. For a while, Sid took his bodyguard Sammy along, but now he goes there alone."

Al nodded as the headman went on, "You get the picture? Every guy has got a weakness and Sid Benson's is women. I just been waiting for the guy to get careless so that we could take care of him. That time is here."

Al nodded. "With just him and the dame and with Sid's mind on nothing else but the broad, he'll be a sitting duck."

"You get the picture, kid. I told you the whole thing was planned. I started working on this deal six months ago, but the job has to be handled right—no slipups."

"I'll handle it right, Louie."

"I figured you would, kid. Okay. You got about two hours. Get there at ten. Wait a few minutes for Sid to get going with the broad, then you know what to do."

"Sure. I'll ease into the joint and surprise the guy. Blast the punk and then scam. What about the dame?"

"Forget about the dame. You blast Sid Benson. That's your job. The dame knows what to do."

"Okay, Louie. Then what?"

"Drive back here to headquarters. Be careful. I'll be

waiting for you. When you get here we talk about the future."

"Okay, Louie. Consider the job done." Al got up to leave.

He turned as he heard the gruff voice. "Kid, you handle this right and you'll be a real big wheel in the outfit."

"I'll handle it right. With Sid Benson blasted, you'll need a big man to help you. Maybe to run the Eastside outfit?"

The man behind the desk scowled. "Later, Al. We talk about that later. Okay?"

"Okay, Louie. We talk about that later."

AL grinned as he left the office. He was still grinning as he drove away from headquarters in his car.

Al Nicely had about two hours to kill before it was time to send Sid Benson off to join a few of his ancestors.

He drove his car a mile away from the Northside headquarters and pulled up across the street from a drug store. He sat in his car for a short time. Al was doing some thinking about the big break that had come his way.

Quickly, he made up his

mind. Thinking was okay, but this was something that called for action. Action backed up by his .45. He got out of the car and walked to the drug store.

He entered the store and walked to one of the enclosed phone booths. He dialed a number, talked briefly, then left the store. He got in his car and drove toward the Eastside.

There was a big grin on the kid's face as he kept the car at around thirty. He yanked out the card that Louie had given him and tore it up. Al wasn't driving to the bungalow at ten that night. He was headed for the headquarter's building of the Eastside mob headed by Sid Benson.

It was shortly after eight when he pulled in to the lot adjoining the building that was the Eastside syndicate headquarters. He parked the car and walked rapidly toward the building. The joint looked real quiet, was almost in darkness.

He reached the front door and knocked sharply. A panel in the door slid open and an ugly face stared out at him.

"Hello S a m m y," Al said. "Sid's expecting me."

The big goon nodded and

opened the door. Al stepped in and looked around. The room was empty. He stared at the big ugly brute who was the chief bodyguard for Sid Benson.

"Sammy, I said that Sid was expecting me," he said.

"Yeah, I know," the big guy sneered. "Come on."

Al followed the big guy up the winding stairway to the upper floor. He knew it was a big risk stepping into the lair of the rival gang, but his plan called for taking big chances. He patted the .45 in his shoulder holster.

Sammy knocked on the door, opened it and motioned for Al to follow him into the room. He closed the door and waited.

Al looked at the little guy sitting at the desk that damned near hid him. Sid Benson was on the small side, with sharp gray eyes, thinning brown hair and a flat, expressionless face.

"Okay, Al. Draw up a chair and sit down," he said.

Al looked at Sammy as he sat down, then stared at Sid. "What I got to say to you is private, Sid," he said.

The little guy smiled. "Okay Sammy. I'll see you later."

The big bodyguard silently left the room. Sid Benson kept staring. "Supposing you tell me all about that telephone call you made a few minutes ago," he said.

"I got something real big in mind, Sid," Al began.

The little man broke in, "Okay, kid, but make it snappy. I gotta be someplace at ten o'clock. I got an appointment."

"Yeah, Sid. I know. At ten o'clock tonight, you got an appointment with death." He watched the little guy.

Sid Benson's face twitched. "What the hell you talking about, kid? What do you know about ten o'clock tonight?"

"Sid. Listen close. At ten o'clock tonight you were to be with a dame in a bungalow offa Soto Street? Right?"

Benson's face paled. "How the hell did you know that?"

Al grinned. "Because I was supposed to blast you tonight at ten o'clock. Orders from Louie Martinez."

"Then that bitch is..."

"Right. A decoy, working for Louie."

"Why, that lousy bastard. And the dame; I'll take care of that bitch, for sure."

"Later, Sid. Later. Listen to me first."

"Okay, keep talking. But I don't get you. Why tell me all of this? I don't get your angle."

"Listen, Sid. I took one hell of a chance coming here. Well, I'm going to take a bigger chance. You play ball with me and we both will be in real big."

Sid's crafty eyes narrowed. "How do I know if I can trust you? I still don't get your angle."

"You can trust me. I already saved your life, ain't I?"

"Yeah. Keep talking, kid. I'm getting interested."

"Good. Sid, I gotta deal, but I need your help. It's a double cross to end all double crosses. Still interested?"

"Yeah. Keep talking. It better be good or you ain't going to keep talking very long."

Al's lips tightened. "It's real good. Louie Martinez expects me to blast you, then report back to him. Then he says he'll make me a big wheel in his outfit, but that ain't good enough. I want to be the head-man and..."

Sid broke in, "Where do I come in, kid?"

"Listen and you'll find out. Here's my plan. I go back to Louie after he thinks I blasted you. Then I blast him!"

Benson whistled. "You blast him then what?"

"That's when I need your help, Sid," the big kid said. "Blasting Louie will be the easiest part of the deal. After I do that, I scam outta the joint and hurry back here."

"Then what, Al?"

"You have a small bunch of guys lined up with Sammy in charge. We go back and take over the Northside outfit. With Louie dead, it will be a breeze."

The little man kept staring at Al. "Okay. We take over Louie's outfit, then what?"

Al grinned. "I take over as headman of the Northside outfit. You keep on running the Eastside, but from then on we work together. We control all of the North and Eastside."

"We merge the two outfits in one big syndicate?"

"That's right, Sid. We work together instead of fighting each other and we increase the take. Then we split the gross right down the middle. This will really be a big deal."

AL stared at the little man and waited for his reaction. Sid Benson was doing a hell of a lot of thinking. Finally, he grinned. "The deal sounds crazy, but it might work."

"Sid, we can't miss."

"A real crazy deal, but I'm interested," the little man said. "I guess I can trust you after all. I owe you my life right now. But why didn't you blast me and then blast Louie?"

"Sid, I told you. One guy can't handle it. I need your help to take over Louie's outfit. Is it a deal?"

Sid Benson nodded. "A real crazy deal. Crazy enough to work. Okay kid. You got a deal."

"Good. After I blast Louie, I come back here and see you. Have some of the guys take care of the broad so she won't talk."

"Yeah. I'll sure do that."

"Okay, Sid. Then we move in fast and take over the Northside outfit. After that, we can make arrangements to work together. We'll go over the whole setup."

"Okay, Al. You got a deal."

The two men got up and shook hands. "Sid, I'll see you later, maybe around eleven. Then we move fast. Okay?"

"Okay, kid. What kind of a double cross did you call this?"

Al grinned. "A double cross to end all double crosses."

Sid Benson laughed. "That's a good one."

"See you later, Sid." Al glanced at his watch, then left the room. He saw no one as he walked down the stairway, opened the front door and walked to his car.

He was grinning as he drove away. This was going to be a real big night. And it was only the start. Sid Benson didn't look too tough to him. Maybe in time, Al Nicely could take over both outfits. Why not? All it needed was a little planning and some real fast action. Some real fast action.

After Al left the Eastside headquarters he drove to a side street and parked his car. He smoked about half a pack of cigarettes and kept looking at his watch constantly.

It was ten-fifteen when he finally started up the car and drove carefully back toward

the North Broadway sector of town.

He turned into the parking lot of the Northside syndicate and parked his car. He checked his .45 as he walked to the back of the building. He used the back stairways.

Al walked up the back stairway and paused at the door to Louie's office. As far as he could determine no one had seen him enter the building. Without knocking, he opened the door.

