

AMAZING DETECTIVE MYSTERIES



JUSTICE

JAN

35c

a **NEW** novelette

by **CORNELL WOOLRICH**
the **BLACK BARGAIN**

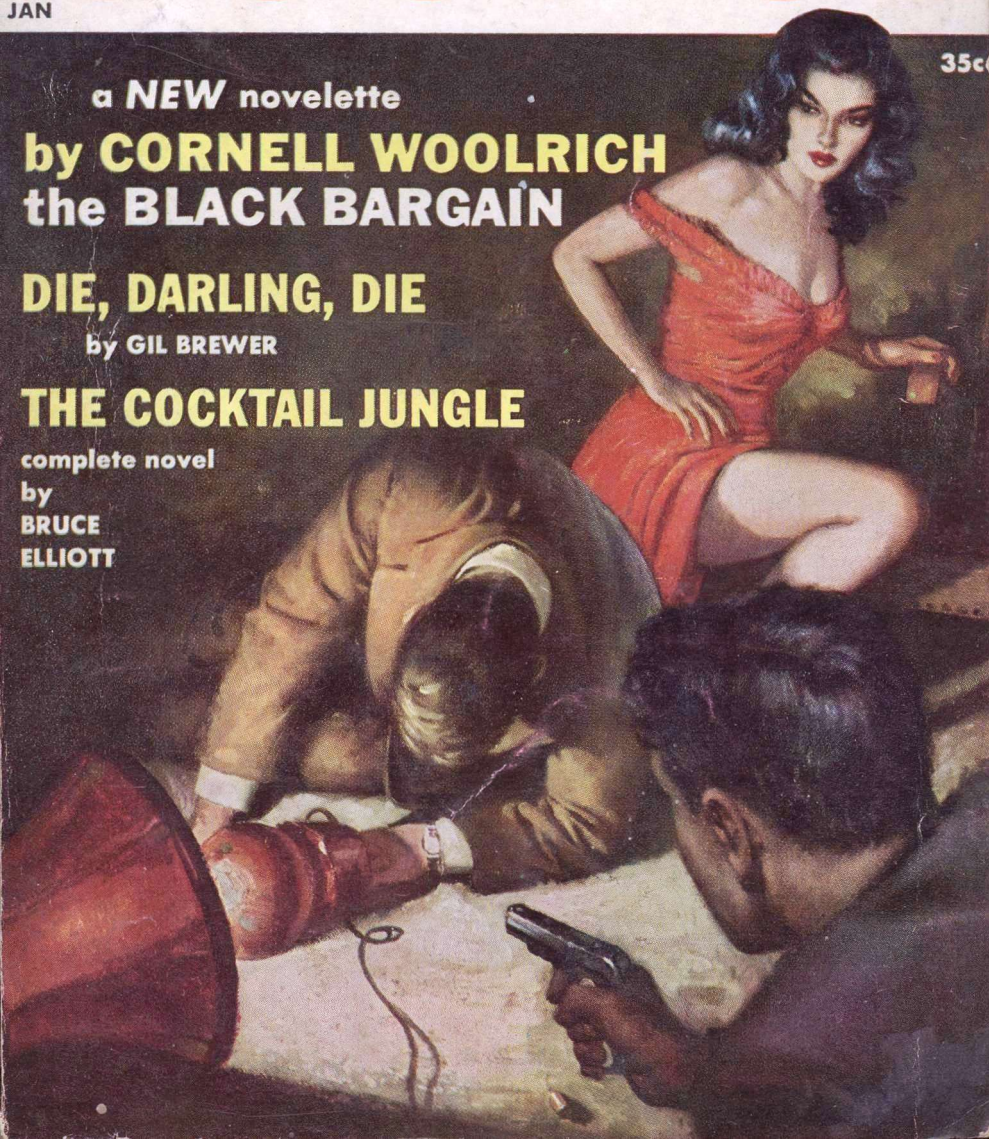
DIE, DARLING, DIE

by **GIL BREWER**

THE COCKTAIL JUNGLE

complete novel

by
**BRUCE
ELLIOTT**



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THE BLACK BARGAIN

Feature Novelette

by CORNELL
WOOLRICH



Abbazzia had grown so powerful that he was above and beyond human help when disaster struck.

1

THEIR women came first.

One was a blonde, one a red-head, one a brunette. They were all tall, extremely so; as though

height had been a determining factor in their present status. Among others. They were beautiful, in a spectacular fashion. It was not a friendly sort of beauty. Their blue-painted eyelids were held far down over their eyes; not in modesty, but in a sort of supercilious disdain. As though rejecting the stares they were long since used to receiving.

They wore their hair pasted down flat about their skulls and hanging dankly, like little girls who have just emerged from a dip into the surf and have not yet dried it off. It was clipped short at the nape of the neck, and one had it shingled almost like a man's.

Unlike women walking together, no matter how short the distance, they said not a word to each other, nor to the man at their heels. As if having learned that the slightest word, or the slightest glance, might be misconstrued and turned against the speaker at some later summing-up or betrayal, and it was safer not to speak at all.

Close together and yet in this lonely sort of silence, they entered the elevator, their guide entered after them and walled them in with his body—standing facing outward with his back to them—

and they were carried up out of sight.

The car came down again presently. The man who had just gone up was still on it, the girls no longer were. He was holding, noticeably, even you might say blatantly, a key in his hand. Playing with it, turning it over; and its newness made it glisten, and light strike out from it each time it turned. It was not one of the hotel's own keys, the pendant six-pointed star that these all had was lacking.

The sheep were in the fold and the loyal shepherd had them safely locked in.

He went out to the entrance and stood there on the topmost step, as if watching for someone's arrival.

Within moments after, an arrival had occurred. Not just an arrival, but *the* arrival. It was the looked-for event. The way the man blocking the entrance quickly took his hand from the lintel, stepped back to give clearance, showed that. It was both multiple and yet strangely compact. It was that of a phalanx of men. They came in in roughly triangular formation, wedge to the rear. The base was three men, pressed closely abreast. Behind it,

to center, pressed almost equally close upon the advance line, was a fourth man.

Even the doorway was not allowed to disorganize them. They clung to this formation even while passing through it. They moved with a quick economy of step, all four alike; and though they were not all in step, in the military sense, the discrepancy was not to be noted above, for their bodies all swung to the same walking-rhythm: brisk, staccato, purposeful.

In the exact center of the phalanx, the one whom it was formed around, with a man each at his sides and another at his back, was a rather short, heavy-set man. The rest were all a half-head taller.

He gave a sleek, swollen impression: an oleaginous quality of skin, a flatness of nose, and above all a smallness and deftness of foot all slyly abetted this optical illusion. Even the pudgy stubbiness of his fingers, several of them swollen with oversized diamonds, did their part in maintaining it.

He was surprisingly young-looking, thirty-two or three at most. It was not the smoothness of boyishness, it was rather a reverse process, an erasure. The face was becoming vapid, a cipher, and

hence tricked the eye at first sight into mistaking it for youth, juvenility; it was not, it was decay.

The phalanx compressed itself into the rather narrow elevator. Ensnared within, it reversed itself to a man, with a military coordination. The slide closed. Though there were five people in it, and they were all (presumably) associates, not a word was said. That same guarded inscrutability was observed as had been previously by the three women.

The man at the controls flung back the slide, stepped out, and examined the corridor in both directions with a single, quick, all-comprehensive glance. Then, the phalanx emerged, as intact and unbroken as ever.

Ghostly music that had been whispering along the corridor, suddenly blared into heightened pitch, as a door opened in admission. The blonde member of the three girls became visible behind it, acting the part of usher. The phalanx entered, and as it crossed the threshold, at long last dissolved into its components, became just four individual men, separating to move about in divergent directions.

The rearguard member chucked the blonde under the chin, and

an incandescent smile immediately flashed from her, as though he'd turned a switch just under her jaw.

"I'll take it," he said, and apparently understanding the cryptic injunction, she retired deeper into the room and he replaced her there by the door. He closed it, remaining outside by it.

The man who had recently been at the core of the phalanx said suddenly, "Who would've ever thought that Abbazzia would find himself like this, holed up behind a locked door in a cheap hotel with the last few of his boys?" as though speaking to them about some third person of great consequence.

"It'll blow over," one of them said to him.

Abbazzia went over and sank into an easy chair. For a moment he was supine, boneless there. "Blow over," he repeated mechanically.

Then suddenly he raised both arms and knotted their fists, and brought them down like mallets upon the arms of the chair. Then raising both knees, similarly though not simultaneously pounded the flats of his feet back upon the floor. And as and while he did both things, an expression of maniacal rage curdled

his smooth features into a doughy clot.

"My mistake was waiting too long," he said in an unlooked-for high piping voice, as though his vocal cords had become momentarily unmanageable too. Then it dropped down again to deeper resonance. "I shoulda struck first. I got careless. Now he's taken the town away from me."

"He won't have it long."

Abbazzia curved a hand for a shield to his eyes, it vibrated strenuously, then he let it fall again. "He's got it now, and that's all I care about. It's the now that counts, in this deal. There ain't no more than now. There ain't no next time."

The redhead sidled over on a careful diagonal, like someone who is watching where she puts her feet at every step, and softly traced her hand across his hair.

He recoiled spasmodically, as if, not having seen the caress approach, his reflexes had mistaken it for the touch of danger. Then vented the shock it had caused him by seizing her hand at the wrist, tugging it from his head, and flinging it forcefully back toward her, so that it struck her in the chest, as if it were some separate thing that was not a part of her. "Never do that unless I ask

you to!" he snarled ungraciously. "What's matter with you anyway?"

"I didn't mean—" she mumbled in indistinct contrition.

"He'll call you over when he wants you," Augie added.

She retreated toward the wall, but without turning her back, as if fearful of doing so.

HE CONTINUED to direct his remarks toward the men in the room, ignoring the women. He opened his hand and showed it to them, as if to show them that it was empty. "Seven of my best boys," he whined in lamentation, wavy-lined furrows pleating his forehead. "Seven all at one time. All in one shot. Who've I got left? Where'm I gonna get their kind again? They don't come like them every day in the week. Guys that started out with me in the old days. Guys that knew every twist and turn of the business." He allowed the fingers to fold back again upon the empty extended hand, but not as when they grasp something; rather as when the petals of a withering plant fold back upon its emptied-out pod in decay. Then he allowed it to turn and drop of its own weight, and it even swung

of its own fall, inertly, there beside the chair. "How could they be so foolish?" he demanded wanly. "To go there one by one, to a place like that? To a ga-rodge nobody ever heard of."

"They thought the word was from you."

"Each one by himself. Walk into their arms like that! How long was it? How long'd the whole thing take?"

"I think Ruffo walked in there at two, and the last one about three-thirty. An hour and a half, altogether, for the seven of them."

Abbazzia bared his teeth. "They'll get it back," he promised.

"Sure they will, Chief," Augie said confidently. "Just watch. This ain't for long. In a day or two Corkie and his boys'll be blowing in from Detroit, and then we'll do a little pushing-around ourselves."

Abbazzia nodded, grinning lethally with skull-like exposure of teeth. "Sooner than that, even. The word went right out to them. If we can ride out the next twenty-four hours, we're all set."

"How they coming? By train?"

"Na, three or four fast cars. It attrac's less attention that way.

"It's just a matter of hours," Abbazzia said by way of conclu-

sion. He yawned, hitched his elbows back, straddled his legs still further apart. "I'm tired," he droned languidly. "Getting out of there in such a hurry, like that. My feet cramp me."

At once, as though an esoteric signal had been given her, the redhead sluiced forward from her position in the background, dropped deftly first to one knee, then to both, directly before his chair, began to busily pick at the lace of his shoe with her long, pointed, magenta-lacquered nails. In a moment she had eased off the mirror-like, needle-toed low patent-leather shoe he wore.

Over her bowed head he gave a look of smug complacency to the other men. They answered it with fleeting grins. There was in the exchange an undertone of masculine contempt for the servility displayed, but more than that, for all things feminine, for her femininity itself.

He lordlily crossed one leg over the other, so that she could more easily reach the second foot to divest it, without having to progress on her knees across the floor.

The other girls acted thwarted, as though she had taken the initiative away from them by darting out first as she had.

Having taken off the second

shoe, she gracefully balanced his foot by placing her hand under the arch, lowered her head still further, and pressed her lips warmly to his instep.

"That's what I think of my baby!" she proclaimed triumphantly, rearing her head again.

Abbazzia reached out to the top of her head and roughed her hair slightly, as one would playfully disarrange a dog's coat. "You stay with me tonight," he said indulgently. He yawned cavernously. "I'm beat."

There were immediate preparations for departure by everyone in the room except the redhead. Augie picked up his glass, jerked the residue left in it into his mouth, put it down again, slid his hand past his lips. "He turned and asked Vito: "Which side of the chief you taking?"

"Either one," Vito said. "You name it."

"I'll go over here," Augie decided with a pitch of his thumb at the blank wall behind him. "You get in there."

"Go in there first and see if you can hear me," Abbazzia ordered, eyes glittering alertly with the will to self-preservation. "We don't want no slips. Both of you," he amended it. "Then come back and let me know."

Vito nodded, opened the room-door, went out into the hall. Augie followed him, drew the door closed after him.

Abbazzia got up from the chair, rammed one fist deep down into



a pocket, arm held stiffly at his side in token of tension. "They gotta get in here fast, in case I need them," he explained to the respectfully watching girls.

He went over toward the wall on the left-hand side first, and thumped loudly three times, at spaced intervals.

Within a matter of seconds, not minutes but seconds, the room-door burst backward and Vito strode in, a snub-nosed revolver held springily down beside his hip-joint.

"Heard-je," he said triumphantly. "How was that for speed?"

Abbazzia narrowed his eyes mistrustfully. "How many knocks did I give it?"

"Three," Vito answered, with a slight look of surprise. He reached in under his left armpit, revolver-first, and brought his hand back empty.

Abbazzia nodded approvingly. "You heard me," he admitted.

He turned to face the other way. "Now we'll try Augie's side." He pummelled the wall heavily. Then a second time. Then a third. "I'll give it four this time," he said, jaw clenched with effort. The impact of the blow coincided with the flaring-open of the door, with the latter just preceding it by some instants.

Augie's revolver was bedded within the side-pocket of his coat, but reared perpendicularly so that the whole coat-hem rose with it to a squat-nosed projection. "Clear as a bell!" he reported.

Abbazzia's eyes narrowed to a baleful squint. "How many times did I sound off?"

Augie looked slightly taken back, just as his cohort had. "I only caught two," he admitted.

Abbazzia's face twisted into a violent grimace of rage. "I done it four times! Whattaya trying to welsh out of it for? The twists were all in here; they saw me do it four times! Vito saw me! You're gonna come in here and tell me it's twice, haa?"

His voice was a piping whistle of fury. He advanced upon the errant bodyguard, coiled a forearm far back of his own shoulder, swung rabidly with it, caught Augie flat-handed on the side of the face with a sound like wet linen being pounded on a line. Then again on a pendulum-like reverse swing. The third slap missed contact because Augie veered his head acutely aside, without however moving the rest of his body back.

Hand poulticing his stricken cheek, Augie's attitude was one of rueful loyalty, without a spark of resentment visible in it. "Hold it, boss," he protested virtuously. "Hold it a minute, will ya?"

"I don't like for nobody to lie to me, see?" Abbazzia shrilled.

Augie drew a deep breath, in order to avoid the necessity of having to interrupt the explanation he was about to give. "I caught the first one sitting in the chair in there, waiting for it to come. By the time the second one come, I was going through the door already. If you gave two more, I was out of the room by that time, on my way over here. What am I going to do, sit there

counting 'em off on my fingers? If them things was wrong-way bullets, four would be too many to wait for. While I'm waiting to count, you're—" He left it eloquently unfinished.

Abbazzia took a moment to consider this, crinkling his eyes toward Augie's face, then aside toward the wall, then back again to the face of the man before him, this time widening them in appreciation. "Yeah!" he concurred with staccato enthusiasm. "Yeah! That was the smart thing to do! It's the speed what counts when I'm sending for you, not the arithmetic." He turned his head a moment in oblique disparagement. "Why didn't you think of that, Vito?" And added to the rest of them, as though he had been the one taking Augie's part all along and they had been the ones in opposite judgment: "See what a smart boy I got here? What're you trying to tell me?"

Again his hand went out toward Augie, this time to clap him on the shoulder rewardingly, to squeeze his biceps affectionately. Even to pinch the point of his chin and wag it playfully between his fingertips.

"That's all right, about that before, ain't it?" he said confidentially. Meaning the facial

blows. "Abbazia didn't mean nothing by it. It's just that I don't like for none of my boys to lie to me. I get a little excited when they do." He reached into his pocket, took out a billfold, took something out of that, prodded it down into Augie's breast-pocket. "Roll yourself a home-made cigarette out of that," he instructed jovially.

There was a general exodus from the room. They went in pairs, Vito with the blonde, Augie with the brunette. No goodnights were said. Goodnights were for people who lived less dangerously.

"Take it easy, boss," Augie saluted.

"Take good care of him for us, Ginny," the blonde warned, with an undertone of jealousy.

"And I'm the kid that can do it," was the pert, head-tossing answer.

The door closed.

"Lock it up on the inside," Abbazia ordered his solitary remaining companion. He looked at her from where he lay sprawled out in the chair, but his look was lethargic, even somnolent. The somnolence caused by the dregs of a spent passion that can no longer stir or vivify.

"Undress me," he ordered in a monotone.

The girl quickly advanced, the grin starched on her face. She slid downward onto her knees before him, reached gingerly forward with both hands toward the button of his suit-jacket, as though she were afraid of getting an electric shock.

He allowed the lids to close over his eyes, the better to retain whatever distorted images this was about to bring him.

Just as her fingertips touched the button, and almost as though it were an effect generated by her touching of the button, there was a single, low knock on the outside of the door.

Her hands scampered back to herself, like two things seeking refuge. They all but tried to burrow inside her clothing and hide.

His eyelids went up, furrowed with annoyance. "Go see what they want now," he told her. "One of 'em must have forgotten something."

She released the inside lock, grasped the knob, and pulled the door open.

An elderly woman in black was standing there. Short and stocky. Her face long-dead; only the eyes still alive. Black, too, and bitterly alive. Her eyes never left his face, never touched the girl at all. "Get out!" she commanded stonily.

Stunned into alertness, Abbazzia's back reared from its supine position against the chair. "How'd you get here?" he breathed in amazement.

He became aware of the red-headed girl, still cringing there. "You heard her," he rasped. "Wait outside. I'll let you know when I want you to come back."

As the girl darted out, with the whisk and the flurry of a skirt-hem, she slapped backhanded at the door, and it clapped-to and closed Abbazzia and the elderly woman in alone together.

The elderly woman mouthed balefully, "Garbage."

"Who steered you here, anyway?" he asked angrily. "Who tipped you where I was? Who brought you over here? I'll fix him good, whoever it—"

"No one brought me. I came with no one."

"How'd you get here, then?"

She said curtly, "Subway."

"Now that you're here, whattya want? Whadja come for? To say good-by to me?"

"I said good-by to you ten long years ago, night after night in the dark, on my knees before the blessed image of Our Lady; drops of water falling from my eyes, drops of blood falling from my heart. It was too late then al-

ready for anything except good-by. Then it was finished. That was my good-by. It was over."

"You're talkin' crazy," he said uncomfortably. He squirmed, and got up from the chair, and moved away from her for a few paces; then turned and came back again. "Then whattya here for, to preach to me? Whattya after?"

She flung back one end of the shawl intercrossed over her bosom, grappled beneath the seedy black garb that encased her. A packet of banded currency was in her hand when she withdrew it. Tile-thick, slab-thick.

"To give back this!"

She showed it to him first, lying flat in her hand so that it lined her entire palm. She held it up before her own face then, still held flat like that, and spat violently into the middle of it, and then flung her hand away from her. Its contents flew out and landed anywhere; she did not look, she did not care.