Louie Martinez looked up with a scowl on his face as Al entered. "What's the big idea, kid? Don't you knock?"

Al grinned. "I forgot Louie. Just forgot."

The big man gave him a puzzled look. "Well? You take care of the assignment?"

"Not yet, Louie."

Louie glared. "What the hell do you mean, not yet?"

Quickly, Al yanked out the .45 and walked toward the big man. "I made a little change in the assignment, Louie. I didn't blast Sid Benson. I got a different idea."

Louie jumped out of his chair and walked toward the big kid. He stopped abruptly

when Al rasped. "Hold it, big man."

The kid raised the .45 and pointed it at Louie's skull.

"You crazy, punk kid," the big man sputtered. "What the hell's the matter? What do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm going to kill you, Louie!"

The threat was gone from the big man's voice. "Why, Al?" he pleaded. "Why this crazy caper? I told you I'd make you the number two man as soon as you blasted Sid Benson."

"That's not good enough, Louie. I'm going to be the number one man; the headman of this outfit."

"You won't get away with it, kid," Louie said hoarsely. "You kill me and the gang downstairs will tear you to pieces."

tering step toward him. "Kid,

"Let me worry about that, you big slob."

Al watched the panic whip across the big man's face as his finger tightened on the trigger of the .45. Louie took one fal-you can't do th..."

He never finished the sentence. The roar of the .45

sounded like a cannon in the room. Al watched the big man fall heavily to the floor. He walked over and pumped two more slugs into the bloody mess that had once been Louie Martinez's face.

Quickly, he walked out of the room. He ran down the back stairs, smiling as he heard the pounding feet rushing up to the office of the late Louie Martinez. He ran to his car and started it. With a loud roar of the engine and a shattering screeching of the tires he tooled the car out of the yard.

He slowed down as he turned into North Broadway and headed to First Street. The first part of his plan was completed. Now to see Sid Benson and carry out the rest of it. He turned east on First Street and headed toward the Eastside headquarters.

IT was a few minutes past eleven when Al Nicely pulled into the Eastside building. He walked to the front door, rapped sharply, then entered when the door was opened by Sammy.

"Everything okay?" Sammy asked.

"Yeah. Let's see Sid right away," Al answered.

He followed the big goon up the stairway and into the office.

Sid looked up. "You blast big Louie Martinez?"

"Yeah. We're all set. Let's get going," Al said.

He turned and looked at Sammy. The big hood didn't move. Al looked at the little man sitting behind the desk.

"Okay, Sammy," Sid said. "Get going on that little deal we talked about." The big guy left the room.

Al frowned. "Come on, man. Let's get moving real fast. That mob over on the Northside are going nuts right now with big Louie Martinez laying on the floor with his face looking like a jungle cat had ripped it to pieces."

Sid gave him a thin smile. "No hurry, Al. My boys already took care of the broad and right now they're on their way to take over what's left of Louie's outfit."

Al snarled, "What the hell you talking about? That's an operation that I'm in charge of. All you do is help me."

"Relax, kid, relax. Every-

thing is being taken care of."

"Listen, you little jerk," Al snarled. "Remember our agreement? This is my operation; you just help me take over, then we merge and run the two outfits."

"That's what you think, sucker," Sid sneered.

Something was stinking rotten, Al realized. The plan was fouled up. He patted the .45 in his shoulder holster.

"Sid, maybe you better explain a few things to me."

"Sure kid, sure. Sit down and relax." Al didn't move as the little guy went on, "I like your idea up to a certain point, but when it comes to splitting the take, no deal."

"Keep talking, Sid."

"Kid, you just did a job for me that I figured on doing for a long time. Blasting big Louie Martinez. But I intend to run the whole operation myself now."

"And what about Al Nice-ly?"

"Al, I like your style. I can make a place for you in my outfit. Nothing real big yet, but a spot. You understand?"

The bitter realization that he'd been played for a champ

sucker hit Al like a bolt of lightning. His own sweet double cross was now being offset by another double cross that made his pale into insignificance. Any talk now was useless.

His hand snaked into his coat and grabbed the .45. He whipped it out, then went into a deep freeze.

"Hold it, punk," he heard Sammy say.

Al turned and saw the big goon standing at the door. He stared at the .45 pointing at his guts. He was sweating as he realized he'd been set up for a prize chump.

To hell with the bastards. He'd shoot his way out. First Sammy, then the little double-crossing bastard in back of the desk. Then he felt the sting of the slug and heard the roar of the .45 when he started to raise his own gun.

His .45 flew out of his hand. He stared down at the blood gushing out of his forearm. He turned as he heard the calm voice.

"Good work, Sammy. You handled it just right," Sid said. "You send the boys over to the Northside?"

"Yeah, Boss. They're taking over right now," Sammy said. "When do you want me to blast this lousy punk?"

"No hurry, Sammy. Maybe he wants to talk some more."

Al turned to the little guy. "Look Sid," he pleaded. "I'll go along with your deal. Just make a spot for me—any spot is okay. Whatever you say and..."

Sid broke in, "Kid, you're just a dumb lousy punk. You think I could trust a guy who'd blast his own headman?"

"Sid, I'll stay in line. After all, this whole deal was my idea. You gotta admit it was a good one."

"Listen punk," the little man snarled. "In this outfit I make all the decisions. I don't want double-crossing guys with too much ambition around me. Just guys who follow orders."

"What you going to do, Sid?"

"Can't you guess, kid?"

"Sid, I..."

"Shut up, you goddam lousy punk. Just shut up. I got no further use for you." Sid's eyes narrowed as he turned to Sammy and made a motion.

Al turned and faced the big goon. There was no expression on the flat face of the big hood. Slowly, he raised the gun, pointing it at Al's head.

Panic whipped across Al Nicely's face as he saw the finger tighten on the trigger. In one last brief mental flash, he realized that a little ambition was fine—stepping up in class was fine—but too much ambition and too little planning could be the death of a guy.

He was done. He was finished. As he made a desperate

grab for his .45 lying on the floor, he heard Sid's voice say, "Okay, S a m m y. Go ahead. Blast the lousy, two-bit punk."

Al never managed to grab the .45. He never felt the bullet that damned near ripped his face off. He hit the floor with a dull thud. His body gave a convulsive quiver, then was still as two more slugs tore into his face.

Al Nicely had failed to step up in class.

THE END



WALK AWAY FROM DEATH

by HARRISON SMITH

I was scared but still capable of some violent action

I was scared, scared all the way down to my pants.

It's not that I'm a coward. A weak sister couldn't last in the marines, and I was a judo instructor in Parris Island for a while. And after that I did

my share in Korea.

Of course, as a guy gets older and gets a little more sense, he slows down a bit, becomes a little cautious; but that doesn't mean he's a coward. He might not look for trouble, but that



doesn't mean he'll run if trouble comes looking for him.

But I was scared now. Real scared.

Shaking scared.

From where we live it's about a mile to the nearest movie house. Usually after our Sunday dinner Marie and I drive down there. I like one night a week away from the typewriter. But tonight, the weather being so nice, spring in the air and all that, we decided to walk to the movie and home.

Almost like being young again, walking hand in hand, eating popcorn, laughing together, real fun time.

It was about a quarter to twelve when we left the movie and started back home.

We'd seen *North To Alaska*, and laughed so much our sides hurt. I still can't understand how they can stage those rough-house fights without anyone getting hurt. And those scenes in the mud, they were the greatest. I'd like to write something like that.

We were walking along Handen Boulevard. This is a small main street in the suburbs.

There are stores in groups for several blocks, then there are a few sparsely settled blocks, then some more stores. It's not entirely deserted, but you can go for a few blocks and see little sign of activity.

We were passing Bolger's delicatessen, which was the only store in one deserted area and about six blocks from where we lived. I'd noticed earlier on our way to the movies a sign in the window which read: Closed due to death in family, will reopen Tuesday.

Marie was laughing and said, "And that Ernie Kovacs, when he got up, with all that mud—"

The surprise was complete; we didn't have time to think.

We were just in front of the big plate glass window of the delicatessen when the four punks jumped out of the darkened doorway. A red neon beer sign cast eerie devilish shadows across their crime-hardened faces.

Two of the black-jacketed hoods grabbed Marie and yanked her away from my side. Before she could utter a cry, they had her arms pinned to

her sides and one of the punks clamped a grimey paw over her mouth. They dragged her toward the curb.

I took a step toward her, shouting, "Get your goddam filthy hands off of my wife." Frantically, I glanced up and down the avenue, seeking help. The street was deserted.

The biggest of the group jumped between us. He looked about six-foot-one and must have weighed about 190. His black leather jacket flapped loosely and his right hand jutted forward.

I heard the *snick* as the blade of his switch knife sprang out, saw the glint of the street lamp on the bare steel. I began to tremble and the bile was bitter in my throat.

"What the hell is this?" I demanded, not able to keep the tremor out of my voice. I tried to feel brave, but I couldn't.

Marie was struggling helplessly in the grip of the two hoods and I heard her moan. I glanced past the punk in front of me. Marie was trying to squirm away as the third hood probed under her coat with his hands.

He said: "How do ya like

that, baby? I think you'd really get hot with the right spark, huh, baby?"

I pushed forward with a curse and the punk with the knife rested the blade against my throat. He was so close I could smell the beer on his breath. I knew they must have broken into the delicatessen and spent the evening drinking stolen beer. And after they were tanked up they had the courage to grab the first unarmed couple that happened to walk along the street.

The sharp point of the blade drew blood and I felt it trickle down my neck. I was scared. But not for me—for Marie.

Blind rage began to boil up inside me.

I glanced again at Marie. The punk was pushing one hand down the front of her dress, a leer on his moist lips.

"Feels good, eh, baby?" he grinned.

Marie was struggling violently shaking her head, trying to break loose from the grip across her mouth. She managed to get her lips free and she started to scream.

I watched, helplessly, ashamed.

The big guy with the knife at my throat glanced quickly around at Marie and the three punks.

The distraction was all I needed.

I don't know how I did it. The rules of judo were long forgotten, but instinct prevailed. I reached up, grasped his wrist, gave a sudden lunge and a twist and I had him in an arm lock, his lithe body bent forward. With my left hand I grabbed a fistful of oil-slick hair and pulled his head back till the thick neck-muscles strained and bulged.

He dropped his knife to the ground. His voice, a choking sob, gurgled in his throat and he breathed, "Take it easy, daddy-o we was only kidding."

The other punk pulled his hands from Marie's breasts and turned toward me. "Sure, dad," he mouthed, "like, we was only having a little kicks. We wasn't goin' to hurt your queen." He took several steps toward me, empty hands outstretched.

"Let her go," I grated, "or I'll break his neck."

"Okay, okay," one of them

mumbled. They released Marie's arms and stood there, arms dangling, slavering lips hanging wide.

I watched as the one punk approached. He took another step. And another.

Then I acted.

Still holding the big punk in an armlock, I pivoted sharply to the left, releasing his head just as his face smashed into the plate glass window.

There was a terrific crash as shards of glass came boiling down to the sidewalk. A cardboard beer advertisement went tumbling into a corner, the empty brown bottles tumbling and smashing. One end of the electric beer sign broke loose and it dangled, swaying back and forth, casting a wavering red glow into the street.

The punk gave a scream which tapered off to a bubbling gurgle. Another chunk of window glass clattered down, striking him alongside the head and neck. Blood spurted from his jugular vein.

I sprang back; turned to face the others.

The other punk was still coming toward me, his face a mask of hate, but now he had

his blade clutched in outstretched hand.

Quickly I bent down and grasped a long, pointed shard of glass. I whipped a handkerchief from my pocket, wrapped it around my hand and stood ready with 18 inches of razor-sharp weapon in my fist.

"Come and get it," I snarled.

The punk faltered; glanced over his shoulder. His two buddies were still standing near the curb, mouths hanging. Their eyes darted to the spurt-ing blood of their fallen leader.

"Come on, cats," the punk grated, "let's take him."

They seemed to get their wits back and slowly closed in.

The other punk took another step. I lashed out with my glass rapier. The hood jumped back a step and I missed.

Again he started forward.

I lunged, breath hot in my nostrils. My spear caught him high on the left cheek, ripped through muscle and flesh and left his ear dangling by a few threads of skin. He screamed and collapsed to the sidewalk, both hands clasped to his face, trying to stem the flow of blood. He rolled over several times, moaning in agony.

The other two closed in fast, knives flashing.

I braced myself for the attack, my "blade" held firmly in front of me. They came in from each side, flanking me. I fainted with my weapon. I wanted to glance past them, to see if Marie was all right, but I didn't dare take my eyes from them.

I fainted again, jabbing at the hood on my right.

He jumped back, gasping, and the other one lashed out with his foot, his voice a low growl.

Pain flashed up through my arm and my weapon went flying and shattered on the edge of the curb. I heard the rending of cloth; felt the searing stab of pain as my left arm was ripped to the bone by slashing steel.

Blood, warm and sticky, gushed down my wrist, and a wave of nausea washed over me. I bit my lips to hold back the pain.

I lashed out with my good right arm, grasped a fistful of matted hair and spun around. I heaved with all my strength. There was a rending crash as the punk dove head-first into

the remaining piece of plate glass window. The swaying neon sign fell in a shower of sparks and winked out. The punk's scream was drowned in the noise as the glass shattered, spewing across the concrete.

The remaining punk stopped in mid-stride. He was alone, now. His arms hung loosely. His vapid eyes darted to his three companions, lying in the clutter of broken glass, drowning in their own blood. His mouth sagged. He breathed heavily, nostrils flaring, and he ran one dirty hand through his thick mop of uncut hair. His mouth sagged. He closed his switch-blade; put both hands in front of him, pleading. Fear rose in his face; came into his eyes.

I could almost smell his fear.

"I've had enough," he cried. "I've had enough mister."

"I haven't," I snarled, leaping forward.

He turned to run, legs rubbery.

I grabbed him by the back of his collar, yanked him off his feet and slammed him down.

He landed on his back on the sidewalk and threw his arms over his head to protect his face. He was whimpering, now.

Whimpering—and scared.

Scared, like I was. . .

I lashed at him with bleeding knuckles, splitting his lips with the first blow. Blood flowed. I took him by the hair and rapped his skull against the concrete a dozen times. Then I stood up and stomped him. I kicked in his ribs; I ground my heel into his crotch; I slammed my foot against his head, and again, until he stopped moaning. I used both feet on his face, till it was a bloody pulp.

Marie was tugging at my sleeve. "My God, Larry," she cried. "Stop it, stop it! You'll kill him. Larry, Larry, please."

"I intend to," I grated, and stomped on his crotch again.

Suddenly like a breath of fresh air, sanity returned.

I looked around at the others. The punks were still lying where they had fallen. One was breathing; two were not.

My arm ached. My body ached. Pain seemed to block out all other feeling. I looked

down at my hand; saw the clotted blood on my fingers; my slashed coat. I looked at Marie.

She was standing near the curb, hands covering her face, and sobbing. Her shoulders shook; she was trembling.

I went over to her, put my good arm around her waist and started to lead her away.

She uncovered her tear-stained eyes, peered up at me. "But, Larry," she said tremulously, "you're not going to

leave them there like that, are you?"

I pulled her close to me. "How do you think they would have left us?" I asked. "How do you think they would have left you?"

She shuddered. "But but—the police?" she asked.

"They'll find them," I said. "In time."

We turned, and walked away from death.

THE END



DEADLY CALL GIRL

by RAY McKENSIE

Anita was an expensive girl,
she could cost a man's life



JACK Donovan said, "I don't know if this sort of thing interests you or not, Fred. But I got the number of the sweetest little tootsie you could imagine, last week. She's expensive, but worth every penny. If you go in for that sort of thing."

Seated across the table from Donovan at the expensive restaurant, Fred Markell toyed with his highball glass and said, in a voice that tried to be casual, "What's she like, Jack?"