"Money with blood on it! The dead cry out from this kind of money. Their voices are inside it."

"You're a fool," he sneered. "You could have had everything in the world, and you live like a rat in a hole."

"No, you are the fool, not I!"

Her mouth tightened into an angry, lipless slit. She struck her hand sharply against her chest. "I am clean. I am a poor woman, but I am clean. My husband worked hard all his life until he died worn out, but he too was clean!"

She turned away abruptly, in dismissal without farewell.

"It will be finished soon, anyway," he heard her say stonily.

"They'll never get me!" he shouted toward her. "D'ye hear what I'm saying? They'll never—"

She turned briefly, nearer the door now. "They do not have to. You will go just as surely, without them. Your years are already days, your days are minutes. You have the Bad Sickness in you. The sickness that creeps and cannot be got out. No man's hand needs to be raised against you. You are one of the dead."

HE STARED at her in almost superstitious fright. "Even that you know—" he breathed in awe. Mechanically, as if from some long-forgotten habit interred for years beneath the surface of awareness, he made a sneaking furtive sign of the Cross. "What are you, a witch or something?"

She slit her eyes at him in

contempt. "One does not have to be told. One knows it. One sees the signs. This is nothing new. This is the punishment of God. It has always been among us, from the first. And it always will be, to the last. I saw it in my village, small as it was, when I was young. Even there it was not new. One crossed the road in passing it by, that was all. I knew it had come into my house already when you were still only a boy of sixteen—"

His breath rustled like silk, in sudden sharp intake.

"The cup you drank from, the fork you ate with, kept apart, hidden from the rest. They were always missing when I washed the things. Those were the signs that told me. You did not come to me for help, so my lips stayed sealed. You went to the streets for help, instead. The streets where you already robbed the storekeepers, and roamed at night the leader of a pack, marauding with knives. And the streets gave you back what you had given to them. Now the mark is on you, and it is too late for help any more. In a little while you will not be able to feed yourself, not be able to do for yourself, any more. Then the tongue dies, and there are no more words, only sounds like the animals make. The arms and the

legs die, and you cannot move any more. Childhood comes back, but rushing you the other way, toward the grave."

"Shut up!" he squalled, and cupped the heels of his hands tight against his ears.

She pulled the door open.

"Close the door," he coaxed. "Come on back in. Stay with me awhile. I'm lonely. I ain't got nobody of my own. These others—" He took a sudden step toward her, arms outstretched. "*Madre!*" he cried out in intensity. "*Madre mia!*"

She turned. "Mother, no. Just a woman who bore a devil. The woman who once bore you says good-by to you."

She spat upon the threshold of the door. The door swept before her face like a wooden curtain, and erased it. She was gone.

His mouth opened in a gape of disbelief, such as one might feel to find that one's own self had betrayed one. Then his mouth clicked shut, and defiance came back into his face.

"All right, let 'em all go!" he bellowed. "All of 'em! I don't need nobody! I'll make it alone! I come up by myself, and I'll stay up by myself!"

He went over and looked into the mirror topping the dresser,

and tightened his tie, and jerked downward at the closed fit of his coat, and straightened the padding that sloped upon his shoulders.

"It's me for me, all by myself, just like it's always been," he said aloud to the scowling reflection facing him. He flourished his own hand toward his reflection's hand, so that his reflection's eyes could see the explosively-brilliant diamond on the little finger.

He picked up the money she had flung onto the floor, and gestured with that back toward the mirror too, though he was no longer before it. As one flips a glove or handkerchief.

"There ain't no good or bad, anyway," he grunted. "They just tell you that in the church when you're a kid, to keep you from getting wise that everyone else has something, and you ain't got nothing. There's only dumb and smart. And if you don't want to be one, then you gotta be the other."

He riffed the money back into order, tucked it into his billfold, replaced that.

He summed up his life, content with it, proud of it.

"Abbazia picked smart for his."

Then he went over to the door,

and opened it. "Hey, you! All right, you can come in now." Then he turned away, allowing it to remain ajar behind him to accommodate the redhead's passage.

He took out a cigarette and a pocket-lighter. Then before he had completed the contact, he broke off abruptly to turn his face back toward the door in inquiring disbelief.

It was still as he had left it. No one had come through it.

His face took on a darker cast. He flung the cigarette down and strode back. This time he stepped out past it, and glared searchingly, first in one direction, then the other.

There was no one in sight. The hall was empty.

He slammed the door. He wrenched the phone out of the fork that held it, and shouted: "That girl—I want her up here! I don't let nobody make me wait like this! She'll be the sorriest that ever lived if she don't—"

"I'm sorry, sir. She left the building."

3

THERE was a moment of sudden stunned silence. "She *what?* What'd you just say?"

"She's not in the building any

longer," the voice repeated. "I saw her leave by the front entrance."

Abbazzia's voice was less raucous now, more incisive. "That man I left down there. Put him on. I want to talk to him."

"I'm sorry—he's, he's not in the building any more either," the voice told him. "He left with her."

The stunning impact of the news made him take a step back on one leg. "What'd you say?" he croaked. "How'zat? Come again?"

"The two of them left together," the voice reiterated.

He was having trouble with his breath: it came too full one moment, too sparse the next. He closed off the connection, as though afraid to leave even that small opening leading into his room.

His lips had fallen open enough just to show the edges of his teeth. And above, around the eyes, went a grimace of sparkling rage, flecked with undertones of latent apprehension. The pupils moved far over into one corner of the eyes, then all the way back into the opposite corner, then back once more to the first corner. Never remaining at calm center.

"Both!" he burst out aloud, finally. "They *both* ran out!

Wait'll I get Augie in here! I gotta get Augie in here!"

He scurried to the wall on the bias, giving a glancing shove to a chair to get it out of his way rather than going around it, so intent was he on getting there. He struck at the wall, and it gave back a loud but flat-surfaced impact, that raced around the room and died again in silence.

Then drew back and struck once more. And then once more.

Silence came back, and he nursed his hand, blowing his breath over it and holding it with the other.

He turned around to face the door, waiting to witness its imminent flinging-wide and Augie's headlong rush across the threshold, as at the rehearsal.

Nothing occurred. The door remained lifeless.

This time his arm moved like a triphammer. Its motions blurred, they could no longer be identified individually, so fast it struck, so incessantly. So frantically, so despairingly.

He even cried out his name, and added that to the burden of sound he was making. "Augie!" and then again "Augie! Why don't you come in here?"

His arm suddenly dropped, and swung there fallow.

"Gone," he panted. "Him too."

Then he laced around with the swiftness of a top when a child whisks the wound cord away from it, and flung himself at the opposite wall, the one across from the first. Then his hands began to ripple, beating tattoo with their palms; like a drummer using the plaster for his drumhead. Faster and faster they went, frenzied, battering. And his voice kept calling out in agonized repetition the other one's name, the man who was supposed to be behind there; "Vito! Vito! Vito!"

No one, nothing, gave any sign.

Panic came—with its limitless black horizons. His voice came out, unknown to him. "I'm wide open. They can walk in from the street and get me! There's nobody any more in-between!"

He ran to where the suitcase that one of his men had carried in at their first arrival had stood all this while, against the wall and partly screened by the bureau.

He drew it out, still talking hastily and brokenly to his unseen companion: self-preservation. "Shoulda been out of here by now, instead of wasting all this time! Crazy, to stay here this long, like I have. This is the first place they'll find out about; one of them rats'll squeal."

The suitcase had been packed meticulously. His ravening fingers disembowelled it; neckties of tropical brilliance splashed up, to fall in rings around him, and stay that way, like static ripples.

Then a gun, bedded in layers of undergarments. He inserted it underneath his coat, attaching it to some appendage already there to support it.

Money from the billfold went into the suitcase, and then the lid went down. He stood up. "That's all," he said. "That's all you need in this-here world. Money and a gun. A gun and money. Everything else, you can get with one or the other of them two." And leered with his own wisdom.

He put the suitcase down just within the closed door, and opened that narrowly to look out.

Then his breath clogged against the roof of his mouth. There was a man's figure standing a short distance down the hall, just where the elevator-door was. Standing completely motionless, head lowered attentively, a newspaper furred to about two columns' width held diagonally outward just below his breast-bone. The tilt of his hat-brim kept the hall-light from the upper part of his face, as though he were wearing an overlarge eyeshade.

He didn't move, nothing about him moved; not the fingers holding the newspaper's edge, not even the loose-hanging hem of his olive-drab topcoat. He stood there bated. He hadn't turned his head to acknowledge the opening of the door.

Abbazzia closed the door.

"The window—" then came racing down the millway of his thoughts, like a gleaming dislodged pebble—"may be a fire-ex-cape. Get out through there." He'd first used the word at seven with an x; he'd used it that way ever since; and no one that he'd ever spoken it to in all the times between had known that it was wrong, themselves, and told him so. A wrong word throughout a life, used many times.



He flitted from the door, now. When his fingers held the little twine ring the shade-cord ended in, he didn't draw the shade up,

he simply slanted it aside, making a parsimonious triangle to look through. Craning a little, he saw at once that under the ledge there was nothing, only a dark gap, all the way down to the street. This building had no outside escapes. It offered only fireproof stairs. Which meant the door again, the death-vigil in the hall.

He was cut off, sealed up in here. The room that had been chosen because of its inaccessibility for a sanctuary, had turned for that same reason into a tomb.

"I'm finished!" he shuddered deeply. "I'll never get out of here alive, by myself!"

Silence, at first. Then that "by myself" began coming back, like an echo, like an afterthought. Louder, more insistent each time, as though he had shouted it out:

"By myself! *By myself!* BY MYSELF!"

Ricocheting, playing back to him, glancing off the walls in eerie polyphonic impetus.

His hand, dropping from his forehead, suddenly stopped, tightened, as if it were grasping an idea, holding onto it for dear life.

"By myself, no, not a chance. But with somebody else! With somebody else I could make it!"

Then his hand relaxed a little, almost let the idea go.

"Where's the somebody else for me, though? There isn't any somebody else left for me. They've all run out. And what good would it be, even if they hadn't? It would have to be somebody that they're afraid of, and they're not afraid of my boys any more. Somebody bigger than them. Bigger than them and bigger than me, both—"

His hand tightened again. Far tighter than it had been the time before. The idea was caught fast now, had taken form, had taken body.

"*Them!*" he breathed, as if in amazement that the idea should occur to him at all. And then, after an instant's contemplation, redoubled amazement at its simplicity, its logic; in fact, that it had not occurred any sooner than it had. He drove the clenched hand into its opposite. "Sure! Them! Why not them? I've always laughed at them. They were for the chumps. For the little guys, not the big guys like me. They were for decoration. They turned their backs, when I passed the word. But always with a hand sticking up behind them, like a tail. All I had to do was put something in it, and then they were never around where I didn't want them to be at a certain time. Now I *want* them to be around,

that's all. It worked that way, why shouldn't it work this way just as good?"

He hastened to the phone, caught it up. He looked at the door and then at the window, but there was less stark ravening fear in his look now, there was more of a dissembling cunning.

"I got no bodyguard left?" he breathed above an hysterical abortive chuckle. "I'll make a bodyguard out of *them!*"

A man's voice said: "Yes, please?"

"Gimme the police," Abbazzia ordered.

IT WAS a tactful, low-modulated knock. Not urgent, not demanding. Respectful, as behove emissaries come to a person of greater importance than their own. There was even something intimate about it, as if to say: *You know why we're here, and we know too; but no one else does. Let's keep it from them, shall we?*

"Coming, boys!" he hallelujahed. "Coming ri-i-ight to you!"

Then he was at the door, and the brassware under his fingers was like a caress. It was like gold, and he had always loved to touch gold. Just for its own sake alone.

This door that had kept death

out—he opened it now to let life in.

He saw their faces first. Life had three faces. There were three of them. One was on each side of the opening. The third was in mid-center of it, but not immediately forward as they were; a little in the background. Two paces, say.

Their faces were as the faces of men are—particularly men in their calling. They told nothing. There was no feeling to be read on them, no modulation. They were strangers confronting another stranger, without emotion. Assigned to do a task, without emotion. Such as rescue a cat stuck in a drainpipe.

Their eyes regarded him, and that was all. They revealed nothing, other than that they saw him.

His gaze feasted on their uniforms, like moths that gorge themselves on fabric. The blue service-garb of the Police Department of the City of New York. The brass buttons, the visored caps, the pewter-looking badges affixed.

They didn't speak, he was the one did:

"Hello, boys! Gee, am I glad to see you! Hello, fellows! Boy, it's sure good you got here!"

Beside himself, and scarcely

knowing what he did, he even tried to press the hand of one. The man passively let him do so, without making any move of his own, Not even raising his hand to meet Abbazzia's.

Two of them came forward into the room, one turning to the third as he did so and instructing, quiet-voiced: "You wait outside here by the door. We'll be right out."

Abbazzia had been made almost light-headed by happiness. He cupped his hands together, leaving an orifice. He blew into it zestfully. He rubbed them together, in anticipation of imminent welcome activity.

"I'll get what I'm taking with me," he told them. "Won't take no time at all."

The other officer's first move on entering the room had been to cross it to the window, to draw the shade. Then seeing that Abbazzia already had it down, he modified this intention to simply plucking a finger's length of it aside and peering out. Satisfied, he turned his back upon it. He stood there like that briefly, full back to window. Then he moved forward unhurriedly to rejoin them, and stopped just back of them, and stood in a waiting attitude, hands behind him.

"You won't need them," the other one suggested helpfully to Abbazzia.

"No, I guess you're right," Abbazzia conceded. He cast aside the monogrammed shirts, stooped again to his suitcase.

"Y'got a gun?" the man asked him matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, sure."

"Better let us take it," the patrolman said quietly.

"Okay, if you think it's better that way," Abbazzia assented accommodatingly. He drew it out, offered it to him grip-first.

"Take his gun for him, Charlie," he instructed his fellow-patrolman without offering to touch it himself.

The second one uncoupled his hands, accepted it from Abbazzia, and disposed of it somewhere within his uniform jacket, unbuttoning this to do so, then rebuttoning it again.

"Thanks a lot," said Abbazzia absently, bending once more.

"You're welcome," answered the first one tonelessly.

Abbazzia straightened from the suitcase, about to insert something within his own clothing this time.

"You won't need that," he was told, as tonelessly as ever.

Abbazzia stopped long enough

to give him a blank look. "Oh, this I will," he contradicted. "This time you're wrong. This is dough, in here. You take dough with you every place you go."

The policeman didn't shake his head, he merely compressed his lower lip slightly to indicate his negation. "There's one place you don't," he said expressionlessly.

Abbazzia stopped to look at him more fully.

"Put it back again," the man counselled, detachedly.

Abazzia's look became a stare. "Now wait a m-m-minute—" he stammered. "This is *my* money. What d'ya mean? I don't get you—"

The other one spoke unexpectedly, from over-shoulder. "Let's get finished, shall we, Nick? This is no fun any more."

Abbazzia turned sharply to look at him. Then something made him look down. The man's hand held a gun. Not the one Abbazzia had just handed over to him, but one that must have come out of his police-holster. He wasn't aiming it, it just lay idle in his hand, sidewise, as if he were testing its weight.

Abbazzia turned back in consternation to the first one. "What does he need that for?" he asked with quickening tension.

"I don't know," was the dispassionate answer. "Ask him." But even as he said it, he was unlimbering his own, as if his companion's similar act had reminded him of something.

Abbazzia's voice was beginning to throb. "Wait a minute. I don't get it—"

"You don't get it?" said the one before him, meticulously repetitive. "He don't get it," he said to the one behind.

"Something's wrong here—"

This time the policeman gave a slight head-shake. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's just the way it should be."

"No it isn't! The way you're looking at me—something about the way you're looking at me—" Suddenly suspicion, seeping into the overheated crannies of his mind all this while like a combustible gas, ignited, exploded into a ghastly white flash of certainty.

"You ain't real—" His lower jaw dangled loosely. He got it to cleave to its upper part long enough for utterance. "Barney—Maxwell—didn't send you!"

"What d'ya know?" the one in front of him apprised the one behind him. "Barney Maxwell didn't send us."

The voice in back of Abbazzia

said: "Who's Barney Maxwell?"

Abbazia's eyes flickered closed in expiring confirmation.

The first one dropped his voice slightly, took the stilts of irony away from under it. "Police captain. Must've been trying to make a deal with him." He plucked briefly at his own coat-sleeve to indicate it. "So the blues worked?" He leered at Abbazia, leaned in closer. "Just let me ask you one thing more. If this copper Maxwell didn't send us, then who did? D'ye know?"

"Yes," sighed Abbazia, on a long breath that seemed to empty out his soul. "Yesss, I know who sent you—" He sank downward onto his knees between the two of them there.

He started to talk for his life. And lives can't be put into words. "Fellas. Fellas—my money. All my money, fellas—"

"What d'ya think, we came here to rob you?" the face smiled. "We ain't thieves."

His voice came straight from his heart now. Every heartbeat swelled it, thinned it, and they were dynamo-quick. "Two minutes. Just give me two minutes. That ain't long to ask for. Just one minute. Don't give it to me cold. Just let me get ready."

"You're ready now," the over-

hanging face said. And it said crisply to the other one: "Get a pillow."

The sole of a shoe went up right over Abbazia's eyes. It came down across his throat, full stamping-power withheld though, and pinned him there. He could not raise his head at the one side of it, he could not raise his trunk at the other. His fingers scratched the empty air.

There was a gusty impact, as when someone drives a blow into the plumpness of a pillow.

The man was holding a pillow before his own midsection, the curve of one arm supporting it. The gun was fastened idly to the hand of that arm, pointing off to nowhere. With his other hand, wound into a fist, he kept buffetting the pillow, driving each successive blow deeper into it. Until it slowly folded over around all its edges, and he had driven a deep hollow into the inner side of it.

Then neatly and economically he brought out his hand, took over the gun with it, and inserted that into the pit he had dug within the pillow.

His eyes scanned Abbazia's form steadily for a moment, as though he were taking aim sight-unseen, by dint of finger-feeling

alone. He remarked to his fellow-killer: "Get your foot outta the way, I don't want to hit you."

THE shoe suddenly left Abbazia's throat. His windpipe seemed to unfold, like a rubber tube that has been trodden flat and slowly fills out again.

The shots followed immediately afterward, without any further preliminary.

The pain came first, then the throbbing drum-beats of the sound. There were many pains, and many drum-beats, but they all came in that order. Twice, thrice, four times, five, six.

He moved very little, just rocked a little from side to side, with an ebbing motion, like something settling to rest. He didn't cry out. This pain was too deep to be voiced. It lacked the breathing-spells in-between, in which to gather voice and eject it.

His eyesight fogged, as when someone breathes too closely on a glass, and then cleared again momentarily, but not to the full expanse it had had before; just a small clear patch in the center, with mist all around its edges.

He saw a feather come wafting sluggishly down, in graduated volplane glides from side to side.

It looked so enormous, like the lush tail-plume of an ostrich. Afraid it would smother him, he tried to get out from under it before it completed its descent, but couldn't move. It landed on his chest someplace, was lost to sight.

High up above he saw a trace of smoke-haze. This went up the other way, as slowly as the feather had come down, erasing itself to nothingness as it went.

His eyesight dimmed again, and was no more.

His hearing lingered on, futile, moribund.

An inquiring tap on wood sounded, and a voice immeasurably far-off said: "Yeah, we're through. We're coming."

The hard hub of a shoe pounded against his ribs, like a mallet swung underhand seeking to drive them apart. The pain this time was like splinters.

"Take that with you," a voice said way off in the distance. "That's Nicky's regards."

A door-latch clicked, many rooms away it seemed.

And in that distant room, that was the world now, men were exchanging a brief remark or two in passing.

"How'd it sound?"

"Like a guy snapping his fin-

gers at a crap-game, that's about all."

And then someone laughed. That was the last time he heard laughter. Only the living can laugh, only the living can hear it. "That was the crap-game of death, buster. We cleaned up in there."