Donovan shrugged. "Blonde. Tall. Twenty-one, twenty-two. She hasn't been in the business long, no more than six or eight months. She was married for a while when she was around eighteen, but she went into the call-girl business after the marriage split up."

Markell nodded, trying to hide the inner stab of desire from his lunch companion. "Stacked?"

"I'll say! But she isn't a cow, mind you. She's bosomy without being sloppy. Big and firm, even when she's stripped. And everything else in proportion. This girl is strictly calendar-girl stuff."

"What about the bedroom department?"

"She's a pro, isn't she?"

Markell nodded again and took a quick drink. He felt himself bursting out into a cold sweat. He had always envied Jack Donovan's freedom to make his way from one bedroom to the next. Donovan had never let marriage tie him down, the way Markell had.

Markell said cautiously, "What's the rate?"

"Say, you really *are* interested, aren't you!"

Markell's voice was tight and thin. "Sure I'm interested, Jack. Don't I have a right to be?"

"I thought you were a good faithful husband."

"Most of the time," Markell said. "But it isn't worth it. It just isn't worth it. Janet and I have been miles away from each other psychologically for a good two years now. If I had one more drink in me, I'd tell

you about our sex life. Hell, I'll tell you anyway. It's been lousy lately."

"That so?" Donovan said sympathetically.

Markell leaned forward across the table and stared at the oval, pudgy face of the man opposite him. In a low, conspiratorial whisper he said, "I tell you confidentially, Jack, we aren't getting along at all. Not at all. Something's happening to Janet. She's turning frigid. I don't know what it is. But it's driving me crazy, Jack. Absolutely crazy."

"Maybe she's worried about getting old," Donovan suggested. "That sometimes fouls up a woman's nerves."

Markell laughed. "Old? Hell, she's thirty-three. *Thirty-three*, Jack! She hardly has a wrinkle. She's still got her figure. If she's old, what am I? What are you? We're forty; for Pete's sake! No, it isn't that. It's—I don't know. Some kind of neurosis. All I know is she hardly seems to like sex any more."

"So you're in the market for a call girl?"

Markell nodded. "Yes," he said. "I figure it's simpler that way than starting a love affair.

Love affairs lead to complications. Call girls don't."

THEY had another drink apiece. Markell was starting to feel relaxed, now that he had managed finally to confess to a sympathetic friend what had been bothering him for so many months. He had always been devoted to Janet, had not, like so many businessmen in his income bracket, gone on from one extramarital affair to the next. But he couldn't go on any longer. He was a virile man, he had certain healthy desires that his wife was failing to satisfy.

He had to look elsewhere.

He said, "What does she charge?"

"Twenty-five bucks for the regular thing," Donovan said. "She'll give you an hour of her time for that. There's a sliding scale for specialties, if you go in for stuff like that. And it's a hundred bucks for all night. It's about standard."

"Fine," Markell said. "Give me her telephone number, will you?"

Donovan took a page from his note pad and printed the number laboriously. "Here," he said. "It's an answering serv-

ice. You call up and leave your phone number, and then when she gets around to it she calls you back."

Markell pocketed the slip. "You won't say a word to Janet about this?"

"Are you kidding? Me, doublecross a fellow husband?" Donovan asked indignantly.

Markell laughed. "I didn't think you would, really. But I'm sort of new at this kind of operation."

"How long have you and Janet been married? Ten years, is it?"

"Nine years last June."

"Nine years of marriage and you never stepped out on her *once*?" Donovan asked incredulously.

Markell shrugged in an off-hand way. "Oh, there were one or two little incidents at summer resorts. But they were sort of things that just happened, you know. Quick impulses. It isn't like this. It isn't like all this cold-blooded planning in advance, and *paying* for it."

"But it's simpler this way," Donovan said. "And easier, too. When you need a woman in a hurry, you can't wait around for a little incident to happen."

"Yes," Markell said. "Simpler this way."

He left the restaurant at quarter past two, a solid, substantial meal in his belly, and walked the six blocks up Fifth Avenue to his office. At forty, Markell was unquestionably a successful man. As head of a medium-sized real estate brokerage firm, he had already piled up a personal fortune comfortably along in six figures. He had an annual take-home pay in five high figures. He owned a fine Tudor-style mansion in one of the better Westchester towns. He had a beautiful wife.

The only flaws in his existence were on the matter of the beautiful wife. She was unable to have children, for one thing. A tumor eight years ago had settled that. And she seemed to have lost all interest in sex, lately.

It puzzled and bewildered Markell. He could remember the early years of their marriage, when Janet had been warm, loving, passionate. Those days, he was hardly able to wait for the day to end, so he could be together with her in bed.

But things had changed. As he had grown wealthier, Janet had surrounded herself with a high wall of hobbies, and somehow the hobbies drained off all her energies.

She was so busy these days with the Garden Club and the United Nations Association and the Symphonic League and the City Cleanup Campaign and all her myriad other organizations that she seemed to have no time left for the basic matter of making love to her husband.

Markell resented it. He tried to complain to her, but she shrugged it off. She was seeing a psychiatrist, these days—it cost him \$60 a week—but so far the headshrinker had told her nothing except that her frigidity was a "hostility phase" that would require several years of intensive therapy to remove.

The therapy had been going on for six months now, and the only result Markell observed was that Janet now had a fine new vocabulary to use when she explained why she didn't care to sleep with him on a particular night. Now she could talk about "resistances" and "negative transferences" and a lot of

other fancy things.

But the fundamental fact was unaltered. Their marriage was at a standstill. And, as a healthy and vigorous man still in the prime of his life, Markell was determined to do something about it.

Lunch with Donovan today was the first step. Donovan was *always* philandering. He was famous for it. It hadn't been hard to get him to bring the conversation around to a specific girl who was available to anybody with a price.

And now Markell had her number.

He slid in behind his broad desk. His secretary came bustling up to him with the list of messages taken during his absence. He waved her aside.

"In a moment, Miss Falk, in a moment. I've got an important phone call to make first."

He spread the sheet of note-paper out in front of him on his desk. Donovan had printed the name ANITA, and a telephone number.

He picked up the receiver. He began to dial.

THERE were three rings, and then a professional oper-

ator-voice said, "Whom do you wish to speak to, please?"

Markell hesitated a moment. "A-Anita," he said.

"Yes, sir. Certainly, sir." Strict mechanical properness. "She is not available at the moment, sir. May I have your number and the time you would prefer to be called back, please?"

"Yes," Markell said. He moistened his lips, squeezed the receiver tensely, gave the operator his number. "Have her call me before half past five. That's my business number, you understand."

"Certainly, sir. And the name?"

He paused a moment, wondering. "Fred," he said. "Just *Fred*."

"Thank you, sir."

There was a click. Markell put the receiver down slowly. So that was all there was to it, he thought. Just call up and leave your number. And then wait. Wait and wait and wait.

He tried to do his regular work. There were papers to sign, phone calls to return, documents to draft. He worked with only half his mind. His concentration centered on this

girl, this Anita.

What would she be like?

A tall stacked blonde half his age. That's what Donovan had said. A knockout.

He wondered. If she was as beautiful as all that, he considered, why would she be in that sort of business? Why not be a movie star, a model, or even just some executive's wife? Why should a really good-looking girl become a call girl?

He knew he was being naive. Obviously she *was* good-looking or Donovan would never have recommended her. After all, Donovan had his own reputation as a connoisseur to maintain. So maybe the girl just *liked* being what she was. Or found that she made more money that way than any other. Who knew the reason? Who could ever understand the first little thing about what made a woman tick?

Not me, Markell admitted bleakly.

As the afternoon wore along, he grew more and more impatient. Most likely she slept late, till two or three or four in the afternoon. And then she woke, and phoned her answering service, and got the list of the new

clients and their numbers. And started calling them.

He had left his personal phone number. It was a direct wire from the outside. It didn't go through the switchboard or even through his secretary's desk.

He had set up the phone that way so he could be sure of no eavesdroppers on important business calls. He had never dreamed that one day he would be waiting for word from a call girl on that same telephone.

Around quarter to four, the phone finally rang. Markell snatched it up with feverish impatience.