There was a slight vibration of the flooring that was cupped like a sounding-board against his one ear, as though feet were coursing away somewhere along it.

Then momentarily a voice came clear again, as though a head had turned inward toward him in parting. "Close the door," it jeered. "Let him die in privacy."

A latch gave a single clock-like tick, and then there was nothing more of other men, their voices nor their stirrings nor the pain they gave. He was alone.

It was a twilight-world. It was just twilight, just shadow.

At least there was no pain in it, for it knew nothing.

The heart beat, the breath filled and backed; beyond that, nothing. It was death-sleep, stretched out into a life-time of nothingness, the nothingness of a lifetime.

And then the effort to live some more set in, coursing slowly

through him like some hypodermically-introduced plasma.

His struggles now were terrible to watch, because they were so small. A finger quirked, a foot twitched, his eyelids flickered as if the light of life still beat too strong upon them for them to bear in repose. A pulse made a moving shadow on his cheek.

In a moment, or in forty, one knee had switched up toward his body like a piston, and then gone back again; and then switched up, and then gone back again. And then what it was trying to do, occurred. His trunk gave a half-turn over, and his hand caught in the bed-stuff there above him, and clawed, and stayed.

Then in a little while the other hand was up there with it. But his head hung down between them of its own weight. He'd raise it, but it would go down again. Until a time came when it stayed down. Then one hand let go and fell off.

Then the other one did too.

Then the spark went out.

Then there was nothing, nothing at all. Forever after, for all the rest of time. And when there is nothing, no thing at all, for all the rest of time, that is called death.

DON'T GO AWAY MAD

by ROBERT TURNER

The smooth payroll bandits decided to laugh off the warning broadcast that one of them might have hydrophobia.

THE thing went off fine up to a point. Nobody in the payroll office gave us any trouble. Briggs and I left the three clerks neatly bound with tape and took the money out in the laundry bag. We started across the factory yard to the alley where we'd left the car and the yard was deserted this early in the day. Briggs was in front, carrying the laundry bag and I was slightly behind him and to his left.

We never were sure what got the dog after us. Later, Briggs thought it was the silk stockings we were still wearing over our



heads. I figured it was the laundry sack; some dogs, I knew, couldn't stand the sight of strangers carrying packages or bundles.

Anyhow, this little black mongrel shot out of the shadows of a building, yiping and snapping. He concentrated his attention on Briggs. We tried to keep going, to ignore the little beast but a couple of times, swearing crazily, Briggs kicked at the dog. One of these times the dog went for him. It hung onto Briggs' trousers and part of his leg, before he caught it in the belly with the toe of the other foot and landed it on its back ten feet away. When it gathered itself up, it ran squealing back to the shadows.

We got to the car and drove away fast. I was driving. Nobody chased us. Several blocks away when we figured it was safe to slow down, I said:

"He really bite you or just get your pants?"

Briggs pulled his trousers up to the knee. There was an oval of blood-oozing teeth marks on his thin calf. Briggs felt the wound gingerly. He said: "It ain't too bad. He didn't get deep. But it stings like hell."

"So you dump iodine on it when we get to the place," I told him and concentrated on driving,

on sticking to the rather torturous route we'd mapped out.

It was one of those perfect things. We made it all the way without anything going wrong; to our own car, hidden in a patch of woods outside of town, where we abandoned the stolen one and changed clothes and headed for the fishing camp twenty-five miles away along rutted wagon paths, bordered by nothing but palmetto and scrub oak.

We'd bought the fishing camp a month ago. We were rich Northern business men, you understand, with the finest credentials. I almost believed them, myself. We got the whole place for \$800 cash which we figured to be a good investment. We moved in two weeks ago with visitor's fishing permits and that gave us time to be snooped at and cleared by the game warden and local sheriff.

We had enough supplies for six weeks. Now that the thing was over our schedule called for us to stay cozy there for a month, and then check out and go our separate ways without arousing any suspicion.

If we were investigated again, routinely, as strangers in the neighborhood? Perfectly all right. What could they prove? What would they find? Not the money.

That would be in a waterproof container at a marked place in the bottom of the lake. When we were ready to leave it would be recovered with a skin-diving outfit.

And the whole thing went off exactly that way. Except for the radio announcement.

I'd treated Briggs' leg with iodine and we had just finished counting the loot, when it came on. Briggs had insisted on turning on the radio for an account of the robbery and what action was being taken. Briggs is the nervous type. Me, I wasn't too interested. We'd either make it the rest of the way or we wouldn't. Wondering and worrying about it wasn't going to help.

What I was interested in was the \$86,420 stacked on the table in fifties, twenties and tens. I was thinking of all the things I was going to do with my half.

And what else I was interested in, was Julie, Briggs' woman. In pretty much the same way. I was thinking how neatly she was stacked, too. Only that wasn't very practical. She belonged to Briggs. What Briggs had he could keep. I don't get my kicks trying to chop the rattles off a live snake.

It wasn't a good setup, though. But Briggs had insisted on it. We

had to have decent grub, he said and Julie could really cook. Well, she could but it wasn't her cooking he wanted her there for, of course.

The cabin was one big room and there wasn't much privacy. Briggs and Julie rigged a canvas curtain around their bunk at one end but it didn't help much with the night sounds.

It did me no good, either, watching Julie with her long black sateen hair and high-cheeked sensual face all the time walking around in pedal-pushers and halter or shorts and halter. I wondered how she ever sat down in those pedal pushers and those sharkskin shorts without splitting them. Or took a deep breath in that halter.

After the first two weeks, too, it did me no good to begin to know that she was too much woman for little old Briggsy. I could tell that by the speculative way I'd catch her looking at me.

Briggs was only about half my size, one of these blond, wiry little guys. Handsome, of course, in a fierce, gaunt way. And he could box like a featherweight champ; he knew all there was to know about judo and he knew how and was not afraid to use a knife or

a .32 whichever seemed most desirable at the time.

If you get the idea that Briggs was a dangerous little man, you're so right. I'd rather tangle with one of those pretty little coral snakes they have down here. So I didn't build up any great head of steam about Julie and I wasn't fond of the ideas she was getting about me after two weeks of Briggsy's high-strung, sullen possessiveness. I stayed away from her as much as possible and was content with a little mild dreaming.

Anyhow, it was right after we finished counting the take that this radio announcement came on. Julie was saying something gushy about all that pretty money when the newscast started and Briggs said: "Shut up, you."

She did. He hadn't raised his voice but she quit talking in mid sentence as though a hand had clapped over her mouth.

The newscaster told all about the big factory payroll hit and how the two men had gotten away clean, how roadblocks had been set up and how local police didn't have much to work on but the F.B.I. were being called in. Then the announcer dropped his bomb.

"Here is a special bulletin," he said. "If the men involved in

that holdup are listening now, this is urgent. This is a matter of life and death for one of you. . . . *Attention please, the men who pulled off the Bayco Company Payroll robbery!* . . . An eyewitness to your flight from the factory yard saw you attacked by a company pet, a small dog, who makes his home in the yard. It is *believed* that one of you was bitten by the dog. Shortly after, the dog showed signs of being rabid. Laboratory tests are now being made. It is most seriously *advised* that the dog-bite victim *immediately* submit to treatments at the nearest Public Health Service laboratory. *This is the only possible way to avoid devastating illness and almost certain death from hydrophobia. . . .*"

There was a pause and the announcer went on: "I repeat. . . . For the benefit of one of the two men who took part in the Bayco Company payroll robbery this morning. . . . One of you was bitten by a presumably mad dog. *You are subject to immediate infection.* Unless you apply for treatment *immediately*, your life is in danger. A long, drawn-out, agonizing death awaits you if you avoid taking treatment.

"Throughout the next few days, in case those men are not pres-

ently listening, this warning will be issued again."

Briggs shut off the radio. He stood for a long time, his hand still on the switch, looking down at the radio. Julie and I watched him, the heavy way he was breathing, the movement of his skinny shoulders.

When he turned, he was ashen. His almost colorless eyes under their thick, sticky lashes, were bleak.

"What about it, Connaught?" he asked. "Are they kidding?"

I SHRUGGED. "How do I know? If the mutt *was* rabid, you *could* get it. He looked all right to me but you can't tell by that. He might have gone into a fit thirty seconds later. Maybe it's a bluff. Maybe it's a gimmick to get you to turn yourself in."

He thought about that. "Yeah," he said. "That could be."

"Sure," I said.

"But suppose it ain't?" His tongue moved over his thin, mobile lips. "What can I do?" He shivered violently.

In his eyes I could see his imagination going to work. I told him: "I don't know. There's nothing much you *can* do. Except go get the treatments."

He made a savage, impatient gesture. "That's out. If they're pulling a fast one, I'd be a sucker. If I really have got it, I'd still rather die. You know what it would mean. I'm a three-time loser."

"I know," I said. "So you just sweat it out, huh?"

"No," he said. "You're going to do something for me. There must be something. You studied to be a vet, didn't you?"

It was true I'd had a year of Animal Husbandry before I became convinced that if you worked real hard, didn't smoke and drink and were kind to your mother, it was still possible you might never get rich.

"What I can do, Briggs," I said, "should you reach the secondary stage, is keep you in the quiet and the dark and counteract the intensity of the spasms with morphine and chloroform. If we had either. If we could get them."

"Spasms?" You could see Briggs' Adam's apple jumping as he swallowed, now.

"That's right. Violent muscle contractions. You know, like convulsions. The worst ones get you in the throat and the mouth. That's why water—"

I didn't get to finish the discourse. Briggs shouted, all the

veins in his neck and face straining: "Skip it. I haven't got the damn thing, anyhow, you understand? I refuse to have it. You hear me?" His scrawny hands wiped up and down the sides of his trousers.

I said: "Okay, Briggs."

We got busy with the money, then. We counted it again and stowed it into the metal, waterproof box and rowed it out to the place in the lake we'd selected and dropped it overboard.

That night I listened to Briggs and Julie whispering in the dark over there in their bunk and I thought about the money and about that crazy mutt nipping Briggs and wondered what would happen if the dog *was* rabid.

I got a little excited thinking about it. It would mean Briggs would die. It would mean that whole eighty six grand would be mine. And maybe Julie's, if she wanted it that way.

I calmed down though before I went to sleep. There wasn't much chance of it being true. Actually cases of humans contracting rabies is rare. I'd never really known of one. It could happen but it wasn't likely. Even if the whole thing wasn't just a police trick, which I was sure it was.

It was too much of a coincidence that the one mutt in the city to bite Briggs would be that way. I just somehow couldn't buy it.

The next morning after breakfast, Briggs turned on the radio again. It was almost an hour before the local newscast. Briggs almost went nuts during the wait. When the announcer came on, he started right off saying the Pasteur tests had been positive. The dog had been rabid. All the warnings to Briggs were issued again. Of course, that figured, even if it was still a police trick.

While the announcer was talking, Briggs started to sweat. The announcer was halfway through the warning when Briggs knocked the radio to the floor with his fist and kicked it across the room. The radio went off, the speaker smashed in. It was finished.

"He's lying!" Briggs shouted. "It's impossible. Who do they think they're conning, some school boy?"

Neither Julie nor I said anything. We just looked away. Briggs went outside, then, slamming the door. I went to the window and watched him walk furiously toward the little building out back that Julie coyly referred to as The Blue Room. Then I felt a hand

on my arm. Julie had come up behind me. My biceps tensed under her fingers as though touched by electric wires.

"Connaught," she whispered, "is it possible that he does have that—that awful disease?"

I shrugged. "Only time will tell."

Her nails dug into my arm, those long shiny nails but the hurt of them somehow felt good. "What if he *does*? What will we do? It'll be awful, won't it?"

"Pretty bad," I told her.

"Will—will he be dangerous?"

I started to say, no, that in human beings there is usually no desire to attack others, that usually the patient wants only to be left alone. Then I started to get a wild idea. I said: "Well, you know what a mad dog is like, Baby?"

I could almost see the picture forming in her mind of Briggs frothing at the mouth and running around biting everybody. Then we saw Briggs starting back toward the cabin and Julie moved away from me and went to the sink and started pumping water to do the breakfast dishes. I sat down and picked up a magazine.

That afternoon I was trying to

nap. Julie was mending a brassiere strap and I wondered why; she never seemed to wear one.

Briggs was pacing the floor like a caged bear. He stopped in front of me. "Connaught, I got to know. When will I know for sure?"

I was about to tell him that if he really was infected it would be from six weeks to three months before there were any manifestations. Then I remembered the idea I'd got before. I said:

"As soon as you show a lot of the early symptoms."

"Okay," he said. "What are they? Come on."

"There're three stages." I sounded like the prof I'd had in that class. "The first one, you get irritation in and around the bite, like itching and some numbness and pain. Then you get short tempered, you flip easy and you're apprehensive as hell and you can't sleep much. You also get depressed, way down in the dumps and have bad headaches and don't feel like eating much. That's the first stage. When those things happen, you know you can get ready for the second stage." All this was true; I wasn't conning him with this, at all. The only thing was, those weren't only

symptoms of hydrophobia. A highly strung, scared and worried person could get them, too. And after awhile they'd compound themselves, those symptoms.

"Yeah, yeah," Briggs said. "Then, what?" He unconsciously reached down and rubbed and felt around his leg where the mutt had nipped him.

"The second stage," I said, "comes restlessness and extreme excitability. Then the spasms—like I told you before. You want water but any attempt to swallow it brings on spasms of the throat so severely painful you get so you can't even stand the sight of water. You show signs of mania—you know, you act a little nuts."

He was watching my mouth, watching every word come out. His thin, dark nervous face was shiny wet now. He kept his voice calm but there was a nerve jumping in one check. "Okay, Connaught," he said. "Is that all?"

"No, there's the last stage. The spasms stop but you go into a coma. You get weaker and weaker. Death is finally caused by heart failure."

All the time I was talking, I could see, from the corner of one eye, that Julie was listening. Her lovely full, sullen mouth was opened in horror.

Then I said: "Aw, quit worrying, Briggs. You probably haven't got it. It's probably like you say, a rib on the part of the cops. Some wise guy heard about the dog chasing us and biting you and cooked it up. The police are as psychology-happy as everybody else, today. Don't let it get on your nerves."

That was like telling a guy sitting in a bed of nettles not to get itchy.

He moved one hand limply across his forehead. "No," he said. "No, I can't do that."

BUT that night almost every time I looked at him, he was feeling around that leg. Once when Julie asked him if it was bothering him, he slapped her in the mouth and told her of course not, to mind her own damned business. She began to look at him after that as though he was something out of a horror movie. The thing was beginning to build just fine. With both of them. Which was the way it had to be.

That night I heard Briggs get up out of bed a dozen times. The next day he was really bad. Jumpy as a frog in a barrel. He picked fights with me and Julie over the least thing. That night

he ate less than he had for lunch, if that was possible.

That night he tried to sleep on the floor but it was no go. He spent long hours outside, pacing in the moonlight of the yard. He drank a pint of whiskey we had on hand, very fast and got messy drunk. I don't think he slept a wink that night.

The following day he looked like death warmed over, with his thin cheeks sunken and covered with beard stubble, his gray eyes red with veins.

That afternoon I knocked over a lamp on purpose. Briggs almost jumped out of his skin at the noise. One after the other he was showing all the symptoms I'd described to him, the symptoms of a man with hydrophobia. Which were also the symptoms of a very neurotic person extremely worried and upset. But of course, Briggs didn't realize this.

Just before bedtime that night, he went into a fit of cursing. When he finished, he looked at me and Julie. He was choking a little and holding his throat between his thumb and forefinger. Finally he said:

"I've got it, haven't I? They were right. Don't try to kid me. Connaught—I'm sure of it now. I'm beginning to have trouble

swallowing. What am I going to do?"

"I wish I knew," I told him.

"Look, you said something about morphine and cholormorph." "

"Yeah. For the spasms. They're only good for that."

"How soon, Connaught?"

"What?"

"How soon do *they* begin?"

"Well, I'm not sure. One stage usually follows pretty quickly after the other. Maybe, tomorrow."

He thought about it. He walked up and down, holding his throat and hawking and swallowing forcibly. Then he whirled on us. "I'm going into town tonight. I'll crack a drug store and get that stuff. Connaught, you come with me and make sure I get the right stuff."

Before I could answer, Julie ran to him. She hurled herself into his arms. "Honey, that's no good. It's senseless. You've got to do like the radio guy said. You've got to turn yourself in, go get the treatment. You—we can't go on like this."

He went a bit berserk, then. He shoved her away and took her by the throat. He really did look insane that moment. His eyes stood out of his head and

his face was blotchy, his mouth all loose. Veins roped in his neck. He shook Julie by the throat until she was purple.

Just as I was thinking about interfering, he flung her away. She fell to the floor, gagging. But he wasn't through. He moved toward her and started kicking her. He screamed down at her:

"Sure, give myself up, you silly little slut. You'd like that, wouldn't you, having my share of the loot all to yourself, while I rot behind bars year after year. Don't make me laugh. You going to do all that time for me? Answer me. Are you? Are you?"

Then, physically as well as emotionally exhausted, he half fell into a chair. He sat looking at Julie on her hands and knees, her head hanging down, crying. When she reached back a hand to feel her ribs and started to drag herself to her feet, Briggs said:

"I'm sorry, Julie, I—guess I don't know what I'm doin', even, anymore. I'm—just—I'm almost out of my mind. I got to get out of here. Me and Connaught got to get those drugs. I'm goin' to lick this, yet. You'll see. Get me the gun, Honey."

She was standing now, swaying. Her head hung forward and

she looked at him from under her hooded eyelids.

She staggered toward their bunk. She lifted the mattress and took out Briggs' .32. She moved in a sort of slow sleep-walk, snuffing through her nose all the time. Six feet away from him she said:

"You'll get worse. It'll only get worse. We'd have to do this after awhile, anyhow."

She squeezed the trigger three times. I watched holes appear on Briggs' shirt in a three-point triangle around his left breast. He arched out of the chair as though something burned his fanny. He was dribbling from one corner of his mouth. He never said a word. He just slid stiffly off the chair and into a huddled heap.

The gun clunked to the floor. Julie stood there with her hands over her face, her shoulders moving. I walked over to her and bent and picked up the gun. I stuck it in the waist of my trousers. I took Julie by the elbows.

"Okay, okay, it's over, Baby. All over. You did right. It's better this way. He's better off."

She turned easily and came into my arms. She slumped against me. I can't tell you what it was like finally holding her like that. With one hand I rubbed the

small of her back and with the other I massaged the nape of her neck to quiet her. It quieted her, all right. In one way.

I don't know how long we'd have stood right there like that, except for the sharp, pinching pain I suddenly felt in the calf of my left leg. I looked down and Briggs was there on the floor where he'd crawled over to me. He was taking his mouth away from my leg.

I pulled away and kicked him in the face. It flipped him onto his back but I don't think he even felt it. He was dead.

Julie watched, wide-eyed, while I rolled up my trouser leg and looked at the bleeding marks of Briggs' teeth. She kept saying over and over: "What'd he do that for? Why'd he do that, Connaught? Why?"

It was a good question. The only answer I could figure was that since he couldn't have the money or Julie he was trying to see to it in the only crazy way he could think of, that I wouldn't, either.

I tried to explain that to Julie. She was scared of the possibilities, I could see. So then I had to tell her what I'd done, about how long it really takes for the symptoms of hydrophobia to manifest

themselves. I pretty well convinced her that Briggs most likely didn't have it at all. Even if he had, I told her, I doubted it was possible for one human to give it to another. I'd never heard of such a case.

The next day we buried Briggs where if he was ever found at all, it'd not be for a couple of years. That night we broke camp. I got the money out of the lake.