"Hello, is this Fred?" The voice was soft, husky, sensual—everything that a woman's voice had to be in order to embody the essence of sex.

"Y-yes."

"Hello, Fred. This is Anita. You called me?"

"That's right. A friend of mine gave me your number at lunch today. He—"

"All right," she broke in. "What kind of arrangements would you like to make?"

She was really down-to-Earth, Markell thought. No time wasted in chit-chat. Strict-

ly business.

He said, "I thought maybe we could get together for an hour this evening—"

"Sorry, Fred. I've already got other engagements for tonight. I could see you 'around two in the morning tomorrow, I guess—"

"No, that wouldn't do. I'd have to be home by then, and I live outside the city."

"What about Friday night at nine?" she suggested.

Just like making an appointment with the dentist, Markell thought. Only the treatment is more fun. He checked his engagement book with his left hand. "Friday night at nine—yes, that's okay," he said.

"You have any place special you want me to meet you?" she asked.

"I thought we'd got to a hotel."

"Okay," she said. "You take care of the booking. My stop just before you is Third Avenue and 51st Street, so get a hotel room somewhere in that vicinity. After you've booked the room, phone my answering service, tell them the name of the hotel, the number of the room. I'll be there at nine

o'clock sharp Friday night. Okay?"

"Okay," Markell said.

"See you Friday, Freddy."

She hung up.

Everything cool, calm, and collected, Markell thought. A real businesswoman. A pro. He could appreciate efficiency. He liked the way she had things organized. If she was half as good in bed as she seemed to be in running her business, Friday was going to be a memorable evening indeed.

HE left the office at twenty after five that night, walked briskly over to Grand Central, and just barely made the 5:31. Seventy minutes later, he was home. It was a brisk autumn evening, cool and clear.

Janet didn't come out to greet him. Markell walked inside and found his wife in the study, diligently typing out envelopes.

She looked up at him. She was an attractive brunette, a little on the thin side, with good legs and an alert, intelligent face. Markell had hoped, when he married her, that her bosom would fill out a little when she had some children. But there

hadn't been any children, and she still wore a padded bra. Otherwise, she was a good-looking woman in every way.

"Evening, Fred."

"What are you so busy with?"

"I volunteered to type the addresses for the PTA's meeting notices," she said. "Hundreds and hundreds. I've been typing all day. God, am I beat!"

So it was going to be another one of those days, Markell thought grimly. "I don't suppose you've been able to take time out for preparing dinner," he said. "And this is Ethel's night off."

Janet gasped. "I forgot all about what time it was! I got so enwrapped in all this typing—"

"That's all right," he said easily. "I had a big lunch today anyway. Jack Donovan wanted to sell me some parcels in New Jersey. Strictly swamp-land."

"You didn't buy?"

"No," Markell said. "But it wasn't a completely wasted lunch after all." *No indeed*, he thought. "No deal, but at least I had a damned good filet mig-

non at Brother Donovan's expense. And I'm still a little full. So if you'll just put together some kind of salad, that'll be enough dinner for me—"

Janet nodded and headed into the kitchen. It was always this way, he thought. She got so damned busy with her community activities that she never had any time for him. Almost deliberately, she drained her energies into ridiculous things, and then was too exhausted to perform any of the duties of a wife.

The least she could have done was mixed a few drinks when he came in, he thought. Even if she didn't want to bother with fixing supper.

But she didn't do *anything*. She was strictly a parasite. She lived off him, and served no purpose at all in the household. The PTA probably appreciated her services, he thought. But what the hell kind of marriage was that?

Janet scraped together a sort of dinner. Then it was back to the envelope-addressing for her, while Markell, fuming inwardly, watched television, paid a few bills, answered a couple of letters. The dull evening

dragged away. He wondered who Anita was with, now. What she was doing.

Quarter to eleven. Bedtime. Janet had finished with her envelopes. He walked into their bedroom and there she was, nude before her mirror, combing out her dark hair. He came up behind her. He ran his hands over her small slim breasts, over the smooth curve of her buttocks.

"Hurry up and finish with your hair," he muttered. "Let's go to bed."

She looked at him glumly. "Not tonight, Fred. I'm just not in the mood. I'm *so* tired."

Any other night, he might have started a bitter argument. Tonight he had the promise of Anita to comfort him. He got into bed, and threw a sour look at his wife's nude, inaccessible body.

Go on, he thought. Keep on being a bitch. One of these days you may find yourself tossed out of here on that sexy pink backside of yours. I've tolerated your antics too long, Janet. You'd better watch your step. Anita is only the beginning. The natives are getting restless.

He rolled over on his side and waited for sleep to take him.

FRIDAY finally came. The hours had ticked by leadenly all day Thursday, but now it was Friday, now it was Anita-Day. Markell bubbled with scarcely suppressable excitement all morning. He felt like a kid about to have his first really hot date. He kept looking at his watch, trying to urge the minutes to move along.

At noon, he left his office and took a cab uptown and eastward, getting off at Third Avenue. There was a hotel at Third and 52nd, a shiny new building that hadn't been open more than a few months. He straightened his tie, adjusted the brim of his hat, went inside.

A desk clerk eyed him respectfully. Markell said, in his best top-executive voice, "I'd like a room for this evening."

"Certainly, sir. A single?"

"Make it a double."

"Certainly, sir. Private bath, television set. Eighteen dollars. Would you sign here, please?"

He signed in under the first name that came to his mind—Edward T. Connally—and

beamed at the clerk. They gave him his key. Room 1516. Since he had no luggage, they tactfully suggested that he pay in advance for the room, and he found no objections to that.

"Checkout time is noon tomorrow, Mr. Connally. If you'd like an extension, just notify us at the desk."

"That's all right, thanks. I doubt that I'll be staying longer than planned."

They gave him knowing smiles. He wasn't fooling anybody. These hotel people knew damn well that this was a local businessman who needed a room for a short while for a very specific purpose.

But they didn't give a damn, Markell knew. They weren't in the morality business. They were just interested in selling their rooms, and if two people were going to occupy the room they wanted the room paid for at double the occupancy rent. Period. After that, what he did in the room was his own business, so far as the management was concerned.

From a pay telephone in the hotel lobby, he called Anita's answering service and gave the operator the name of the hotel,

the number of the room, and the time. The rest was up to Anita.

He had a quick light lunch. He didn't have much of an appetite, it seemed. Returning to his office around one, he put through a call to his home.

Janet took her time about answering. Finally she did pick up, with her nonchalant "Hello," and Markell moistened his dry lips and said, "I'm going to be home late tonight, Jan."

"Oh?" she said languidly. She hardly seemed to care.

"Yes, there's a conference that just came up. It'll keep me busy pretty late. We're all going out for dinner, one of those things. I guess I won't be home till after eleven."

"All right, Fred. I've got some U.N. work to do, anyway. Don't wake me when you come in, if I'm asleep."

"I wouldn't dream of waking you, dear," he said tightly. "I wouldn't *dream* of it."

NINE o'clock, now.

Markell sat hunched tensely on the edge of the bed in his hotel room. It was a fancy room, modern furniture, bright-colored walls and car-

peting. He had gone to it at half past eight, after a skimpy dinner and an hour of tensely wandering around Manhattan.

He was on his way through his third cigarette. He had ordered a bottle of Scotch and some mix sent up from Room Service, and he had already gulped down two drinks, with a third half gone. And now, finally, it was nine o'clock. Any minute, Anita would make her appearance.

He wondered how things like this were supposed to go. Would she be expecting him to be undressed and ready for her, or would that be too blunt and unsubtle? Did he pay her before or after? They hadn't even discussed fees. Donovan had told him it was \$25, but that might just be her rate for some people. He didn't know. He realized that for all his forty years he was terribly inexperienced about some things.

No time like the present for learning, he thought. *It's never too late to learn.*

There was a knock at the door.

He sprang up, half tripping over himself in his haste, and then, with a scowl of self-con-

tempt, halted and moved at a more composed pace toward the door. He opened it.

"Hi," a girl said. "I'm Anita."

The first sight of her was like a cold sword being slipped between Markell's ribs. He caught his breath sharply, wincing at the impact of it.