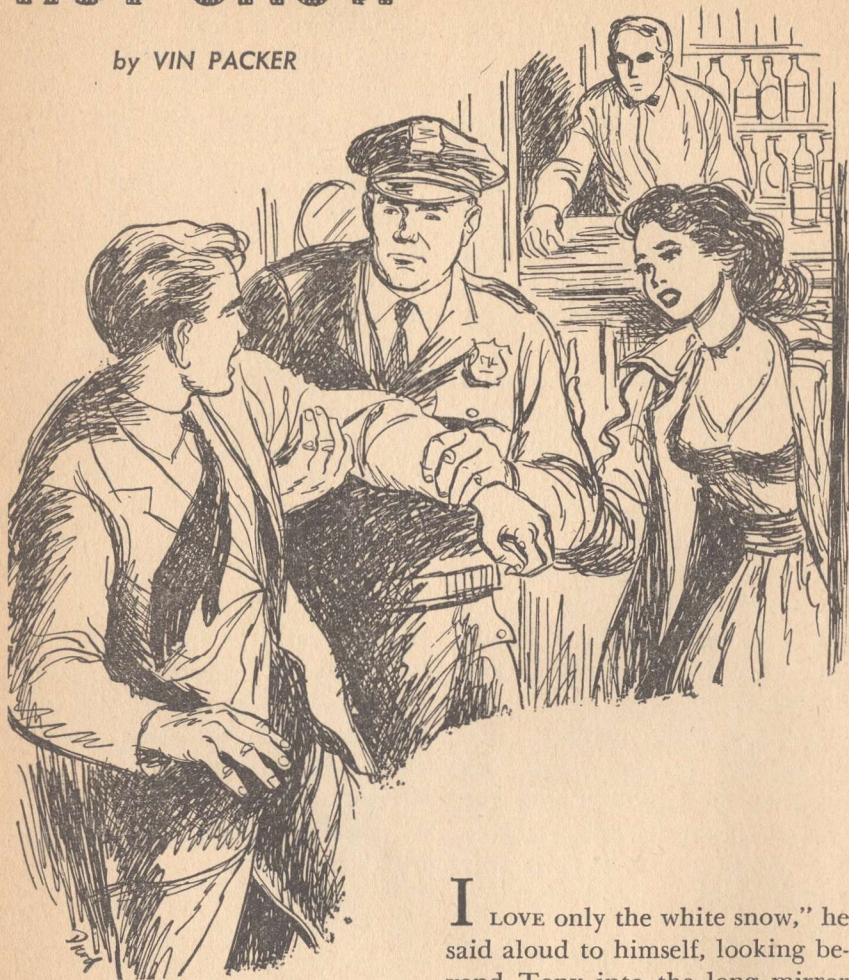
That was over six weeks ago and we're in Mexico, now. Both the money and Julie are better than I'd ever figured they'd be. For six weeks I didn't even think about Briggs and his hydrophobia. I really didn't, I tell you.

But yesterday that place he bit my leg, which was almost completely healed by now, started to itch and get sensitive. I know what it is, of course. It's just my imagination. Imagination can do crazy things. Just like with Briggsy, only to a lesser degree, of course, because I'm not the high-strung type.

Would I be writing this if I was really worried? I mean, even though I'm leaving it in a sealed envelope with a lawyer just so Julie won't ever get to enjoy the money all by herself just in case something does happen. Would I?

HOT SNOW

by VIN PACKER



The pretty girl didn't belong in this bar—and the young man didn't drink.

I LOVE only the white snow," he said aloud to himself, looking beyond Tony into the long mirror behind the bar.

Tony said, "Yep. Yeah," and went on washing glasses.

Besides the two of them in that

place there was this girl. She was on her third drink; rye on the rocks; and she was nice. What is meant by "nice" is good to look at, a fresh and pretty face, and hair that was soft and very black, and eyes green-changing-blue. She was twenty-eight? . . . Probably thirty. She wore a trench coat; her legs were slender, and she did not smile—but her expression was pleasant all the same, and she had been minding her own business until he had said that about the snow.

He had not said it to attract her attention, nor had he said it to Tony. In his small square hands he held a glass of gingerale, and he looked at no one in particular; at his reflection in the mirror, maybe—but that was all. Then his round dark eyes glanced down to study his wrists, the watch on the left one, and the cuffs of his white shirt below the sleeves of his worn tweed jacket. He was a gaunt young man; he had a sad and tender handsome face; a melancholy air; and dark brown hair, strands of which fell to his forehead while he shoved them back mechanically.

She spoke to him then. She was shy, so that her words were followed by a slight chuckle of embarrassment. She said, "There's

not much snow around this time of year."

"Not much," he agreed, and turned sideways to see her.

She blushed and lowered her eyes to her drink; then raised the glass and swallowed some of the rye.

"Do you like it when it's Winter?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Yes, I do."

"Do you *really*?" he said. His tone was too earnest for the question. A puzzled look came on her countenance.

"Y-yes," and then, "but I like Spring too. Spring is nice."

He said quietly, "I see."

He started to stare again at his wrists, without talking, and she watched him momentarily with a thin smile tipping her lips, and then she murmured wonderously, "'S funny, you know?"

"What is?"

"I mean, I never heard a fellow in a bar talk like you do. You talk different. Do you know?"

"How so?" he said.

"I don't know. Like—well—mysterious."

"I'm a very mysterious guy," he said, snickering sardonically, "Ah, yes."

She said, "You college?"

"Unt uh. . . . Nope. . . . But I read a lot. . . . I teach myself."

"I been in a lot of bars," she said, "but I never heard someone just blurt out about loving snow and all. 'S funny."

Tony shuffled back into the kitchen with a tray of glasses, and she glanced out the window of the bar.

"Still raining out, I guess," she said.

The young man said, "You ought to get out of here."

"Why?"

"What are you doing here anyway?"

"The same as you. Having a few drinks," she answered, and her eyes fell to the glass of gingerale in his hands.

He said, "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"What's the matter with it? Is there anything the matter with it?"

"You look like you ought not to be in a grubby bar having drinks by yourself," he said. "Don't ask me why. You just look like you ought not to be here."

"I moved down here," she said. "I live around here. I moved down here yesterday."

"So why do you come to a bar?"

"For drinks!" She sounded angry now.

The young man shrugged. He

said, "Some people are luses, some aren't. I didn't figure you for a lush."

"Look, mister," she said, "Is there anything wrong with a couple of drinks in a neighborhood bar?"

"What are you—all alone or something? Don't you have any one?"

"No," she said flatly.

"I'm sorry."

"That makes it worse," she said.

THEY sat there drinking silently then, and the young man began to notice her in a careful, interested way, his eyes fixed on her. Tony came back and stood behind the bar.

"What time's the plane coming in?" he asked the young man.

The young man's face turned from the girl to Tony, becoming suddenly tired. "Lord, I wish I knew!" he sighed.

She asked, "You waiting for a plane?"

She finished the rye in her glass and pushed it forward, stretching to get Tony's eye. "Another here, please," she said, and for the first time it was obvious that she was a little high; not drunk; but just a little high. She swayed slightly

atop the stool she was perched on.

"Sure," the young man answered her. "A plane from Alaska. From snow land."

"Here?"

"Sure," he said, "Right here."

She picked a cigarette out of her pack, dropped it, reached for it and dropped it again. After she got it into her mouth and lit it, she offered the pack to the young man.

"No," he said, "I don't smoke."

"Nor drink?"

"Nor drink."

"A man who talks about snow," she said with intoxicated thoughtfulness, "white, white snow."

"White, white snow," he said. "That's right."

He faced her once more, studying her profile as he asked, "What's your name?"

"Florence?"

Tony walked wearily to the end of the bar and picked up a magazine and a pencil. He started to work the crossword. He drank coffee and stood back there scratching his head and biting on the eraser of the pencil, frowning down at the open page.

She looked into the young man's eyes:

"What's yours?"

"Ben," he answered, "Ben."

He moved closer to her, get-

ting off the stool and walking over to her, his arm resting beside hers, barely touching hers. He said, "Why didn't I know you before?"

"And if you had?"

"I don't know."

"Things would be different?"

"Maybe I could still—" his voice trailed off. "Now I don't want you to go," he said. "That's funny, isn't it?"

"I wasn't going anyway, Ben."

"I'm glad," he said, "I'll buy you a drink."

He did, and they stood quietly together; and he kept watching her. "I might not meet that plane," he said.

"Oh?"

"I might not."

"If you're supposed to, you'd better," she said.

"I'm not supposed to."

"You talk all mixed-up," she said, "You don't make much sense."

"I love you," he said.

She didn't look at him. He was standing very close to her.

"Take me to your place," he said. "With you."

"No, Ben."

"I don't know how it happened. I just fell in love with you. Can't something crazy like that happen? All of a sudden?"

A breeze blew in from the door; and a heavy man stood in the entranceway. Momentarily he looked about him; then he went to the back of the bar. He called to Tony, "Kitchen open?"

"Sure," Tony said.

"Hamburger?"

"Sure."

He followed Tony to the back room. He was saying, "I got to use the phone, o.k., isn't it?"

The girl looked up at the young man. "You're not in love with anyone," she said. "You just like to talk."

"No," he shook his head adamantly. "Other times maybe you could say that about me, but not now. Something happened to me, Florence. You. You're better than snow," he grinned at her, "How do I know that?"

"You're just talking, Ben," she said.

"Take me to your place, will you?"

"No."

She could not look at him now.

"I ask you to."

"No."

"I'll wait for you," he said, "until you're finished lushing. I'll wait."

"And the plane?"

"I love *you*," he said emphatically.

Tony called out at him then: "Ben? Can you watch the burger a second? I got no help."

"What for?" the young man asked, but already he moved away from the girl. He stood uncertainly at the bar, eyeing Tony.

"C'mon, sport," Tony said. "Be big about it!"

The young man touched the girl's hand; then his fingers curled around her wrists tightly. "I'll be back. I'll be right back. Do you believe that? Will you wait, Florence?"

She nodded without looking at him, and he stood like that for a moment, holding her arm, and then he let go. And he went to the back room.

THE heavy man back there took a teaspoon from the pocket of his overcoat. The handle was broken off and the bottom was charred from the matches which had been lighted under it. From an envelope he took a capsule and opened it, and emptied powder into the spoon.

Then he took a hypodermic needle and an eyedropper from his breast pocket and laid them on the table. There was a water tap at one side of the room and he went over and dripped water

into the spoon. Back at the table he struck a match and held the flame under the spoon.

The young man watched him.

"How'd you like blue-grass-ing?" the heavy man asked. "Did you get the cold turkey treatment, Benny?"

The young man could not take his eyes from the flame.

"We missed you," the heavy man said, "No one could push decks like you could, Benny, when you were hooked. Then you had to go soft." He shook his head. "Well, now you're back. It'll be Winter again, Benny."

"I kicked it, Ace," the young man said, standing transfixed, staring at the spoon, and then at the eyedropper the older man used to suck up the milky fluid. "I just came down for one bang. Period! I kicked it, Ace."

"Sure, you did. This is just a skin-pop, Benny, for past services faithfully rendered. White snow on the house, Benjamin. For being a good boy, ah?"

"I never told, Ace. Sometimes I thought I'd go crazy if they wouldn't shoot me with the stuff, but I never told."

"That's right," Ace said. "Stick the leg out."

The heavy man jabbed the needle through the young man's

trousers into the thigh of his left leg. He placed the eyedropper over the needle, and pressed the fluid into the flesh. As he did this, he said, "But someday you would have, Benny—you're a weak kid. You would have got hooked again and then kicked it again, and you would have kept on like that until you had to rat, Benny."

"Would have?" Suddenly the young man's eyes became alert.

"Tony says you fell in love again tonight. While you were waiting for the plane. You see what I mean, Benny? You're impressionable, kid."

"No," the young man said. "I really—" and then he leaned back against the wall. "You said I *would* have, Ace."

"I've got to cut out now, Benny. It's Winter again, kid. It'll be Winter all the time now."

"Is it hot, Ace? Is it a hot shot? I don't deserve that, Ace! Ace, is it? Am I going to—"

The young man's question was not answered. Noise came; men with it; two in uniform and two in street clothes; and there was this girl.

The young man saw her. "I told you, Florence," he said, "you didn't belong here." He leaned back against the table, pushing

the strands of brown hair back on his forehead; he was perspiring.

The policemen had the heavy man by the arms and collar. They pulled him out of there.

The girl said, "You were right, Ben."

"C'mon, hophead," a man in a brown overcoat said to the young man. "C'mon."

"The girl didn't do anything," the young man said, holding his head with his hands, unmoving.

"It's all right, Ben," she told him. "We'll go together."

He said, "I—c-can't, Flor—" and he lurched forward suddenly while the two men caught him. His body sagged in their arms; his mouth quivered. He said her

name uncertainly: "Florence?"

The girl's hands tightened to tense fists as she watched, the fist of her right hand cradling her silver policewoman's badge, the edges of it cutting into the flesh of her palms. She murmured, "I never thought it would be as rough as this," to the man beside her.

"You'll get tough," he answered, "First time's like no other."

"Hot shot," the other said. "I guess he got one, all right."

"Florence," the young man said, "I love—" she bent near his face, her fingers loosening his collar and he looked at her through his dark eyes—"only the white snow," and died.

SCENTED CLUES

by RICHARD DEMING

IN ONE sense the situation was routine. After ten years as a homicide team, there wasn't anything unusual about Sam London and me standing side by side looking down at a body in a



V. Powell

Foolish wives should never keep records of their—foolishness.

morgue drawer. Together, we'd probably looked at a thousand; and at least a couple of dozen of them had been as shapely as this woman.

The thing that made this time different was that we were looking at the body of Marge.

The nightgown, the morgue attendant showed us, was transparent as glass. I think the sight of that nightgown upset Sam as much as Marge's death.

It's a hell of a thing to discover your wife was wearing a thing like that in a tourist cabin with another man, when you were on night duty and thought she was home.

I hardly looked at the nightgown. I couldn't take my eyes off Marge. If Sam London was my best man friend, Marge had been the woman I thought more of than any other in the world. Light and gay and full of laughter, she'd been living evidence, even to a confirmed bachelor like me, that marriage didn't necessarily have to be a humdrum affair.

Last night she was a living, breathing, warm-fleshed woman, I thought dully. Now, according to the metal tag on a chain around her neck, she was just Number 7.

Sam had never been very emotional. His face was blank and his complexion an unhealthy white, but he had full control of himself. I didn't. I'd been all right up to the time we looked at the body, but for some reason the black bruises on that soft throat sent me into a mild state of shock.

Maybe that's what helped Sam hang on to his own control. He knew how much I thought of Marge, and even under the stress of his own grief he was able to offer me support.

Taking hold of my arm, he pulled me away from the drawer. When we got out in the hall, he let go of my arm. I just stopped still. His gaze dropped to my left hand and his eyes widened.

In a sort of stupor I looked down. The remnants of my best pipe were in my clenched fist. I opened it and the shattered bowl fell to the floor.

Try to crush a pipe bowl with your bare hands sometime. I've tried it since, and I can't even crack one. And I can straighten a horseshoe without too much effort. But I wasn't particularly surprised at the time. In my mind, I'd had my hand around a throat ever since I'd seen that crushed throat of Marge's.

"I guess we better talk to the coroner's physician now, Sully," Sam suggested.

I said kind of vaguely, "Yeah. Sure."

I managed to get into motion then. I imagine I moved more or less like an automaton, but at least I moved. I even opened the door labelled *Coroner's Physician* ahead of Sam.

Doc Kingsley jumped up when we came in, and embarrassedly started to gush sympathy.

Sam interrupted by saying without inflection, "Give me the dope, Doc. All of it."

Kingsley looked a little flustered. "I haven't had time for anything but a preliminary examination yet, Sam. Anyway, don't you think you ought to settle down a little before we talk about it?"

"No. I want it now."

The coroner's physician studied Sam's white face dubiously. Then he said in a reluctant voice, "She wasn't just strangled, Sam. Her throat is literally crushed. You want to look for somebody unusually powerful."

Sam asked, "How long?"

Kingsley shrugged. "Eight hours. Give or take an hour. Say between eleven P.M. and one

A.M. And that's only a guess. Might be another hour off either way."

I found my own voice then. "When can we—when can you release the body?"

The coroner's physician gave me a peculiar look, perhaps thinking the question should have come from Sam instead of me. "I'll be through by noon tomorrow. You can have the undertaker pick her up any time after that."

Sam phoned an undertaker from Kingsley's office.

By the time we got out of the Coroner's Court Building I had conquered my numbness enough to move naturally. By tacit agreement Sam and I walked up the street to Police Headquarters.

There were only two men in room 405. Our new boss, Lieutenant Knudson, and his first assistant, Sergeant Jim Baldwin. The moment we walked in the room both of them started throwing sympathy, but Sam cut them off just as he had the coroner's physician.

"Sully and I want the case," he said to Knudson.

The lieutenant frowned. "You know that's no good, London. You take a few days leave. I'm putting Baldy on it."

He meant it in a nice way. And assigning his top man meant there wouldn't be just a routine investigation. If Sam had thought about it, he would have known Lieutenant Knudson intended to nail Marge's killer even if he had to assign all eleven of his men to the case. But Sam wasn't in a reasonable mood.

He said, "The hell with Baldy. We want it."

Ordinarily that would have gotten him blistered good, because even though we practice a kind of loose discipline in Homicide, corporals don't tell the lieutenant what to do. But the situation wasn't ordinary. On top of the dead woman being the wife of one of his men, Knudson didn't know any of us too well and was still feeling his way in his new job. Though he'd been a lieutenant for some years, he'd only been on Homicide for three days. He'd been moved over from the check-and-liquor squad to replace Lieutenant Murphy when our former boss was made a captain and bounced upstairs.

Baldwin just shrugged at Sam's remark.

Lieutenant Knudson looked pained. In a reasonable tone he said, "In addition to everything else, you and Sully have been up

all night. You ought to get some sleep."

Sam said coldly, "Sully can sleep. If you won't give me the case, I'll poke around on my own time."

The lieutenant looked from me to Sam irritably. Finally he said, "Nuts. Take the damn thing."

IT WAS only coincidence that Sam and I didn't know about Marge's murder until her body came into the morgue; for we'd been on the night homicide trick at the time she died. Three of us were on: Corporal Sam London, Detective Second-Grade Carl Moseby and Detective First-Grade Tom Sullivan, the last one being me.

We don't enjoy the luxury of clerical help in Homicide, so unless there's an emergency calling everyone on duty away from 405 at once, at least one man is supposed to stand by to answer the phone. Sam and I usually work as a team on day duty, but on the night trick rarely more than one man at a time goes out on a call. Some nights are so dead, all we do is play three-handed pinochle, but other times we hop all night. Monday had been one of the latter.

Sam was out on a hit-and-run, and I was out on an attempted suicide, when the call about Marge came in about two A.M. Moseby told the switchboard to take calls for Homicide and went out on that one before either Sam or I got back.

The call had come from the proprietor of the Cozy Rest Motel out on 66, where Marge's body was found. According to Moseby's report, the proprietor discovered her because the killer left the light on and neglected to shut the cabin door. The proprietor was returning to his office, after showing a late check-in party to a cabin, and walked right past Marge's door. Glancing in, he saw her sprawled across the bed with her head hanging off one side, and stopped to take a better look.

The motel proprietor's story was all in Moseby's report, but we drove out to see him anyway. He was a round, cheerful man named Herbert Coombs.

"I told that other detective everything I knew," he said.

"Sure," Sam said. "Just go over it once more though, will you?"

Coombs shrugged agreeably. "Well, they checked in about eleven, this guy and the babe. Didn't have no luggage except a small bag. Registered as Mr. and

Mrs. George Hunt of Kansas City. The guy paid in advance, of course. I always collect in advance. I put them in Cabin Three."

We looked at the registration card, but it didn't mean anything. The name obviously was phony, and while the license number was listed, it didn't lead anywhere. It was the license of Marge's 1950 Chevrolet, and it still stood next to the cabin, waiting for Sam to drive it home.

The small bag Herbert Coombs mentioned didn't lead anywhere either. We'd seen it at the morgue, and Sam identified it as belonging to Marge. It contained nothing but toilet articles, and had probably also contained the seductive nightgown when she checked into Cabin Three.

"The guy?" Sam asked in a husky voice. "What'd he look like?"