She was beautiful.

She was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen.

There was nothing cheap, nothing vulgar, nothing trollopy about her. She was dressed elegantly, her gleaming blonde hair done in a stylish coiffure, a few small pieces of jewelry her only ornaments. She looked like nothing so much as a young wealthy wife out for the evening.

She was only a girl, too, he saw. Her complexion was clear, her eyes wide and blue, her expression somehow an innocent one. He invited her in, his heart pounding fiercely.

"Sorry I'm a few minutes late," she said. "I'll make it up to you, though."

"Care for a drink?"

"A weak one, please."

She settled in the chair, crossing her legs to show a

breathhtaking stretch of leg. Markell fixed a drink for her with trembling hands.

She was in no hurry. She sat and talked for ten minutes or more, chatted about the weather, about politics, about Markell himself. She didn't ask his last name, but she found out almost everything else there was to know about him—the kind of business he was in, his approximate financial bracket, his age, and his troubles with his wife. Especially his troubles with his wife.

She was terribly sympathetic. She was kind and understanding and seemingly sincere. "So many wives cut their own throats that way," she said. "They think that once they've got a man, they can sit back and live off him the rest of their lives without giving anything in return. Which is the whole reason for my profession, I sometimes think. If there were less frigid neurotic wives around, there wouldn't be a call-girl industry."

"I agree," Markell said. "I agree a hundred percent." He had had four highballs by now, and he felt a little light-headed. He wondered when Anita was

going to get around to the business at hand. Did she always talk first? Was that part of the routine? Or was she simply waiting for him to make a pass?

She seemed to notice his impatience, seemed almost to be reading his mind. For, finishing her drink, she stood up, began to undress—all the while giving him a warm, loving smile. Markell had to admit that it was a tremendous act. She was a really polished pro. There was nothing sordid or whorish about the way she was undressing.

She was doing it as though they had been lovers for years, as though it was the most natural thing in the world that she would be taking her clothes off in front of him.

He watched her.

Her body was stunning, a thing of pink and gold, with incredibly lovely full firm breasts and excitingly contoured buttocks, with pale beautiful hips and thighs.

She stood naked before him, glorying in her taut-fleshed young nudity, and Markell felt a pang of sadness at the realization that this was all pretense, that an hour ago she had been

sleeping with somebody else, that an hour from now she would be standing nude in front of another man, that over the past months she had been had by hundreds and hundreds of men.

That there was nothing to be proud of in the thought of being privileged to feast his eyes on such wonderful naked beauty, because anybody with the right phone number and some loose cash could have the same privilege.

He advanced toward her. His trembling hands closed on ripe, exciting flesh.

She was smiling tenderly. She pressed herself up against him. Markell gave himself up to her completely, surrendering to the hypnotic spell of her flawless body, and she gathered him in, carried him off to a realm of utter delight.

AFTERWARD, he lay tired and happy on the bed, watching her dress. It was a pity, he thought, that such beauty should be covered up. She snapped her bra, drew her panties up over the satiny globes of her buttocks.

He said, "When will I see you again?"

"You have the number, Freddy."

"But you may be booked up for weeks!"

"I never take a booking more than a week in advance," she said. "And I've usually got an hour or two open up till the day before."

"I wish I could have you all the time."

She grinned. "I'm expensive. Can you pay \$500 a week for my upkeep?"

"I doubt it."

"Well, that's about how much I make as a free-lancer. If you can match it, I'm yours. For a while."

"For a while?" he said.

"Until I get restless," she said. She yawned voluptuously. "I'm a very restless girl. But I like you, Freddy. You're a real *man*, if you know what I mean. And I think you do." She came over to the bed, kissed him. "I'm looking forward to seeing you again. Again and again and again."

She finished dressing, and tactfully asked him for \$25. He had it all ready for her, in a hotel envelope. She took the

envelope without opening it, put it in her purse, waved him a cheery goodbye, and left.

It was five after ten. She had been with him exactly an hour. A real pro, he thought admiringly. So much time for preliminary small-talk, so much time for business itself, so much time afterward for a lingering farewell.

He thought again of the beauty of her, of the savage pulsing pleasure that she had given him, and a tight band of tension wrapped itself around his waist. He couldn't bear to think of her going on and on, selling herself to a multitude of men. He wanted her.

She was a treasure, he thought. She had a wonderful way of making a man feel really *masculine*. On those increasingly rare occasions when he had made love to his own wife recently, Janet had managed by word and deed to chop him down, to needle him, to deflate his ego. Anita did just the opposite. She built a man up.

He was still in a dreamy glow as he left the hotel, twenty minutes later. He surrendered his key at the desk, paid his Room Service charge for

the liquor, and drifted out into the night, feeling completely satisfied with himself and the world. He caught a cab to Grand Central and got there just in time to make the 10:43.

He was home just before midnight. Janet was sound asleep. He undressed and slipped into bed beside her, careful not to wake her. Let her sleep, he thought. And let her spend her days addressing envelopes or doing whatever else she damned pleased. He didn't mind, not now. He had other ways of gaining satisfaction.

He slept that night as soundly as he had slept at any time in the past ten years.

MARKELL fell easily into the pleasant habit of seeing Anita twice a week. It became a regular part of his routine of living. Anita told him that she never saw anybody before seven in the evening—she usually worked from seven to about two or three, unless she had some special job—but she agreed to make an exception for him once a week.

Every Tuesday, he came to her apartment at four in the afternoon. She woke up at two or

three, and usually by four she was still wandering around the apartment in the nude, which made things all the more convenient. She lived in one of the luxury apartment houses on the Upper East Side.

That was Tuesday. He told his staff that he had to leave the office early on Tuesdays, and no one questioned him.

On Fridays, he saw Anita at eight in the evening, at a hotel room he rented for the purpose. They stayed together till nine, sometimes half past nine, and then he went home to Janet.

Janet didn't seem to mind. In fact, she seemed definitely delighted that the nasty subject of sex hardly ever appeared to come under discussion now. Occasionally, to keep up appearances, Markell would make love to his cold, unwilling wife. But most of the time he just left her alone. Anita gave him more than ample satisfaction.

He wasn't sure just when he conceived the idea of asking Anita to marry him. Perhaps it was the third week, perhaps the fourth, of their steady relationship. The idea didn't spring full-blown into his head. It crept stealthily out of his un-

conscious, until finally it possessed him completely.

At first glance the idea seemed ridiculous. Marry a call girl? Who would do such a grotesque thing? But the more he thought about it, the more sense it made to him.

For one thing, she was beautiful. No argument on that score. For another, she was talented sexually. He had ample proof of that. For a third thing, she was young. She would remain beautiful for the remaining twenty or twenty-five years of his active life.

If, later on, he couldn't satisfy her and she wanted to take lovers, he wouldn't mind that, he told himself. At least he would have had her all to himself for many years.

On the other hand, there was the drawback that she had slept with scores of men. Markell considered that. Did it really matter? Nobody was a virgin any more, at least nobody that got married past the age of sixteen or so.

Janet had had four or five lovers before he had married her, and he hadn't cared about that. Once you married a woman who had slept around, did

it matter whether she had slept with four or four hundred men?

Yes, it did. Because the one who had slept with four hundred men would be vastly more knowledgeable, vastly more experienced. She could be endlessly fresh, endlessly challenging in bed. Unless you were very moralistic, it made more sense to marry an expert in the art of love than it did to marry an inhibited, inexperienced girl.

Of course, it would be awkward if people found out about her past. *You* didn't care, but they might. That was the one tricky factor here. He didn't know how many of his friends and business associates had slept with Anita. Jack Donovan, for certain. Others, quite possibly. Donovan was given to passing phone numbers around. A lot of eyebrows might get raised if Markell announced his engagement to a girl everybody had been to bed with.

And then, there was the problem of what to do about Janet.

Divorce didn't look too likely. He had no grounds for divorcing her, and not even the threwnest lawyer around was likely to work up any kind of

case against her. She was cold, yes, but frigidity isn't grounds for divorce.