"Big. Nearly as big as your friend here." The proprietor nodded at me. "About thirty, thirty-five, I guess. Six two, maybe. Two hundred pounds at a rough guess. Black hair. Didn't notice what color eyes, but he had a heavy suntan." He paused, thinking, then added, "Well dressed. Brown sport coat and tan slacks. No hat."

We looked over Cabin Three then. We'd already seen its interior from photographs taken by Moseby while Marge's body was still across the bed. Now it didn't tell us any more than the photographs had.

It was a nice cabin, pine-paneled, furnished with modern furniture in good condition and with a coin-operated television set. The bath was glittering porcelain and imitation tile.

I examined the scratches on the bedroom window sill which I had previously noted in one of Moseby's pictures. The window was shut now, but it had been open in the photograph.

"Looks to me like the guy left by this window," I offered. "Seems funny he'd do that with the door wide open."

The fat motel proprietor said, "Maybe he'd just killed her and he seen me coming."

I shook my head. "He could just have closed the door until you got by."

"Not if he was rattled," Sam said. "You know how screwy a killer can act when he's in a panic."

There wasn't a bit of evidence in the cabin of Marge's lover's presence.

Sam summarized aloud what

little we knew, apparently partly for my benefit and partly to organize his own thoughts. "She and this—this lover of hers arrived in Marge's car around eleven. At two she was dead, which conforms to the coroner's physician's guess. The guy must have killed her in a rage, then panicked and took off across country on foot. If he wasn't in a panic, why didn't he take the car and abandon it in town?"

"Maybe he didn't have a driver's license," Herbert Coombs suggested brightly.

Both Sam and I looked at him coldly. I imagine he was puzzled, because of course he didn't know our relationship to the dead woman and it probably never occurred to him we'd ever heard of her until after she was dead. His expression indicated he thought he'd said something pretty funny, but it turned uncertain when neither of us smiled.

I asked Sam, "Where do we go from here?"

"Home," he said. "My home, that is."

He drove Marge's Chevie, and I followed in my car. Sam's house was down on the South Side at 5312 South 37th Street. A neat, six-room frame house with a six-thousand-dollar mortgage on it.

Sam drove around the alley way to put the car in the garage while I parked in front. I met him at the back porch.

Inside, Sam led the way upstairs to his and Marge's bedroom. It was a large, airy room with twin beds, a chiffonier and a woman's dressing table with a huge round mirror.

A little of the numbness I had felt at the morgue returned when I saw the dressing table; for only the previous evening I had stood in the doorway watching Marge brush out her long black hair. I'd been there for dinner, Sam and I were getting ready to go on duty, and I was waiting for Sam to strap on his Detective Special. Marge followed us upstairs, brushed past me in the doorway and seated herself at the dressing table. In my mind I could see her there now, the brush sweeping downward through that mass of black hair and her eyes laughing at me in the mirror when she saw I was watching her.

I wrenched my mind back to the present. A little unsteadily I asked, "What do we want here?"

"Evidence of who her lover was," Sam said without inflection.

He pulled open one of the dressing table drawers.

I said, "She kept letters in the top left drawer."

Sam glanced at me sharply. "How do you know?"

For some reason my remark seemed to have upset him. For a moment I examined his face curiously. Then I said, "I think you mentioned it once. Or maybe Marge told me. Anyway, that's where she kept them."

He tried the top left drawer but it was locked.

"Damn," he said. "Her purse is down at the morgue."

I pulled out my key case which contained, in addition to regular keys, a couple of Yale masters, a skeleton and three different-sized picklocks. "Step aside," I said.

He looked at me, but he didn't step aside. Instead, he pulled a similar case from his pocket and went to work on the drawer himself. He had it open within thirty seconds.

The drawer was crammed with letters, notes, old party invitations and similar stuff. At the back, tied with pink ribbon, was a thick stack of envelopes all addressed in the same hand.

"Old love letters from me," Sam said without emotion, tossing them over on the bed.

Quickly he went through the other material, tossing on the bed

party invitations, wedding announcements and other trivia which obviously could have no bearing on Marge's death. When he finished he still had a sizable stack of letters in various hand-writings, plus a small black address book. Dividing the letters, he handed me half.

It took us nearly an hour to go through the lot, and I grew sicker by the minute. Some of the letters were innocuous, from relatives and female friends, but more than half were love letters.

I had adjusted myself to the knowledge that Marge must have had a lover, because you couldn't place any other interpretation on her checking into a tourist cabin with a man when her husband thought she was home in bed. But it was a shock to learn there had been more than one. I guess it's indicative of how little we really know about other people that the gal I had admired as a perfect wife had apparently been cheating on Sam for years.

As nearly as we could determine, there had been at least three men; a George, a Henry and an Al. And apparently Marge had been one of those people who got a vicarious kick from writing. The letters were full of reminis-

cences of what had occurred in the past, and anticipation of what would occur at future meetings. If only one of her boy friends had inclined toward this writing, we might have assumed it was his own idea. But with all three following the same tactics, we could only conclude Marge must have deliberately induced this response by writing similar letters herself.

THERE were no return addresses on any of the letters and no indication in any of them as to what George's, Henry's and Al's last names had been.

His face as white as it had been at the morgue, Sam said, "I wonder how many more there were who didn't write?"

I think my own face must have been as white as Sam's. To me Marge had always seemed as fresh and clean as a Spring breeze. It was like getting a blow in the solar plexus to discover that beneath that gay and laughing exterior she'd been a crazy little tramp.

Without looking at Sam I said, "Try the address book."

The book contained about two dozen names, addresses and phone numbers, some of men and some

of women. There were two Georges, but one was Sam's brother in Detroit. The other was a George Blaylock on Lindell Avenue and his name had been scratched through. The only Henry, a Henry O'Conner on Virginia Street, had been scratched through also.

But there was an Al Woodward in the 3700 block of Bates whom neither Sam nor I had ever heard of before.

"Your name's in here, Sully," Sam remarked.

"Yeah," I said. "So's your brother George's. I guess they aren't all boy friends."

We decided the most promising place to start was with Al Woodward. He lived in a first-floor corner apartment of a multi-family apartment house nearly a block long. We hardly expected to find him at home at eleven in the morning, but were agreeably surprised when he came to the door.

Neither Sam nor I said anything for a few minutes, merely looking him over silently. He was tall, about six feet two, weighed probably two hundred pounds, had black hair and a deep sun-tan. He looked at us puzzledly when we didn't speak.

Finally Sam's face broke into a

wolfish grin. "This is the first time in years we ever hit the jackpot first crack, Sully." To the man he said, "You Al Woodward?"

Warily the man nodded.

"Police officers, Woodward. Like to have a talk with you."

Woodward's expression became even more wary. "Private cops?" he asked.

Sam shoved his badge within an inch of Woodward's nose. The man's eyes widened. Then he stepped aside and said politely, "Come in, gentlemen."

The apartment was small, apparently only three rooms, but was well furnished. He led us into a comfortable front room and asked us to sit.

Sam looked over the man's sport shirt and slacks. "Don't you work?" he asked.

"Sure. Baldwin Sales. We're closed for inventory this week. What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"Tell us about last night," Sam said bluntly. "About being at the Cozy Rest Motel in Cabin Three with a woman named Margery London."

Woodward looked startled, but not particularly upset. "Me? What you talking about?"

"Can it," Sam said in a flat

voice. "If you want to make it tough, we'll run you out there and have the motel manager identify you. He described you to a T."

"Oh?" The man thought a minute, then shrugged. "I suppose he could identify me at that." He looked us both over curiously. "I don't get this. Since when have the cops taken over compiling divorce evidence?"

The ease with which he'd gotten Woodward to admit he'd been the man with Marge seemed to surprise Sam. For a moment he just stared at him with the muscles in his cheek working.

Woodward said, "Or is adultery a criminal offense? I'm not much up on the law. Jane sicked you on me, I suppose."

Sam said harshly, "I don't know what you're babbling about, Woodward, but the charge is murder."

Woodward's wary arrogance fell away at once. His face noticeably paled.

"It's—it's what?"

Sam's face had grown a little pinched and I didn't like the way his right fist was clenching and unclenching.

I put in, "Suppose you tell us the whole story, Woodward."

He looked at me wide-eyed.

"Who—was it Marge?"

"Marge," I agreed.

"But—but who?"

"You, we think," I told him. "Got a counter theory?"

"Listen," he said. "I didn't kill her. It must have been that private dick. I didn't even know she was dead until now."

"Tell us about it," I suggested.

He didn't need any urging. Faced with a possible murder charge, he spilled everything. He said he had been meeting Marge for some months, in the daytime when her husband worked days and at night when he was on the night trick. Initially he had met her at a tavern, and the night they met they ended up in a tourist cabin.

"I guess she was a tramp, but she was sure a beautiful tramp," he said.

Sam's face turned dead white, but he didn't say anything. I think my own face must have paled a little too. Yesterday if any man had made a remark like that about Marge, he'd have been choking on his own teeth a moment later. But after reading those letters nothing further I learned about her was capable of disturbing me much.

Woodward said that the previous night Marge had picked him up at a tavern by previous arrangement at nine o'clock. They had a few drinks in the tavern, then drove out to the Cozy Rest Motel, arriving about eleven. About one A.M. they were ready to go home. Woodward said that he was, anyway—but Marge was in no hurry.

"She was just dawdling," he said. "I kept fussing at her to get going, but she just grinned at me, trying to get me mad. She was kind of a tease. Then somebody put a key in the door and started fumbling with it. I thought it was the private dick my wife set on me."

He explained he was separated from his wife and knew she had hired a private detective to get divorce evidence. He said that was the reason he asked us if we were private cops when Sam announced we were police officers. His first assumption was that we had been sent by his wife in an attempt to bluff some kind of admission from him that he had been with Marge last night.

"When I heard the key in the door, I expected the door to fly open and a flash bulb to go off. So I ducked out the bathroom window."

"And just left Marge there to face it alone?" I asked.

"She was better off alone," he said reasonably. "If I'd stayed, she'd have been dragged into a divorce mess. But a picture of her alone wouldn't have meant anything. She had her car to get home in. I was the guy stranded. I had to walk three-quarters of a mile to a filling station before I could phone for a taxi."

I don't know what Sam's thoughts had been while Woodward had been making his statement. But I think reading those letters from three different men must have had much the same effect on Sam they had on me. We were both drained of emotion. There wasn't enough emotion left in us to hate Woodward. All I could feel for the man was a kind of impersonal dislike, and I suspect Sam's attitude toward him was much the same as mine.

When Woodward finished his story, Sam said wearily, "All right, mister. Let's go downtown."

I DON'T know when it was Sam decided he wanted to turn the rest of the investigation over to Baldwin, whom the lieutenant had wanted to assign in the first place. Probably it had been in

the back of his mind ever since we read those letters. At any rate, he was no longer consumed by a desire for vengeance by the time we got Woodward to Headquarters. His attitude seemed to be the same as mine. He wanted to get his report over with, drop the case and get away for a few day's leave.

After booking Woodward on suspicion of homicide, he made a full and detailed report to Lieutenant Knudson of everything we had done. And when I say detailed, I mean complete detail. Sam was gifted with a thing psychologists call "total recall," and his account took the lieutenant step-by-step over every action we had taken and every word Herbert Coombs and Al Woodward had said to us, plus the words we had said to each other.

When he finished, he laid Marge's love letters and the little black book on the lieutenant's desk.

"You were right, Lieutenant," he said. "It's no good to be on a case when the victim was someone close to you. I think Baldy ought to take over from here. That offer of a few days leave still open?"

"Sure, London. Of course."

"How about Sully, too?"

The lieutenant frowned. "Why Sully? Just because he's your partner?"

I said, "Marge meant an awful lot to me too, Lieutenant. I'm just as upset about this as Sam."

The lieutenant examined me curiously. Then he shrugged. "All right, if London wants it that way. Take three days."

"And Baldy will take over the case?" Sam asked.

Knudson shook his head. "I assigned him another since this morning. I'll take it myself."

Then, before we left, he wanted us to brief him on the other cases we had the previous night. Both were written up and the case folders properly marked, but you can't get everything on paper. We always give an oral briefing too when we turn over to someone else a case that's still open.

Sam said, "Mine's mainly a matter of lab work and phoning repair garages. I got a headlight ring, some broken glass and a photograph of the skid marks showing a blurred tire tread. A witness says it was a green Ford, but didn't catch the license. The victim's a Mrs. Mabel Bloch, and she was still in critical condition at City Hospital at seven this morning. I haven't checked since."

"This hit-and-run was down your way, wasn't it?" the lieutenant asked.

"Virginia and Meremac. A mile or a mile and a half from my house."

When I finished my report on the attempted suicide I'd gone out on, Knudson said, "There's a record that the call-in party phoned back forty-five minutes after his first call to complain nobody'd showed up. What took you so long?"

"The damn fool who called in was excited," I explained. "He said 2700 South Grand, and it was 2700 North. By the time I called in to verify the address and found I was fifty-four blocks in the wrong direction, the guy had phoned back again and given the right address."

Lieutenant Knudson just grunted.

Most of our three-day leave was consumed with funeral preparations and with the actual funeral, which took place the morning of the third day. The afternoon of that day and that evening we spent at Sam's house, just the two of us, getting quietly drunk.

Neither of us even mentioned Marge.

When we reported back to

work on Friday we were on the day trick. Lieutenant Knudson looked at us a little peculiarly when we came in, then said he wanted to talk to us and shooed the rest of the squad out of the room.

When we were seated either side of his desk, he opened a file folder and said a trifle stiffly, "As I told you men I intended, I handled Mrs. London's case myself. I've talked to a lot of people in the last three days and collected a lot of information, some useful and some useless. The case is still open, but I've developed a theory I want to discuss with you. It's such a touchy theory I haven't mentioned it even to Sergeant Baldwin, because I wanted to talk it over with you two men first."

The lieutenant cleared his throat. "First let me outline the action I've taken so far. After you left the other day I questioned Al Woodward for over an hour, and I became convinced he was telling a straight story. Nevertheless I did everything possible to check it. From his wife I got the name of the private dick who's been tailing him—a guy named Nelson with an office over on Olive. Nelson swore he wasn't following Woodward that partic-

ular night and came up with an alibi witness who could account for his movements up till two A.M."

Knudson paused to refresh his memory from the typed record in the file folder. "The tavern where Mrs. London met Woodward is at Grand and Gravois. The bartender remembers them being there and states they seemed to get along all right. No sign of an argument."

All this time the head of the Homicide Squad had been speaking with his eyes directed downward at the case file. Now he suddenly looked up and fixed his gaze on me.

"It occurred to me that if Woodward was telling the truth, the probability was Mrs. London was murdered by a jealous former lover who followed them to the motel. So I had the two men whose names had been scratched through in the address book dragged in. They turned out to be the George and Henry who had written those other letters, but one claimed he hadn't seen Mrs. London in six months and the other said he hadn't seen her in over a year. On top of that both had unshakable alibis for the time she was killed."

Something in the lieutenant's

steady gaze began to make me uneasy.

"I still felt it was a sound theory though," he went on. "There could have been other boy friends who didn't write letters. So I checked every name in the address book. A lot of them I eliminated at once—a hairdresser, a dentist, people like that. A George London in Detroit who I assumed was a relative. And the women listed. I didn't even bother to check them. Finally I reduced the list to the names of four men. Three of them turned out to be friends of both Mrs. London and Sam. Young married couples they went around with. The fourth was you, Sullivan."

I looked at him blankly. "So?"

"So I remembered what you said the other day about being as upset as Sam over his wife's death. And in his oral report Sam mentioned you knew the drawer where Mrs. London kept letters. Seemed to me pretty intimate knowledge to have about another man's wife, even when you spent as much time with them as you seem to have.

"Then too, you carry a set of master keys and picklocks, like everybody on Homicide. You wouldn't have had any trouble opening that drawer on some

previous occasion and looking over those letters. Maybe, at the same time—recovering your own. You wouldn't have had any trouble opening that motel cabin.

"You were gone from here on a simple attempted suicide case from ten thirty until after two. With a pretty corny excuse for taking so long. On top of that you're an awfully powerful guy. And Mrs. London was killed by somebody powerful. Got anything to say?"

My face had gradually been turning beet red as the lieutenant spoke. When he stopped it took me a minute to find my voice, and when I did it came out in a low growl.

"You just accusing me of murder?" I asked. "Or of incest too?"

He looked at me without understanding. "What?"

"At the risk of being insubordinate, you're a stupid jerk, Lieutenant. If you'd bothered to discuss your brilliant theory with anyone at all on the squad, you'd have learned something I thought you already knew, but apparently don't. Marge was my sister."

His jaw dropped. "Your sister! You mean Sam is your brother-in-law?"

"That would naturally follow," Sam said dryly.

It took the lieutenant fifteen minutes to apologize. I don't think I've ever seen a man so upset.

Actually there was no reason he should have known Marge was my sister though. He'd only been in charge of Homicide three days when she died, and he barely knew the squad members, let alone their various relatives. I had assumed he knew it, because everybody else on the squad knew it.

But while the lieutenant was doing his apologizing, I was doing some theorizing of my own based on the information he had given us.

When he finally ran down, I said, "Maybe your jealousy theory will hold after all, Lieutenant. There's another guy who had the same motive you attributed to me, and he carries a set of keys too. And he was also out on a case alone at the time of the murder. You say this tavern where Marge and Woodward met was at Grand and Gravois?"

Lieutenant Knudson's gaze had swung to Sam, who was staring at me oddly. The lieutenant nodded.

Without looking at Sam, I said, "That hit-and-run was at Virginia and Meremac. He'd have to drive

right past the corner of Grand and Gravois to get there. Suppose he spotted Marge's car as he went by?"

I turned to look at Sam then and saw his jaw muscles bunching and relaxing again in spasmodic rhythm.

"Well, Sam?" I asked softly.

"I drove straight to Virginia and Meremac."

"Sure," I agreed. "You left here at ten, a half hour before I left on my case. How long does a hit-and-run take? Fifteen, twenty minutes, maybe? You'd have been coming back just about a quarter of eleven, which must have been just about when Marge and Woodward came out of the tavern. I don't think you wanted to be assigned to this case for revenge, Sam. I think you wanted to make sure you had the investigation under control.

"And as soon as you tabbed a likely suspect, you dropped it. What happened, Sam? You spot Marge and Woodward coming out of that tavern, or just see them in Marge's car and decide to follow?"

For a moment he stared at me, his cheek muscles still working. Then he said, "I spotted her license," and shot his hand toward his hip.

I cleared the lieutenant's desk in a head-first dive which carried me, Sam and Sam's chair halfway across the room. Sam never pulled his gun. He changed his mind about pulling it in favor of trying to tear my hands from his throat.

The lieutenant was beating at my back and yelling for me to let go. Sam's eyes were popping from his head and his mouth gaped open like that of a dying fish. His heels were just beginning to beat a death tattoo on the floor when the red mist cleared from my eyes.

Abruptly, I released my grip and stood up.

"My God!" the lieutenant said.

I stood looking down at my ex-best friend. For minutes he simply lay there gasping for breath, his color gradually fading from purple to a sickly white. He offered no resistance when the lieutenant relieved him of his gun and snapped on a pair of cuffs.

Finally Sam managed to rise to a seated position. In a painful rasp, he whispered, "She wasn't worth killing, Sully. She was a lousy tramp."

She was, of course. But she was still my sister. I jerked him to his feet and slapped him the rest of the way across the room.

DIE, Darling, DIE

by GIL BREWER

Joe Morely couldn't stop loving Miriam . . . though he knew that his every move was clocked by the police.



Mystery Novelette

1

AS USUAL, he was waiting for her to go down to the beach. It would be easier to wait on the beach, but he was afraid if she saw him waiting, she wouldn't come. So he paced the warm room

some more, watching the window. He went into the kitchenette, opened the refrigerator and drank some cold water from the water bottle. Then he rushed to the window again.

She was still up there. That was bad enough. It was the worst part of it, in fact.

He knew he would have to do something; change his room, leave the motel, get drunk, or ask her to marry him. The last idea was the one he desperately wanted, yet he feared it most. He knew he would accomplish none of the others.

It was pretty awful. Her name alone was enough to keep him awake all night. Miriam.

The Floridian Motel was two storied, built around a large court with fountains and palms and jungle landscape and mosaic paths. His room on the second floor faced West, directly opposite hers across the court.

The thing was, she went in for all-out sun bathing.

There was this over-large yellow screen. Each day, a little after noon, she carried the screen to the sundeck above her room. Exactly when the sun was right.

He would sit in a bath of perspiration and watch her shadow.

He knew he should tell her. He

couldn't. Each day he waited for her to finish up there, and head for the Gulf beach across the stretch of lawn beyond the motel.

Suddenly he saw her up there, folding the screen.

He was wearing his khaki swimming shorts and leather moccasins. In his haste, he banged his foot against the bed. Dancing with pain, he grabbed a towel and walked as fast as he dared. Everybody in the motel knew what was going on, but he couldn't bring himself to run.

"Well, hello!" He surprised her at the corner of the motel, just as she stepped on the grass from the stairway to the second floor. She blushed under her darkening tan.

"Swimming?" he asked.

She almost nodded. They stood there staring at each other. She was wearing sandals, a two-piece white swim suit, and carrying an enormous red, white and blue beach towel.

"Gosh, Miriam." He moved a step toward her. She blushed still more and her lips parted as she pressed back against the stair railing, caught.

He knew she felt the same as himself. Neither would ever have to say anything.

"Are you going swimming too, Joe?"

They stood there. Her hair was absolutely black. Once he had touched it and it was like silk. Black silk. Her eyes were black, too—and wide and afraid. The fright in them scared him. He couldn't bring himself to pursue her as he might an ordinary girl. She was not ordinary.

"Are we just going to stand here, Joe?"

"I've been waiting for you."

"I know."

"You know?"

She turned quickly and started off across the grass.

He hurried after her. "What d'you mean?"

She paused. They were very close and he knew she wished she hadn't said that, for a strange look was in her eyes. She shook her head and turned toward the beach again.

"Miriam!"

He caught up with her just on the edge of the sea wall. He hardly dared look at her, the way it was with him. When she looked at him, he went right straight out of his head.

"What did you mean?"

They were close by a huge azalea bush in full bloom.

"Joe, please. I just knew you would be waiting—somewhere."

He took her hand. He suddenly

moved without volition, compelled, grabbed her. She came against him and he held her brutally and tenderly and kissed her and she kissed back and he got his fingers twined in her hair and it was as if every muscle in his body tied knots and he couldn't speak or move.

"Joe," she said, pulling away. "The people."

He stood there shaking his head. "Miriam. Miriam."

"Goodness!" She turned, jumped from the sea wall onto the sand, and moved toward the blue-green waters of the Gulf.

Men and women from the motel lounged about on the white sands, swam, or sat humped over cool drinks in beach chairs under violently colored umbrellas provided by the establishment.

Miriam started unfurling the beach towel near the Lawtons, a middle-aged couple who were both slightly alcoholic. She saw Joe coming and hurried.

"Miriam, please."

"Joe!"

"Let's go down the beach."

She didn't want a scene. She let him take the towel, and went along with him, past the smiling eyes and whispered asides.

"What will they think, Joe?"

"I just want to talk with you."

"Please, Joe—this is far enough."

THEY were by a row of old pilings that stretched staggering out into the water. A pelican billed its wing on one piling near shore.

Joe held her hands, tugged her down on the towel.

"I thought you were going swimming."

"I've got to talk with you. You know that."

"Please, Joe."

They were near the sea wall and couldn't be seen from behind. They were far enough from the other guests and he put his arms around her and held her down and kissed her again. He did it without thinking, compelled as before.

This time when she broke free, she leaped up and she was afraid. Not of him. Of something else. He didn't know what.

"If you don't go, I'll have to, Joe."

He stood up, took her hands and pulled her down again. She was breathing fast and so was he. Her smooth flesh was warm from the sun.

"Stop staring, Joe!"

He looked away. They sat there.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But what are we going to do?"

"I don't know what you mean," she spoke rapidly.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"No. I can't."

"Will you go out with me tonight? We could hit the night spots, dance a little?"

"No." She turned and looked at him. "Don't ask me again." Her leg touched his, but she didn't move it away. He knew it was doing the same thing to her as it was to him. Why did she act like this? Her fingers were clenched into the thick nap of the towel. She sat perfectly rigid. When she spoke, she didn't look at him and her voice shook. "You've never told me where you're from. Don't you work at all? What're you doing down here?"

"Vacation." He explained automatically, terribly conscious of her leg, her nearness. Knowing, she tried to change the subject. He wanted things to be in the open. He wanted to tell her how he watched her behind the screen. He wanted her to speak what he knew she felt. He was dizzy because none of this happened and he couldn't break through to her

and he didn't know what was frightening her.

"Vacation from where?"

"Davenport. It's a vitamin plant. Make all sorts of junk. Pills, you know?" So he told her all the rest. Betty's father was president. They wanted Joe to



marry Betty and be vice president. Only Joe had been working too hard, they said. So the vacation. Only because Betty's folks were the kind they were, it wasn't really because he worked too hard. It was so Betty could make sure by dating all the unobjectionable hopefuls in town while he was away. He had never told anybody that he wasn't sure himself, how he felt about Betty. He'd gone along with it. "One of those things. Glad it happened. Never liked chemistry, or vitamins. I'm not going back. You're my vitamin and I'm stuck with you."

He swallowed and looked at her and her eyes were misty.

He pretended not to notice. She looked small and luscious and helpless and scared and he wished he didn't hunger for her so. Somehow it wasn't right. He asked:

"How about you? What are you doing here?"

She turned, rising to her knees, and looked at him. She leaned toward him and placed both warm palms against his face. Her gaze was quick, up and down the beach, then at him. "I wish—" she said. Then she kissed him. They clung to each other, his hands tugging at her back, twisting in her hair. She tried to wriggle away, yet somehow not wanting to break the fierce demand of her lips. She sank her fingernails into his arms and stood up. "Stay away from me, Joe! Go back to her."

"Why are you like this? Miriam. . . . Please—"

"We can't. I mean it—I mean it. Stay away!"

His mind was foggy with her.

She turned, ran up the length of the beach, and walked swiftly across the grass toward the motel.

He followed and knocked on the door of her apartment.

"Here," he said, when she

opened the door. "You forgot your towel."

She snatched it from his hand and slammed the door. He tried to catch the door and open it again. She locked it.

"Joe, don't ever come here again!" She spoke through the louvered door window, then snapped the Venetian blinds shut.

"Miriam."

She didn't answer.

Finally he turned and started along the second floor outside landing, moving in a kind of dream toward his rooms.

"Mister Morley?"

He turned. It was the desk clerk, Kirkham, padding toward him from the nearest stairway; a short, stocky man wearing a yellow sports shirt sprouting green palms.

"Been looking all over for you, Mister Morley. There was a man in the office, asking for you."

"Who?"

"Some friend of yours from town."

He nodded at the clerk and turned away toward his room. Mistake. He didn't know anybody from town.

Miriam. He had to see her tonight. Whether she thought she didn't want it, or not. He knew what she did want.

He loved her.

The door was unlocked. He recalled that he hadn't locked it, but this didn't entitle strangers to free entrance.

"What's going on?"

"Hello," the man across the room said. "You Morley?"

He stepped on into the room. Somebody else closed the door.

"That's Morley," the one who closed the door said. "He was down on the beach with her. I saw them."

"All right, Stewart. You run along, now."

The door closed behind Stewart.

2

MY NAME'S Thompson, Morley. We tried to get hold of you before entering. You weren't around. We had to come in."

"Now you can get out."

"Easy, now."

Thompson had been seated in the contour chair by the window. He stood up, reached into his jacket pocket, brought out a wallet. Joe saw the gun as the jacket flipped open.

"I'm with the police."

Joe read the ID card and Thompson put it away.

"Satisfactory?" Thompson said.

Joe looked at him. Thompson

was tall and thin, his face untouched by any hint of humor, his pale blue eyes very calm. His gray gabardine suit was wrinkled and his dark hair quite neatly combed.

Joe looked beyond Thompson toward her room across the court. The sun slanted yellowly across the top of the motel, shining into the court. It left the far wall in shadow and he thought he saw her move past her window.

"We're going to have to use your room. You either cooperate, or you don't," Thompson said. "We've made provision for either way."

"What's all this about?" The sound of his voice was dim. There was a kind of dimness inside him just then.

Thompson returned to his chair, glanced out the window, then looked at Joe. "How is she?"

"What?"

"How's Miriam?"

A sudden urgency seemed to plane just beneath the surface of his skin. He stepped over to Thompson, standing close. "Tell me what this is about!"

Thompson sighed. "That's my job. That's what I planned. Now it's difficult, because you're all jammed up over her, aren't you?"

Joe breathed slowly, waiting.

"All right," Thompson said. "Got to tell you, anyway. You've hooked onto a wrong one. Not only that, but you're in the middle of something I don't figure you want to be in."

"What's it got to do with her?"

Thompson lifted a hand, dropped it on the arm of the chair. He drew a long breath, looked sourly at Joe. "She tell you about her husband?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Husband. Her man. No, of course not—she didn't tell you." Thompson glanced out the window. Then he looked at his right foot, reached down and unlaced his shoe, eased his foot, then retied it. "How bad is it, Morley? How deep you got it for this one?"

"Watch what you say."

"Relax, friend."

"I mean it."

Thompson looked at him and cursed softly.

Joe stood there watching, listening. He believed what the man had said, but that was all he believed. Then suddenly he didn't even believe that. Husband? Miriam?

"She's a doll, isn't she?"

Thompson said. "Well, son—she's a killer's doll. A moll. A babe. A broad."

Joe stood there listening and it was as if his dream were a moth brightly burning in a candle's flame.

Thompson was enjoying this. You could tell. There was a flicker of life in the stale blue eyes. Thompson was wrong. He had to be.

"Get out of here," Joe said.

"Not that easy, Morley. Cooperate or not—remember?" Thompson leaned back in the chair, stretched, glanced out the window, then at Joe. "Her husband's Frank Garrett. Basically, that is. He has a string of aliases. One week ago, he engineered a bank holdup near Coral Gables. There were two men with him. They got one hundred and seventy-three thousand dollars. A great deal of money. Garrett killed a cashier, shot him in the face. Coming through Miami, he murdered both men with him, left them in the stolen getaway car. Only we were tipped."

"Tipped."

"About his wife, his little doll, Morley. She's here, waiting for him."

He stood there staring at Thompson. He went into the kitchenette, opened the refrigerator and took out the water bottle.

"Say, I could go some of that," Thompson said.

Joe found two glasses, poured one full, overflowed the other. He left the water bottle on the sink, took the glasses into the living room and handed Thompson one. He set his own on the floor. Then he headed for a chair. He sat down. Thompson got up, took the glass of water from the floor and handed it to him.

"Drink up. You need it. This all you got—water?"

Joe drank it and set the glass on the windowsill.

Thompson said brusksly, "All right. She got under your skin. Now it's over. Now you know."

"You're here—waiting for him?"

"In a way, yes."

"But why here—why not over there?"

"If it was only that easy. It's not."

THOMPSON returned to the window and settled into the contour chair. The sun lingered on the maroon carpet. "We got this tip. Legitimate—very legitimate. You see, somewhere in this damned hotel, there's a hired gunman." Thompson shrugged. "We don't

know where. He's here on account of a double-cross. Garrett wasn't working for himself. He's hid the money. Only he knows where. This gunman is only concerned with the double-cross. Has orders, what they call a contract. He has to fill it."

It seemed as though the room had become a dark hollow, containing only Thompson's self-satisfied voice.

"I still don't understand."

"Well, he's waiting to kill Garrett. We figure it'll be a rifle, straight into that apartment over there—see? Your room is best for keeping an eye on things, that's why we're here." Thompson lifted a pair of field glasses from beneath the chair, set them down again. "Is it clear now, Morley?"

Joe came fast across the room to Thompson. "What about her?"

"What about her."

"She's in danger. She could be killed."

Thompson shrugged. He shook his head. He looked out the window and picked at the arm of the chair.

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Little Miriam's got herself into a pickle."

"Listen," Joe said. "You listen to me. You've got her wrong. She's nothing like that."

"Are they, ever? You're not going to tell her any of this, are you?"

They watched each other.

Thompson said, "Who knows? Maybe you're the killer. Wouldn't that be nifty?"

"Damn you!"

"Relax. Seriously, though—we've tried to screen everybody as best we can. Not very good, at that. It could be anybody." He scrubbed his chin, looked at his watch. He stood up, stripped his jacket off, dropped it over the back of the chair and sat down again. His revolver was holstered on the left side of his belt. It had shiny black grips. "It's no fooling, you know—Morley? There really is a killer and he's going to kill Garrett. Thing is, we've got to stop him—somehow. We've got to find where Garrett hid that money. Somehow. Clear, now?"

He looked at Thompson. Then he turned and ran for the door.

"I'd hate to shoot you," Thompson said quickly.

Joe paused.

"But I would. Thing is, Morley—we need you."

He stood with his back to Thompson, one hand on the door-knob.

"You going to help us, Morley?"

The doorknob twisted in his fingers. He let go, and the one called Stewart came into the room and closed the door.

"Not a sign, Lew," Stewart said.

"Who are the possibles?" Thompson said.

Stewart looked at Joe. "You going someplace?"

"Not yet, he isn't."

Stewart lounged against the door in white flannel slacks and a blue sports shirt. He needed a shave and his yellow hair was dank. Thompson glanced at Stewart and stood up. He pulled the tails of his shirt free, so his shirt covered his gun.

"That's better," Stewart said. "Be nice if whoever the guy is got a look at that."

"How about it?" Thompson said. "Any possibles?"

"All of them are possibles."

Somebody knocked on the door.

THOMPSON motioned to Stewart. Stewart pussyfooted across the room into the kitchenette, out of sight. Thompson grabbed his jacket and the field glasses and went after Stewart. Then he poked his head around the wall.

"Morley, we got to trust you. Get rid of whoever it is."

Joe opened the door.

"My name's Foster," the man at the door said. "You have any iodine?"

"Iodine?"

"Hate to bother you. I cut my hand on the ice tray. I'm going to run into town for some iodine, but I figured I'd better put something on it."

Foster showed Joe his arm. There was a scratch cut deeply across the back of his hand. It was bleeding, but not badly. Foster was wearing a blue-and-white checked bathrobe. He had red hair with touches of gray at the temples and he kept pursing his mouth as he looked at the cut on his hand.

"Damned ice trays," Foster said.

"I'm sorry. I haven't anything for that. Listen, why not try the office?"

"Yes. I guess you're right."

Stewart came out of the kitchenette, whistling. He brushed past Joe and Foster in the doorway. "See you tonight, O. K.?"

"Right," Joe said.

Foster kept looking at his hand. "Sorry to bother you. I'll try the office."

"That's it," Joe said. He watched Foster trot away toward the stairway from the second-floor landing.

"Close the door," Thompson said.

He closed the door and looked at Thompson. Thompson started to say something. The door opened and Stewart returned.

"Nuts," Stewart said. "He did cut his hand. Blood on the sink and the ice tray, too."

"You mean, you went into his apartment?" Joe said.

"Right. He's way off any line of fire, Lew. Down on the corner. Couldn't possibly use a rifle from there. I checked for one, quick as I could. No sign."

"There wouldn't be," Thompson said. He glanced at Joe and went over to the contour chair and slumped down, putting his feet up. He rubbed one foot with the other. "All right, Morley. How d'you stand now?"

"Why should he use a rifle?" Joe said.

Thompson looked at Stewart. "What you know?"

"He's coming around," Stewart said.

"I'm not anything," Joe told them. "I'm just asking you. How come you think he'll use a rifle?"

"You got inside information?"

Joe looked at both of them in turn. Then he moved across the room and sat down and looked at his hands and thought how

warm and vigorous her body had been. It sent his blood awake and he could taste the smooth caress of her lips. He smacked his hands together.

"Stands to reason a rifle," Stewart said. "He wants to get away, whoever he is. He don't want to show himself, he can help it. So a rifle."

"Well, Morley?" Thompson said. "You still got that itch?"

Joe looked at him. There was a kind of helplessness inside him and he thought of Betty and Davenport, Iowa. Then Miriam, and the way her lips were again, and the hot touch of her soft bare leg.

"Shut up!" he said.



"There's the Lawtons," Stewart said. "Next door, here. But she don't look like she would stick it with a killer, and Lawton don't look the type."

"Do they, ever?"

"No. Then there's Holcomb, on the other side. He could be

our boy. He's a nervous cat, Lew. All alone. He's down in the bar, last I knew. Keeps watching the clock."

"We can't do a thing," Thompson said. "That's the curse of it. We make one wrong move, we'll blow the whole thing up. They'll knock Garrett off someplace else. Maybe he'll get tipped."

"By her?"

"Who knows. Morley, you go in to help us?"

"You have other men here?" Joe said. "How many?"

"Never mind. It's taken care of. You know too much already. We got to use you, Morley." Thompson sat up, put his feet on the floor. "How about it?"

"How?"

"We want you to go ahead with her, just like you have. Maybe she'll give it away, somehow. Maybe she'll tip you when Garrett's supposed to show."

"That's the hell of it," Stewart said. "He could come any time."

Joe looked at them, trying to think beyond the fog of her. He couldn't. They were giving him a chance. They were asking him.

"All right," he said.

"Maybe he's just hot for the babe," Stewart said.

"We'll take the chance," Thompson said.

"Another crack like that, I'll blow this whole thing," Joe said.

"He's got backbone," Stewart said. "We'd just run you in, son. Say—well, molesting women. See? But honest—we need your help. Why in hell you think we're here?"

"Stewart," Thompson said. "You take off. Don't come back unless you've got something good. It'll look fishy, the way you're running in and out."

"All right." Stewart frowned. He left the room.

"What do you want me to do?" Joe asked.

"Find her and stick with her. See what you can get." Thompson smiled. Just his lips, nothing in the eyes at all. "Concerning what we want. All right?"

"All right."

"You've committed yourself, Morley. To the law."

"Yes. All right."

"No errors. It could go bad for you now."

Joe got up and started for the door.

"Get dressed first," Thompson said. "She's not going swimming again. I can see her over there." He raised the field glasses to his eyes and his lips quirked. "Can't say as I blame you, either, Morley."

Joe went into the bedroom, stripped off the khaki shorts and took a cold shower. It didn't do any good.

3

ON THE way down to the bar, an hour later, he saw the man called Holcomb. Very smooth and efficient looking. He had met him the first day at the motel. Holcomb was seated on the stairs, nervously smoking a cigarette. He edged out of the way as Joe came down.

"Nice afternoon," Joe said.

"Is it? It stinks, for your information."

Joe kept on going. At the bottom of the stairs, he paused and glanced back. Holcomb was standing there, picking tobacco off his lip.

Thompson had told Joe that their tip had said the killer would use a rifle and that he was a dead shot. Holcomb seemed too nervous for that. But you couldn't tell. Maybe the nervousness was an act.

Suddenly everybody in the motel was suspect. He knew how Thompson and Stewart felt.

Miriam.

She wasn't in the bar. He ordered a beer, drank half of it and

decided to try her room. The sky was flaming in the West, the sun a huge orange ball resting on purple clouds. There was a stiff, salty breeze.

Holcomb was lounging in a deck chair around the corner from the side of the motel where Miriam's room was.

"You got the inside track," Holcomb said. "Haven't you?"

"What?"

"Hell, you know what I mean."

Holcomb was a bit tight. You could see it around the eyes. He kept smoking his cigarette, lounging there, staring up at Joe.

"She didn't come out," Holcomb said. "I been waiting."

"Oh."

"Devil with it. There's others."