On the other hand, he doubted that he could make her divorce *him*. She led a nice plush life now, and he would really have to work at it to make her want to pull out. Even if he came home drunk night after night, slapped her around, brought other women into the house, she'd probably try to bear with him.

Or else she would take him to court and squeeze him for every penny she could get. Janet was perfectly capable of bleeding a man white, Markell realized. And the court, presented with the case of a faithful husband suddenly turning into an ogre, would see immediately that here was a man deliberately trying to force his wife to divorce him, and so the price of his liberty would be steep.

He didn't want to turn huge sums over to Janet.

But he wanted to be rid of her. And she was too damned healthy to die naturally any time in the next forty or fifty years. Markell couldn't wait that long.

THE weeks passed. And an idea started to crystallize, an idea that involved Janet and Jack Donovan, an idea that might just solve a couple of his problems.

"Still seeing Anita?" Donovan asked, as they met for lunch one day close to Christmas.

Markell nodded. "A couple of times a week."

"Great girl, isn't she?"

"Tremendous," Markell said.

Donovan stared at him levelly. "You're pretty hipped on her, aren't you? I mean, not just as a call girl, but something beyond that."

"Maybe."

"You ought to watch out for that," Donovan said. "These girls, they try to get you to fall in love with them, they try to make you think they love you, only you. Meanwhile they're sleeping with half of New York, but they tell you you're special. And they soak you. Bought her any gifts yet?"

"A few," Markell said, tight-lipped. He didn't like Donovan's cynical approach.

"There you are. That's the beginning. Next thing you know, you'll be thinking about

marrying her. There's always some damn fool who wants to marry a call girl. Men never learn."

Markell ran his tongue nervously around his lips. "Listen," he said, "let's get off the subject and onto a different one. Like next weekend."

"What about it?" Donovan asked.

"You said your wife would be visiting her parents in California next week, remember? So I was talking with Janet, and she suggested we invite you to stay with us. We wouldn't want you to have to spend a lonely bachelor weekend all by yourself."

"Well, as a matter of fact," Donovan said, "I was thinking of lining up a little companionship for myself for that weekend. But I hadn't arranged anything yet."

"Good. Come on up to our place. We can discuss that Long Island deal, for one thing. And you can just relax in front of our fireplace and help reduce our liquor supply. Janet will *love* to see you. You know how fond she's always been of you."

"Yes," Donovan said dryly.

There was an odd look in his eyes. Markell knew that Donovan had been interested in Janet for years and years. But he had had so little opportunity to be alone with her.

Markell was determined to give Donovan that opportunity next weekend.

"Is it a date for the weekend?" Markell asked.

"Okay," Donovan said. "It's a date."

WHEN he saw Anita the following Tuesday, Markell told her that he wouldn't be free for their regular Friday meeting. "We're having a weekend guest," he said. "He's coming up Friday night. So we'll just have to skip it this week."

"Anybody I know?" she asked playfully.

He ducked the question. "Somebody I do business with some of the time," he said evasively.

"I'm going to miss you Friday night, Freddy."

"I'll miss you too. But we'll be able to see each other more often than twice a week, soon. A lot more often."

"Oh?"

"I'm planning--I'm plan-

ning some changes," he said. "Big changes."

"Tell me, lover."

He shook his head. "I don't dare. You'll find out when the time comes. But I tell you one thing. I'll be able to see a lot more of you after it happens. Would you like that, Anita?"

"Of course, Freddy."

"Would you like to see me a whole lot?" he asked carefully. "Like every day?"

"Why not?" she asked, running her fingers through his hair. "I like you, Freddy. I like you plenty."

He left the matter at that. He didn't want to do too much talking ahead of the fact, too much bridge-crossing in advance. Just so long as Anita was fond of him, he could go through with what he had planned, knowing that when he finally did get to the other side of the bridge he would possess the kind of happiness he had never dreamed was possible to attain.

Friday came. He had arranged to meet Donovan at Grand Central about half past four—to beat the weekend rush—and there he was, standing by the newsstand where

they had agreed to meet, a weekend bag at his feet. They boarded the train, went to the bar car for martinis, then settled down for the ride. It was a dark, wintry afternoon, a hint of snow in the air outside.

Markell thought of Anita. He thought of Donovan sleeping with Anita. He reminded himself that it was this man who had first given him Anita's phone number.

They reached the Markell house by six. Janet was glad to see Donovan; she welcomed him warmly—*suspiciously* warmly, Markell thought, though at this point he hardly had any objection to that. They settled down in the livingroom, Markell putting up a blazing fire while Janet mixed drinks.

Janet seemed lively and animated—more so than she had seemed for months. She was wearing a tight sweater and pair of corduroy pedalpushers, and her figure was on open display, stressing the fine lines of her hips and legs. Markell had known for a long time that there was an attraction between Donovan and Janet. But they had had so little opportunity to

be alone together. Markell had seen to that.

But now everything was different. *Let them do what they damn please*, he thought.

They spent a cozy evening in front of the fire, the three of them. They talked—about real estate, about the stock market, about Donovan's wife, about the international situation. About midnight, Janet suggested it was time to get some sleep.

Markell had been watching her carefully. She was keyed up, excited about having an unattached man in the house. Donovan was sleeping downstairs, in the guest room. Markell wondered whether things would actually get as far as he was expecting them to.

THE next morning, just before noon, the phone rang. He had arranged that with his switchboard girl on Friday afternoon.

Janet answered. "It's for you," she said, handing the phone to him. "A girl. Calling from New York."

He took the phone, spoke into it briefly. Across the room, Janet and Donovan were laughing over some joke. Markell ex-

changed a few words with the girl, then hung up. He walked over to join the other two.

"Afraid I'm going to be a lousy host today, people," he said with a shrug. "That was my secretary calling. There's been some legal foul-up in a title closing, and I've got to go to the city right away."

"Can't it wait till Monday, Fred?"

"I wish it could," Markell said. "But if I'm not there by three o'clock this afternoon, they're going to void the contract. Which means forfeiture of all fees, surveying costs, and whatnot. I'll be out about five thousand, altogether. I don't have any choice but to go."

Donovan chuckled. "I guess we can hold the fort while you're away, Fred."

"Yes," Markell said. "The two of you will just have to manage without me. Play gin rummy, or something. It's a hell of a thing to do, skipping out on a weekend guest, but it can't be helped."

"How long will you be down there?" Janet asked, a trifle warily.

Markell shrugged. "The conference will last at least two

hours, rock bottom. And then about an hour or so to get back home. Figure I'll be back here between six-thirty and seven o'clock. Probably no later than seven, and certainly no earlier than half past six. Wait dinner for me, will you?"

Both Janet and Donovan seemed to be pitying him for having to go out into the wintry cold on a Saturday, when he could be home by the fireplace. But they made no attempt to talk him out of making the trip. They seemed quite prepared to while away the next five or six hours without him.

He slipped into his warm winter coat and left the house a little past one o'clock. Janet offered to drive him down to the railway station, but it was only an eight-block walk, and he preferred to do it on foot.

He walked down to the station, circled it, headed back to the house, taking Laurel Crescent, the undeveloped dirt road that ran up the rear way. From Laurel Crescent he could enter his own property from the back, crossing the rear yard and getting to the garage unnoticed.

From the garage, he could

watch the house.

Warily, he moved through the quiet afternoon, through the deserted area. No one lived back here yet. The developers would be around with their bulldozers in the spring, but as of now it was empty. Ideal territory for skulking through. He could see his house, now. Just another couple of hundred yards ahead.

He stepped through the hedges onto his grounds and made his way toward the garage. He had been gone about half an hour, now. Plenty of time for mischief to get started. The garage had two entrances, the main one for cars, and a small door in the side. He unlocked the side door and went in.

It was a detached garage, set back about seventy feet from the house. The garage was on the biggish side, a two-story garage, and they had furnished the upper room as a storage area and a rumpus room if they ever had children. The single window gave a good view of the back of the house.

And the bedrooms were in the back.

Markell pulled up an empty

trunk and settled down to watch.

The one thing he was afraid of was a mistake in timing. He didn't want to make his entry too early or too late. Give them time, lots of time, he thought. He hoped they wouldn't do it on the living room couch or someplace like that, invisible from the garage vantage-point.