Holcomb stood up. He flicked his half-smoked cigarette over the railing, looked once at Joe, and sauntered off along the landing. His heels smacked loudly, echoing around the inside of the court.

Joe went on down to Miriam's door.

She didn't answer when he knocked.

"If you don't open up, I'll smash it in," he said. He did not speak loud, placing his lips close to the open louvered windows.

"All right."

The sound of her voice changed

everything for him. It was gentle and afraid. She was not just a plain broad, and he didn't care anyway. Damn Thompson. Stewart, too.

The door opened. "I thought I told you, Joe."

He looked past her head. The apartments on this side ran straight through the motel wall. He could see beyond, through the living room window and across the court into his own rooms. He could not see Thompson. He knew Thompson had pulled the blinds and was watching with the damned field glasses plastered to his face.

"Miriam."

She brushed past him, her purse swinging on one arm and started to close the door. He thrust her back inside and went along with her. As the door closed, he held her arms and looked into her eyes.

"What's the matter, Joe?"

"Nothing. You know I want to see you. Why do you do this to me?"

"I've told you. You've got to leave me be."

He stepped close to her. She stepped back. He did it again, until they were shielded by the kitchen wall from Thompson and his glasses.

"Joe—stop!"

He got his hands on her and held her up against him, running his hands up and down her back. She was wearing a white linen dress and he felt it slide on silk with the warm soft flesh underneath. Her head came back. Her eyes were very black. It was as if she were trying to pull away and fighting to stay.

Suddenly she changed. She bent to him and their mouths came together. It was a bright pain, almost unbearable, then it was like drowning and wanting to drown. Her purse dropped. It struck with a thud. She arched back and he bent to retrieve it.

"Listen, Joe—all right—listen."

She held to him, looking at him, holding him with her eyes, too. He forgot the purse.

"All right," she said. "But I've got to tell you something. You've got to promise me."

"Miriam."

"Come." She pulled at his hand, smiling now, her eyes very black. "Sit down," she said. He could smell her perfume in the room and she stood against him, her knees touching his.

He tried to pull her down. She held herself stiff, smiling at him, then not smiling. He went crazy,

his arms around her. She gripped her fingers in his hair.

"I'm a nurse, Joe. It's serious with me, if I lose this job. I'm waiting here, you see?"

"Miriam." He listened, remembering Thompson. Not caring about anything, unable to care.

"They're bringing this old woman here, see, Joe? I've got to be the kind—you know? Very exacting and with nothing in the way, especially not like you. See? She's coming here from the North, New York. To stay here. I'm her nurse."

"When's she coming?"

"Soon. I have to be just right."

"Come here."

"Yes. All right. Then you'll have to go—quickly. But afterwards, Joe. After she comes. Then we'll work something out. We could—something, yes—anything."

"Yes," he said huskily. "Yes."

"I'm human, Joe. I'm human."

Now go," she said. They stood by the door. She kept pushing at him with her hand, smiling and not smiling, her eyes dull, but still very black.

"You're a nurse?"

She looked at him. "Yes. Now go. Don't come near me. Not un-

til I say so. You think I'd let something like this get away from us? Never, Joe. It's too good."

"A nurse."

"Yes, I—what do you mean?"

"Nothing. Just that you'd be a fine nurse."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Sure. Sure I believe you."

"Wait. Wait, then you've got to go."

She started through the kitchen, then saw her purse there on the floor. She snatched it up. She opened her purse, brought out a card.

"Here, just read it."

He did. She was a registered nurse. Miriam Hall.

He looked at her. She dropped the card in her purse, snapped it shut. She turned, took the purse into the bedroom, came back pushing at her thick hair, loosening it.

She was a nurse.

"Miriam. Tonight. We could have dinner, then—"

"Then what? Sure." She pushed him toward the door, opened it and pushed him outside. "Sure. You want me to lose this job? Listen, we wait for something like this, Joe. It means a lot."

"You will let me know?"

She closed the door, only one

eye and her red lips showing. "Now, just what do you think?"

He wanted to go back inside.

She closed the door, locked it, and he heard her say, "Go away, Joe."

"It's like I'm rooted."

"Joe, go away!"

It seemed as if there was panic in her voice. He realized suddenly that he might antagonize her. He didn't want that.

He turned and walked along the landing. By the time he reached the corner, he caught himself thinking of Betty, back in Davenport. Now that was an odd thing. My gosh, what was he going to tell Thompson. . . .

"She's a nurse."

"Oh, great. I thought you were never getting out of there."

He walked past Thompson into the bedroom. Thompson was using the field glasses. "She's changing her clothes again." Thompson looked at him. "That's the second clean dress today. I can't see so well."

The sun's going down."

"That's bad."

"She has lights."

"What did she say?" Thompson came into the bedroom and looked at him. Joe sat on the bed and stared at the floor.

"She's a nurse. I didn't tip her to anything."

"What are you thinking about?"

Joe looked at him. Then at the floor again.

Thompson went back into the living room. "It's getting dark fast now. Does she pull her blinds?"

"Not so far."

"This is the bad part. Night. The logical time. Did it seem like it might be tonight?"

"I think you're wrong about her."

"Sure. You going to be with her tonight?"

"No."

"Dinner?"

"No."

"Why not? Why didn't you fix it?"

"She said she's a nurse."

"Look, Morley. Come off it, please? For me. This is important." He came back into the bedroom. "Don't just sit there. You said you'd help us."

"I've done all I can do. All right." He looked at Thompson and told him everything she'd said. "And I believe her. She just isn't like what you said."

"You poor kid, you," Thompson said. "Well, all right. What

can I do?" He went back into the other room. Joe heard him settle in the contour chair.

"I've done all I can," Joe said.

Thompson didn't answer.

"What do we do now?"

"Somehow, I detect a different tone to your voice, Morley. You've changed since you left this room."

Joe didn't answer him. He went into the bathroom and looked at his face. Then he went into the kitchen. The water bottle was still there on the sink, the water tepid. He filled it from the tap and returned it to the refrigerator. Then he drew himself a glass of water and slowly drank it.

"When you going home to Davenport?"

"How'd you know?"

"When you registered."

He set the glass down and stared at it.

A nurse, she said she was.

"Have some food sent up, Morley. A good lot, so we can both eat. I'm not leaving the room."

"So I have to stick around?"

"It looks that way. If you go out and eat, I don't eat. Be a little peculiar, having dinner sent up after you've eaten."

"We just going to sit here?"

"Get comfortable, pal." Thompson cleared his throat. "How old are you, Morley?"

"Twenty-two."

"I see. Got a girl back home?"

"What's it to you?"

Thompson didn't answer.

"Yeah, sort of," Joe said.

"Don't you wonder what she's doing?"

Joe didn't say anything.

4

THE night slowly progressed into morning. Stewart came in about three and relieved Thompson at the window until five. Thompson slept in the contour chair. Joe did not sleep. None of the waiting did any good. Joe imagined they had men posted around to see if Garrett would come during the night, but when he asked Thompson, the detective didn't reply.

There were no lights after midnight in Miriam's apartment, and Thompson with the field glasses said she wore a long nightgown and was going to bed. Once, at about eleven thirty they thought they had something. She came to the window overlooking the landing and the court and waved her arms. She was only taking some deep breathing.

They had breakfast sent up, and like dinner, they shared the

one plate. It didn't even seem foolish to Joe any more.

"Now what?" he said, after he wheeled the tray outside the door and locked the door.

"We wait some more."

"Did Stewart have anything new?"

"Nothing."

"How long will you wait?"

"Until something happens." Thompson looked like the very dickens.

"You can use my razor," Joe told him.

"I can't leave the window. I got a feeling." Thompson watched Miriam's place. . . .

One o'clock in the afternoon, Miriam appeared on the sundeck above her apartment with the yellow screen. She was wearing her bathing suit. She set the screen up and stepped inside. Her shadow was very clear today, like a moving black paper cut-out silhouetted by the sun. Only you knew it wasn't paper. She lay down and they could only see the curved contour of her back just above the low parapet of the sundeck.

"Stewart thinks it's the desk clerk," Thompson said. He sighed and squeezed his eyes with thumb and forefinger. Then he rubbed both eyes with the heel of his

hand. "He's a transient. They only hired him five days ago."

"That's right. There was a different man on the desk."

"Yeah."

Somebody whistled from beyond the court.

"Here it is," Thompson said.

"What?"

"We have to play it close," Thompson said. He came out of the chair, holding the field glasses. "We want Garrett alive. We could take him now, but we want the other one, too. He's got to give himself away. We've got every room spotted."

"You mean Garrett's coming?"

Thompson's hands shook a little holding the glasses to his eyes. "He's over there. He's reading something she wrote."

Joe stared toward her apartment, sick and a little lost. He saw a man's shadow in there. Thompson dropped the glasses, started for the door.

"You stay right here, Morley. Don't go outside. I've got to move." He went to the door. Joe wanted to say something. He didn't know what. "Lock the door," Thompson said. "And stay here." He was gone.

Joe looked over there, through the window. He saw the man come up onto the sundeck and move

toward the screen. The man looked around, then stepped behind the screen, his shadow sharp. He was wearing a white Palm Beach suit.

Joe heard the door open and thought it was Thompson, remembering he hadn't locked it. He turned and looked at the shiny revolver in the man's hand.

"Get away from the window," Foster said. "In the kitchen."

Foster still wore the blue-and-white checked bathrobe. Joe thought crazily for a moment that he was here for more iodine, knowing all the time who he really was. He backed into the kitchen.

"Yeah," Foster said. His red hair was messed up, and his face sheened with perspiration. He held the revolver on Joe and reached behind the refrigerator. He brought out a rifle with a scope sight and Joe stared.

"Turn around," Foster said. "Fast, now."

Joe turned. He got halfway around when the gun smashed against his head. He sprawled out, the pain bright white deep into his shoulders.

HE LOOKED over there and came to his knees. Foster was at

the window, holding the rifle. Joe went for him, his head one big ache. The rifle fired. Joe landed on Foster and the rifle fell outside the window, the stock snicking against the blinds.

He smashed at Foster's face. He tried to see over across there, on the sundeck.

"If you killed her!" He punched at Foster and they rolled out across the floor. "She was there too!" Joe said. He got his hands on Foster's throat, kneeling on his arms. Foster spat directly upward and Joe flinched.

"Jerk!" Foster said.

Joe fought to regain the hold. Foster wouldn't let him. The man was wiry and there was a crazed look in his eyes. He broke free, then came at Joe, coming to his feet, kicking.

Joe caught his foot and Foster sat down hard.

Somehow, he had to get to Thompson. That's all he could think now.

Then he heard her scream. He knew it was Miriam.

"Damn it!" Foster said.

The two of them stood close together, kneeling on the floor and Joe knew he had him. The man was no good with his fists. He got in a low solid punch and Foster bent over, and Joe brought

his right up without even thinking. Foster fell back, groaning.

Joe went over to the window and jerked up the blinds.

She screamed again. He saw her running across the edge of the parapet. The sun slanted off her body, her hair fleeing black and high above her shoulders.

"Wait!"

It was Thompson who called. Joe saw him running across the roof toward the sundeck.

Then he saw Garrett, lying there by the yellow screen, holding the gun in his hand.

Joe knew what was going to happen. He didn't move, he wanted to do something, at least to speak. He just stood there.

Garrett fired the gun once. Joe heard Garrett's voice, "Die, darling, die. . . ." Miriam went straight out into free air. She fell toward the court and struck and Joe saw that, too. He turned away.

"Watch it," Stewart said.

Foster was on his knees, looking at Stewart who'd just come through the door.

"You all right, Morley?"

Joe brushed past him. He heard Stewart tell him to wait, but he didn't wait. He went on through the door and toward the stairway to the roof. He climbed

the stairs trying to shake the fog out of his mind.

She was a nurse, he thought. Lying down there.

Miriam. . . .

He started along the roof. He didn't look down into the court. He couldn't make himself look down there.

"Morley."

Thompson was standing over there by the yellow screen.

"Yes."

He came across the sundeck. There were three other plain-clothes men standing around, looking at the thing by the yellow screen.

"You all right, kid?"

Joe heard Stewart yell across the court.

"We got him, Lev. It was Foster, just like you said."

Thompson waved back. There was no expression on his face. He looked at Joe.

"How about it, Morley? You all right?"

"I'm all right. He shot her."

"That's right."

Joe moved over to the screen.

"We got it out of him before he died, though. Thank cripes for that, eh?"

"Sure."

Joe looked at Garrett. A young man, in a bloody palm beach

suit, lying dead on the sundeck. Garrett's eyes were partially open and he was very pale.

"Hit him in the chest, too. Right in the chest," Thompson said. "Look here."

He took Joe's arm. He showed him the hole in the screen and they both heard Stewart calling. Stewart came up to them.

"She set him up for it," Stewart said. "She and Foster were working together."

"I'm darned," Thompson said.

Joe looked at the blood on the yellow screen.

"Foster said she nearly messed it up, the way she was with young Casanova, here."

"Easy," Thompson said.

"Foster says he didn't wise up we were here, even," Stewart said. "How about that? We're getting good."

"You mean," Joe said. "She brought him, her own husband up here—so Foster could get a good clean shot at him? At his shadow, standing up behind the

screen?" He stared at Stewart. "Is that what you mean?"

Stewart nodded. "She left a note for him, in her room."

"Nifty," Thompson said.

"She said she was a nurse," Joe said. "She even had a card to prove it."

Thompson and Stewart looked at each other.

"Going back to Davenport, kid?" Thompson said.

Joe looked at Stewart, then Thompson, and remembered Betty. He wondered about her for a moment, then thought of Miriam again.

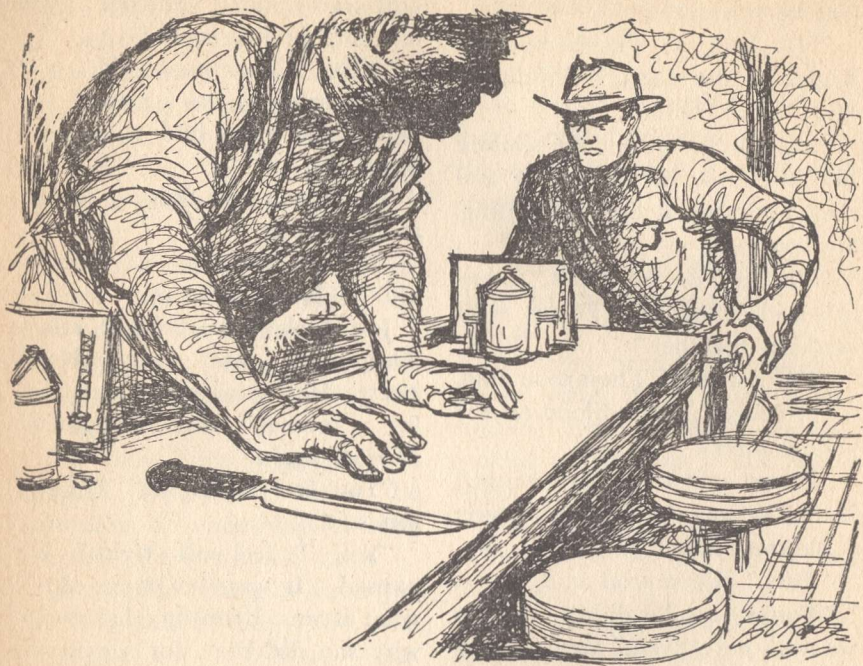
"You feel all right?" Thompson said.

"Yes. I feel all right." He paused. "It was the purse, that's what it was. I couldn't figure out why she did that, for a minute. She must have had a gun in her purse. It sounded like it, when it fell on the floor. She didn't want me to see it."

"What?" Thompson said.

Joe shook his head and turned away.

The counterman knew a lot about the fugitive hunt—too much.



PEPPER in his TRACKS

by SHEP SHEPHERD

THE black-and-white state police car swung into the graveled area in front of the low redwood building. Across the front and sides of the building were a half dozen signs touting hot and cold

drinks, sandwiches and meals. A two-foot-high sign on the roof, visible from both directions, read: REDWOOD INN.

Morton pushed open the door of the police car and slid out from under the wheel, the sun flashing on the bright badge on the breast of his uniform shirt

as he straightened and surveyed the building. He noted the *Open* sign hanging on the front door; the rather battered truck parked under a huge spreading tree at the north side of the building; the two gasoline pumps in front. Except for the police car and the truck, which he guessed belonged to the owner of the place, there were no other vehicles present.

Morton turned his head, stared back down the road toward the south. Back where other men in uniforms like his, and unlike his, state police, deputies, prison guards, were combing the countryside, watching the highways and back country lanes. Where a man with bloodhounds listened to their baying as they followed a killer's trail. Joe Morton felt just a twinge of disappointment at being out of the excitement and thrill of the chase. Yet he was glad. With a desperate convict at large, a convict who had become a killer, who had left the dead body of a prison guard behind, and who was even now fully armed, the chances were better than even that more men would die before darkness fell again. The killer had but two choices now; escape and freedom—or the gas chamber.

Joe Morton surveyed the heavily wooded hills opposite the inn. If a man could throw off the dogs he could stay hidden in there for days. At a distance of something over a hundred miles Joe could no longer hear the dogs nor the prison siren. The manhunt still centered in the neighborhood of the prison. Almost to a man the searchers believed the killer to be within that bottled up 20-square mile area.

Yet, Joe thought, why take chances? He slid back under the wheel of the car, started the motor and moved the car in behind the truck where it would be inconspicuous from any but a nearby viewpoint. He settled the .38 police special more firmly at his hip and entered the cafe.

Inside, the lame man behind the counter looked up from cleaning a grill and watched the man in uniform settle himself on a stool near the front. Slowly he laid aside the soiled towel and limped forward. His eyes traveled swiftly over the broad shoulders, the peaked cap, lingered a split second on the bright badge. "What'll it be?" he asked. Joe's mind snapped alert when he noted an undertone of apprehension in the voice.

"Whatever's handy," Joe said, "as long as there is plenty of it. I'm hungry."

"Ham and eggs?" suggested the lame man.

"Fine. Scramble 'em. I'll start with some coffee now." He studied the man as he limped back to the coffee urn and returned with a steaming mug. And he didn't miss the slight tremor of the hand as the coffee was set before him. He wondered why the man was lame. A bullet could cause a limp like that. He kept his face blank.

The lame man went back to the grill, laid two slices of ham on it, broke two eggs into a frying pan and set it on a burner at one side of the grill. Joe got off the stool, walked over to a cigarette machine, found a quarter among the change in his pocket and dropped it in the slot. He pushed the button, slid the pack out of the big slot and walked back to his stool, tearing open the pack as he sat down. Without looking, he knew the man behind the counter had watched him closely all the time.

The cigarette was one-third finished when the lame man set the food in front of him. He stubbed the cigarette out, noting as he did so that the man's hands were less nervous. He seemed

more at ease. Could I have been mistaken, thought Joe, I'll swear he was scared when I came in here. The lame man didn't leave. He leaned against the back counter and watched Joe cut the ham. "You been down there?" He jerked a thumb toward the south.

"Sure have," Joe spoke around a mouthful of food. "Right in the middle of it."

"They get him yet?"

"Not yet. Maybe they won't."

"They don't think he's made it this far, do they? I mean—well, your being here and all."

"No. They're still working through the timber and fields down there. I'm on my way up to Ordville to relieve one of the boys in the office there. Can't take too much of this rough stuff yet. Had a spell in the hospital. Just been out a couple of days when this escape call came in."

"Well, they're sure to get the guy before long. I hear they got bloodhounds down there now."

Joe shook his head. "Don't be too sure about that. This con had pepper. Red pepper. Anyway that's what it seemed to be. The dogs were having plenty of trouble."

"You mean he sprinkled red pepper on his own trail? Would that really work?"

"Sure." Joe looked straight into the lame man's eyes. "Didn't you know about that?"

The man half turned, looked out the window down the road. "No." he said. "Never heard of it."

"How about some more coffee," Joe pushed the cup across the counter. "And why not turn on that radio. Maybe we can get a news flash."