He waited.

Half an hour crawled by. He caught sight of Janet once, fully dressed, going into the kitchen for something. Fifteen minutes later, Donovan was visible for an instant in one of the other rear windows. He was dressed, too.

It would be a whopping anticlimax, Markell thought, if nothing at all happened. But somehow he clung to his original confidence that everything would happen as he predicted. He continued to wait.

It was three o'clock, now. It was fiercely cold in the unheated garage, and he was shivering, his lips going blue in the cold. He hugged himself for warmth and wondered what the hell was taking Donovan so long. Two hours ought to be

enough time to get things started.

And then he saw what he was waiting to see.

Janet, nude, looking out one of the back windows. He ducked out of sight. She wouldn't bother drawing the blinds—there was nobody back here to see, she would reason. There she was, though. He could see her small breasts, her swelling hips. And there was Donovan, dimly visible behind her.

This was it, Markell thought. He studied his watch. Give them five minutes, no more.

He let five minutes tick past.

He left the garage and quietly moved toward the house. The safety was off his gun. He had bought the gun when they had first moved this far out of the city—you needed some kind of protection, he had argued, when the nearest house was a few hundred feet away. He had never used the gun. But his Army days were only sixteen years in the past. He still remembered which end of a gun you pointed at the target.

He entered the house silently.

He tiptoed up the stairs.

He pushed open the bedroom door.

Janet and Donovan were on the bed—the marital bed, Markell thought with a pang. They were both nude.

He lifted the gun. It was dangerous to hesitate, now. Dangerous to stop and think. They saw him. They were sitting up.

"For God's sake, Fred!" Donovan yelled hoarsely.

The bullet smashed into his throat, and he dropped over onto the floor, gurgling and spouting blood.

"Fred! No!" Janet screamed.

He fired again. The slug drilled a hole between her little breasts. She dropped back against the pillow.

Markell was quivering violently. He wanted to rush into the bathroom and retch.

He put the gun down. On numb legs he walked down the hallway, picked up the extension phone.

"Hello," he said. "Give me the police."

THERE was a trial, of course. It caused a local sensation and kept the tabloids buzzing for a week or so. Mar-

kell testified that he had left his house on business, but that he had decided not to go into the city after all. He had returned and found his friend in bed with his wife. Snatching up a pistol that he kept in the bedroom drawer, he had killed them both.

Janet's psychiatrist was called to the stand and reluctantly testified to the dead woman's instability. He admitted that she had often talked of infidelities.

The local police testified that the victims had indeed been nude and in bed together when shot.

The coroner testified that sexual relations had been taking place between the victims just prior to their death.

The jury was out no more than half an hour. They found the accused Frederick Markell guilty of second-degree manslaughter under extreme provocation, and recommended leniency.

Markell drew a two-year suspended sentence. A month after the murder, he walked out of court a free man.

He had big plans.

He had carefully kept away

from Anita during his month of legal maneuvering. He had no doubt that the prosecution was keeping tabs on him, and he didn't want to give them any reason to think that he might have wanted to be rid of his wife. But he waited until a proper interval had passed. Then, one afternoon, he dropped in uninvited at Anita's East Side apartment.

She came to the door looking sleepy and surprised all at once. She was wearing only a gauzy nightgown that hid little of her full-fleshed beauty. Markell, who had been living a life of purity for a month, felt his entire body go tense with desire at the sight of those lush breasts and rounded thighs scarcely concealed by her gown.

"Freddy!"

"Hi, Anita," he said with a grin. "Long time no see, huh?"

"Gosh, Freddy!"— She seemed taken aback, her poise and professional calm deserting her. "You should have called first!"

"Why? Got company here?" he asked.

"No, but—but it would have given me some time to get washed up, presentable. So the

trial's all over!"

"Yes," he said. "I'm a free man. I hope you understood why I couldn't call you all these weeks."

She nodded. "Sure, I saw that." She was looking at him strangely. "You must have really blown your top. Killing your wife like that. And Jack. Poor Jack. He didn't deserve that, Fred. Your own friend. And your wife was just a bitch anyway."

Markell shrugged. "I had to. I didn't want to, but Janet had to get put out of the way. It was simpler all around to kill Jack too."

"You mean—"

"And now I'm a free man," he went on. He rubbed his hands. "Some time this spring, we can get married, Anita. At long last."

"*Married?*" she said, as though thunderstruck.

He blinked. "Of course. Why do you think I'd do a thing like that? Not out of jealousy, certainly."

"But—but—" Her lips were trembling. "Who said anything about marriage, Fred?"

"Why—I assumed—remember when I said we'd soon be

together all the time?"

She shrugged. "I figured you meant you'd be taking me over as a full-time mistress for a while."

"I meant marriage."

"But—no, Fred. This is ridiculous. I don't want to marry you. You or anybody else."

"I killed Janet so I could marry you," he said, gaping.

She shook her head. "I was married once, Fred. I couldn't stand it. One man, thinking he owned me. I'm not a monogamous girl. I get tired of a man after six, seven months. Sometimes even quicker."

"I'm rich, Anita. I can give you everything you dream of."

"I'm rich too," she said. "I got a fat settlement from my husband, and I earn plenty doing what I do. I'd rather have my freedom. You keep your money."

"But—but—"

"It wouldn't work, Fred. I'd be cheating you inside a few months. That's what my nature is. And then—Gosh, Fred, you might shoot me. Just the way you shot Janet. I'm afraid of you, Fred. A man who'd shoot one wife would shoot another."

"I swear—I'd never harm you—"

"You never planned to harm Janet, either." She was wild-eyed, now. "I'm scared, Fred. Get out of here. I don't want to see you any more. What you did was crazy, killing your wife. I couldn't dream of marrying you. Especially after—after—" She giggled. "A call girl marrying a murderer. Some marriage that would be. Go on! Get out!"

"No!" he cried. "I want to marry you!"

"Don't be a nuisance, Fred."

"If I can't marry you I'll kill you," he said. "You did this to me! You made me kill my own friend—my wife—you Jezebel! If I can't have you nobody will!" He lurched forward hysterically, arms outstretched. She eluded his grasp. He swung around, caught her gown's edge, ripped it away. She was nude now, and that only inflamed him all the more.

"Kill you," he grunted. "Nobody's going to have you if I can't have you—"

She dodged around him, ran into the next room. He followed her. There she was,

standing next to the bed, now. Naked, her heavy breasts heaving excitedly. She was reaching into the desk drawer, taking something out—

"Anita!" he wailed.

"Leave me alone, Fred!"

He looked at her, naked and stunningly beautiful, her body gleaming with sweat, her breasts rising and falling, her nudity maddening him to berserk fervor.

He saw the little gun in her hand.

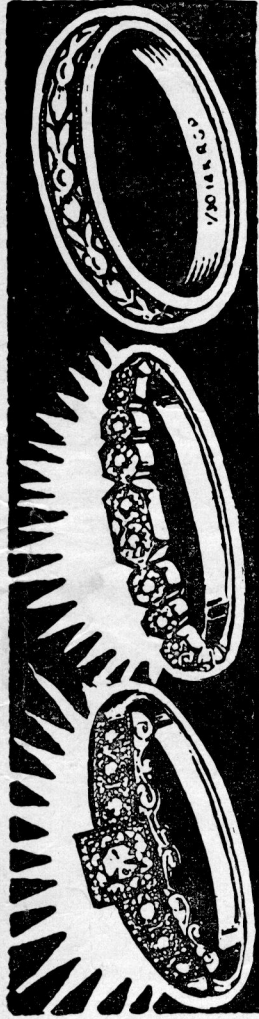
He charged forward like a bull in a rut. She screamed, and he stopped short a few steps from her as the first shot caught him in the belly. He dropped to his knees, blood starting to spurt from him. She was standing above him. He lifted his head, past the splendor of her thighs, past the flaring beauty of her naked hips, past the deep bowls of her breasts, to her face.

She was laughing now. The emergency was over.

"You damned fool," she said.

The next shot smashed through his brain.

THE END



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