"Set won't work. I had it on this morning and got one of the early reports about the break, then something went wrong with it. Tube, I guess. It's an old set." He was nervous again. Joe saw it when he brought the coffee. "How many men you got down there?"

"Fifty probably." Joe lit a cigarette, watched the man over the match.

"Fifty? All state police?"

"Not all of 'em, no. There's guards from the prison, deputies from two or three counties. Maybe a couple dozen state men."

"Your detachment, they're all under Captain Will Moody, I suppose. Good cop, Will."

Joe shot a quick look at the lame man. Would an escaped convict know the name of the state police captain heading the search? Joe didn't think so. Then

his eyes fell on the radio. "Sure," he said, "Moody is one of the best." What was it, thought Joe, he had said about the radio? That he had heard an early report. The name of the man organizing the search would have been mentioned in the newscasts, he felt sure.

The lame man had picked up a clean towel. He was wiping a carving knife with it. A carving knife with an eight-inch blade. A carving knife that didn't need wiping. He moved to lean against the counter near Joe. Joe shifted the cigarette to his left hand, let his right drop to his lap near the .38. I'm going to have to kill him, he thought.

Joe didn't turn when he heard the crunch of gravel under tires outside, and the slamming of car doors. He relaxed when the lame man laid the towel and knife on the back counter and moved to wait on the man and woman who took stools midway along the counter.

"Couple of cokes," said the man.

The lame man got two cokes from a cooler, two clean glasses from a shelf. Joe turned sideways on his stool and looked out front.

He saw a late model sedan with baggage piled in the rear seat and an out-of-state plate over the bumper. He heard the lame man say, "By golly, that's the last two cold ones. I'd better get some more on ice. Be right back." He left the counter, went through a door at the rear. Joe could see it opened into another room.

He picked up his cup, moved two stools to his right where he could watch both the sedan and the truck. He listened for the noise of a back door closing. Then came the sounds of bottles rattling.

Joe stepped quickly back of the counter and snapped on the radio. There was a short hum, then an announcer's voice came in strong and clear. He snapped it off and slipped back to his stool. Another short silence, then the door to the rear room opened and the lame man limped back carrying a case of bottles. He put the bottles in the cooler, scraped ice around them, then shoved the case under the counter. He came up front, picked up Joe's cup. "Might as well have another one," he said, "Coffee's on the house."

Joe had a sudden urge to get the hell out of there. But, dammit, he had a job to do. And he

didn't want to do it with those two customers underfoot.

The customers solved that problem by paying for their cokes and leaving. The lame man came over from the cash register and leaned against the counter again, his right hand only inches from the big knife. Joe wondered if maybe that knife wasn't a trick, if there wasn't a gun handy too. Maybe under the counter right in front of him.

He heard the sedan start up and drive away. Now was the time. He was turning a bit to his right to bring the gun and holster clear of the counter and stools when the lame man spoke.

"You know, officer," he said, "I'm kinda glad you're here. Makes me feel better about Jeff coming by. Safer, anyway. That's Jeff Stanky. He's the guy picks up the cash from the machines over there." He nodded toward the three slot machines standing against the far wall just beyond the cigarette machine. "I don't own 'em, you know. They pay me a percentage. Jeff comes by once a week and opens them and pays me my take. Then he puts the rest of the money in a canvas sack and takes it to—well, where ever he takes it to.

"What worries me is that this

is one of Jeff's last stops. He collects from all over the county. Why he must have thousands of dollars in his car when he leaves here."

Joe sat perfectly still, watching the lame man intently. What did this monologue mean? What was the reason for it? Was it true—or a trick? Whatever it was he wanted to hear the rest of it.

"Well, we're sort of isolated here," the lame man went on, "someday, somebody is going to get the idea that a stickup would pay off good here about the time Jeff shows up. And plenty of people know about Jeff's business. See what I mean?"

Joe nodded. But he didn't see at all. Oh, he saw how that kind of setup would be tailor-made for a stickup artist all right. What he didn't see was why this guy was putting on the act. Joe hadn't believed a word of the story. But why tell it? Was this a stall of some kind? That had to be it. This guy knows as well as I do that I'm going to take him, he thought. I can see it in his eyes. But, could I be wrong? Could there really be a Jeff?

The lame man shifted his position, peered through the north window. "This could be Jeff coming now."

Joe followed his gaze. A car was coming fast from the north, but slowing as it approached the inn. "No, that's not Jeff. That's my towel man," the lame man said. "Comes by once a week to bring clean towels. I'll get the dirty ones ready."

Joe relaxed as the lame man gathered up dirty towels. He heard the car swing in and stop, glanced over his shoulder to see a heavy man coming through the door. He turned back as the lame man laid a bundle of dirty towels on the counter in front of him. One hand was hidden under the towels.

Too late Joe remembered that the heavy man's hands were empty. *He was carrying no clean towels.* Joe jumped backward and sideways off the stool, his hand clawing for the .38. He saw the gun come out from under the towels. But it was a slug from the heavy man's gun that smashed his chest. Joe Morton died with the .38 half out of its holster.

The lame man wiped his brow. "Good Lord, Sheriff, I thought you'd never get here. I only had time back there in the office to tell the operator that the escaped con was here, dressed in a state police uniform. I didn't even know if there would be anyone

in your office, what with everybody out on the hunt for him.”

“How did you spot him, Bill?”

“A state cop stopped here for coffee early this morning. He was headed south to join the search, he said. He was a husky guy with a deep tan and he was wearing badge number One twenty-seven. That one.” He pointed to the star on the dead man’s shirt. “I was pretty sure it was the same badge. And this guy was pale too, like a con would be. He tried to cover that by saying he had been in the hospital. But to make sure I asked him if the state cops were under Captain Will Moody. He said yes. That was what gave him away. Anybody who’s been listening to the reports knows Chief Hank Anderson himself is running things down there. Far as I know there ain’t no such person as Will Moody.”

“You’ve got sharp eyes, Bill,” said Sheriff Lawler, “Sharp wits too. I thought maybe you had heard the reports on the radio about them finding Al Duncan’s body. And about the missing police car.”

“No. I turned the radio off as soon as I got a good look at him out front. I figured what must

have happened, that he got the drop on that state cop. If a report like that had come in while he was here I’d be dead right now. What I can’t figure is why he stopped here at all. Seems he’d want to keep traveling fast once he had a head start.”

“Two reasons. One, he was starving. Hadn’t eaten all night and all day. Two, he had to get rid of that police car and uniform. He knew it wouldn’t be too long before Al’s body was found, even though he’d tried to hide it under some brush. Probably intended to ditch the car around here somewhere, maybe over there in those woods, grab some of your clothes and take your pick-up from here. He’d have locked the front door and hung up the *Closed* sign. That would have given him a few more hours leeway. I’m surprised he was still here though, when I arrived.”

“I stalled him by telling him about the pickup Jeff makes. I knew he must be wanting money real bad. I built it up a little, said Jeff would be carrying thousands. Only I didn’t tell him this wasn’t Jeff’s day—or that those are penny machines that pay off in gum.”



by FREDERICK LORENZ

BACKBITE

Geste had to shoot his way out of an embarrassing triangle.

THROUGH the field glasses, Howard's red hunting coat was very clearly visible a half mile ahead through the light stand of Aus-

tralian pine and palmetto. Satisfied, Geste slid the glasses back into the leather case that clipped to his belt. Now he knew exactly where Howard was going. He was heading almost due east toward the big marsh ten miles beyond the Placido River, a two-day trip on foot but there wasn't any other way to get there. There were no

roads, and a plane couldn't land in that stump-ridden slough. A 'copter might get in, but the point was that it took a woodsman like Howard to find the spot in the first place. *And* get back out of it alive.

That was the whole thing, getting back alive. Anybody could have blundered into that marsh, but it took a real woodsman to get back out of it. A woodsman like Howard. Or like himself, Geste thought with satisfaction. He was as good, or better, a woodsman as Howard.

It was a real hunter's paradise, that swamp. The ducks swarmed there more thickly than mosquitoes, and it had never been shot over because it was too tricky to get in and out of. Men had gotten lost in there and turned up years later as skeletons.

Two of us are going in, Geste thought with grim satisfaction, but I'm the only one coming out this time.

He'd owed this to Howard for a long time, ever since Howard had married Mary Alice Freeman right, so to speak, from under Geste's nose, because Geste had been courting her at the time. Geste had taken an awful riding at the time, because it had always been his boast that once a woman

went out with Clyde Geste, she was spoiled for any other man. And Mary Alice had been no ordinary woman. Her pappy owned the biggest citrus grove in middle Florida, and she was a woman for marrying, not just playing around.

Not, Geste thought sourly, like Beth Savage. He could spit when he thought of her. There wasn't anymore to her than a handful of feathers, and it had been fun in the beginning. It had taken her quite awhile to come to his way of thinking, and when she did, it was all tears and sobs and clutching and "we belong to each other."

Beth's brothers had a ranch about two miles south where they were breeding Brahma cattle, but they were poorer than the poor cousins of church mice. Geste didn't want to marry into anything like that. But if he hung around, those three big, hard-fisted Savage brothers would make short work of him if he tried to back down—specially after telling Beth he would marry her.

Hell, he thought bitterly, you always told them you'd marry them. None of them took it serious. It was just something you said so their conscience didn't bother them afterwards.

That was why he had sold out his gas station and had five thousand dollars in his wallet. He didn't want to marry into any ragtag-bob-tail outfit like the Savage's.

But first he had this little score to settle with Howard for taking that Mary Alice Freeman deal right from under his nose. If it hadn't been for Howard, he'd of been in solid with the Freemans by this time and wouldn't have a thing to worry about for the rest of his life, instead of having to run from the Savages, the way he was.

Howard was heading straight for the Hatchet Marsh. Geste had no doubt of it now. He'd camp over-night, probably, just the other side of the Placido River, but it was in the marsh itself that he was going to give it to Howard. They'd never find him, once he sank into the mud of the swamp, and, even if they did, Geste would be long gone by that time.

And the beauty of it was, he didn't even have to kill him. He had that all planned. All it needed was a load of birdshot straight in the face, and Howard would take care of the rest of it. A blind man, when you came right down to it, would actually kill himself in the swamp, blun-

dering into the nearest sinkhole.

With five thousand dollars, Geste could start up again in, say, Tampa or maybe even Miami.

He tracked Howard till sundown when, just as he expected, Howard made camp on the east bank of the Placido River. Geste crossed about a half mile to the south and made his own camp there, cradling his shotgun in a cabbage palm where the wet wouldn't get at it. He made a quick lean-to of palmetto fronds and stretched out under them in his sleeping bag. It would be about noon tomorrow when Howard would reach the edges of the marsh and begin hunting. The ducks were there by the million. Ducks, egrets, white and blue herons, and all kinds of wild life in spendthrift abundance. 'Gators, 'coons, 'possum, even black bear. Everything.

Geste awakened at sunrise the next morning and made a quick meal from the cold grits and sausage he had carried with him. He made his pack and trudged up-river to pick up Howard's track again. In about an hour or so he'd be able to pick up Howard through the glasses. At just about that time, Howard would be crossing the open savannah, which would take at least two hours.

After that, it would be easy to follow him into the marsh. The sound of Howard's gun would be the guide from there on.

It was at eight-thirty that Geste came to the western edge of the savannah and took the glasses from the leather case at his belt and swept the wide, grassy space before him.

He frowned. There was no sign of Howard's red coat, which should have been very easy to pick up in the powerful glasses. He swept the space slowly again from south to north. Howard should have been half way across by now and clearly visible. Intently, he swept every inch of the grassy flatness before him. He swore and went over it twice again. He lowered the glasses and bit his lip. Howard was not out there, and he should have been.

Howard couldn't possibly have started before sunrise. Nobody but a fool would try to go through that country in the dark, and Howard wasn't a fool. In addition to the sink holes, there were snakes — copperheads, cottonmouths, rattlers, even the little deadly coral snakes.

Geste raised the glasses once again and went over the area, covering every speck of it. Howard was definitely not out there.

For the first time, Geste looked back over his shoulder. Howard, too, he suddenly remembered, carried field glasses. His heart began to beat a little faster. Suppose Howard had spotted him the day before? Howard was no fool. Howard knew that Geste had it in for him ever since he had married Mary Alice Freeman. Howard would know why he was being followed.

If he could kill Howard out here in the marsh country, it would be just as easy for Howard to kill him. Even a disabling wound would be mortal out here. A gunshot leg. It was practically a whole day's travel back to the highway, with nothing but the Savage brothers' ranch in between.

Geste wanted desperately to scan the savannah again with the glasses, but he knew it was futile. Howard was not out there on it, and from now on, every minute wasted was a minute lost. He had to travel fast and straight out of here. He was certain now that Howard had spotted him sometime during the day before, and was now coming up behind him, circling through the Australian pine and palmetto country.

His mind worked sharply. He threw off his sleeping bag, his knapsack, and everything, in fact,

except his shotgun. His best plan would be to quarter north toward the highway, skirting the fringe of the Savage ranch, and come out on the road about ten miles above Sanibar. He could always get a lift back, and, by cutting north like that, he would be working away from Howard.

Now that he had his plan, he was perfectly cool. Grimly, he thought, *the hunter hunted*. This had started out to be such an easy thing, but now it had turned out to be a life-or-death race for the highway. Once on the highway, he knew, Howard would never dare take a shot at him. He would be safe on the highway. And after that, he would pick up his car in Sanibar and light out for Tampa or Miami.

HE SET OUT northwest at a dog-trot. He was too good a woodsman to need a compass. One glance at the sun in the eastern sky was enough to set him on his way.

He ran for about a half hour and that was just about all he could take at that pace. The sweat poured off him and his leg muscles felt like constricting springs. He was dizzy and he cursed the quart of "shine" that he had drunk the night before in celebra-

tion of his selling the gas station so quickly. It was taking its toll now. He reeled under the shade of a water oak and lay prone on the ground, gasping for breath, but almost immediately he sat up and, with shaking hands, took out the glasses and looked back through the sparse growth of pine through which he had just come. He caught a movement and hurriedly focussed on it, but it was only a family of 'coons grubbing over the cake of cold grits and sausage he had left behind.

Damn, had he come only such a short distance that he could still see the 'coons through his glasses!

He forced himself to his feet, but he did not run this time. Howard was in no better shape than he was. Nobody could really run through that palmetto. A steady pace was best. He settled down to a bent-kneed stride that really covered ground.

It was lonely country out here. An eagle wheeled in the sky, its small white head bent as it scanned the waters below for fish. An owl mourned in the swamp behind him. His heart leaped into his throat when, with a dry clatter, a small deer leaped up in the path and fled through the rustling fans of palmetto.

His throat was dry and his

tongue was a rasp in his mouth, but he had left his water bottle behind with everything else when he started his flight toward the highway.

In the beginning he stopped only every quarter of an hour to take out the glasses and scan the trail behind him, but soon he had them to his eyes every few minutes.

It was almost noon when he spotted Howard's red coat to the south of him. His heart stopped and he leaned forward, as if those few inches would bring him a closer view of Howard. He frantically spun the adjustment wheel and Howard came sharply into focus. Howard was standing beside a banyan tree, scanning the area with *his* field glasses.

Geste gasped. Before this, he thought Howard would be carrying a shotgun—but now he saw Howard's gun leaning against the tree. It was a rifle. A shotgun had a short range, but a rifle could carry accurately up to about a mile, mounted with a 'scope. He tried desperately to see if the gun had a 'scope, but it was leaning the wrong way against the tree.

With trembling hands, he shoved the glasses back into their case and picked up his shotgun. He suddenly noticed that it was

getting darker, and he glanced up at the sky. Heavy clouds were coming in from the Gulf to the west. There was going to be rain, and this whole country would be a bog once the rains started.

There was no time to skirt the Savage ranch now. He would have to cut across it, but even so, he could still pass a good half mile to the south of the ranch house with practically no chance of running into any of Beth's big brothers.

He set out at a long, loping stride. In five minutes, he stopped and looked back again. Howard was coming definitely toward him now, the rifle cradled in his arm. Geste swore and pushed on faster.

His heart was in his mouth all the way across the Savage ranch. Finally, he was in the rough palmetto again, and he breathed easier. It was only seven miles to the highway now, but a very tough seven miles, waist-high palmetto all the way. His breath was harsh in his open mouth as he bulled through the slashing undergrowth of knife-edged leaves and prickly pear.

He should have known better. He was a good woodsman, and he knew that this was rattlesnake country. He should have heard that warning whirr, but he didn't.

He was not aware of the snake until, as thick through the body as his upper arm, it struck him in the leg.

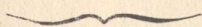
For a moment he stood frozen in horror. Then, in a frenzy, he leveled the shotgun and blew its head off. His hand flew to his belt for his hunting knife to gash the wound and suck out the poison, but the knife wasn't there. He hadn't brought it. He hadn't intended to go hunting, except for Howard, and he hadn't brought the knife.

He tried to keep calm. The thing to do when you're snake-bit, is to keep calm. Don't run. Running stimulates the heart action and the poison goes through you faster. He sat down on the ground, gripping his leg just above the bite, wondering frantically what to do.

The sweat poured off him. It poured into his eyes, down his ribs, and he could even feel it trickling in his hair. And then he felt what he knew was the first action of the venom—a sharp stab in his heart. His world exploded into a whiteness, and he screamed.

When he opened his eyes again, he was barely conscious. He knew he was being carried across someone's shoulder and he could see the matted redness of a hunting coat under him. He moaned feebly and tried to push himself away. A hand tightened around his wrist, and Howard's voice said reassuringly:

"Take it easy, Geste. You'll be okay. I think I got most of the poison out, but I'm getting you to a phone as fast as I can so we can get a doctor. The Savage boys' ranch house is just over the rise. . . ."



The Sinkhole

Eli went to a lot of trouble to let folks think that he was a murderer.

by JAMES P. WEBB

ELI COLE, trudging along the woodland path, halted when he came in sight of the house. It was a small farmhouse, like many another in the southern hill country, and Eli felt a satisfaction in looking at it because it belonged to him.

Eli could not see the front door from this angle, but he could see a portion of the front porch. A man suddenly appeared there. The man looked around, furtively, and then darted off the porch and out of Eli's sight.

It was Barney Goode.

Eli frowned. This was not the first time he had known of Barney Goode visiting the house during Eli's absence. There was always a furtiveness about his de-



partures; though at other times, when Eli was present, Goode's manner was hearty and open.

Eli's mouth tightened. Ever since he had married Janet, Barney Goode had been a frequent visitor. Lately, it had occurred to Eli that there was now some secret understanding between his attractive young wife and Goode.

Eli crossed the side-yard and stepped up to the back porch. He could hear Janet moving around in the kitchen. When he opened the door she turned away from the stove and looked at him.

"Supper'll be late," she said. "Time slipped up on me."

He grinned. "Must've been doin' something interestin'."

She did not answer, but turned back to the stove. Eli watched her. Her yellow hair was thick, and long enough to cluster in curls about her shoulders. A cheap gingham dress confined the ripe curves of her body.

"Know the big sinkhole in the back field?" he asked.

She nodded. "What about it?"

He sat down and leaned forward with his hands clasped between his overall-clad knees. "I was back there today, and it looks like that hole's gettin' bigger all the time. It's six or eight feet across at the top now. I can re-

member when it wasn't half that wide."

"It'll get bigger," she answered, with a disinterested shrug.

"Well, I made up my mind today to fill it up. It'll need a big rock of some kind in the bottom to stop up the hole there. Looks to me like it might lead to a cave under there."

"Maybe so." The odor and sound of frying meat filled the room. "There are plenty of caves in this country."

"I don't want to try to fill up that sinkhole without puttin' a big rock in the bottom," he said, watching her. "I might have to fill from here to China. Once I get the bottom stopped up, it'll still take four or five wagonloads of rocks, but we've got plenty of 'em, all right. I reckon tomorrow I'll start pickin' up the rocks in that field and pile 'em by the sinkhole, so when I get ready all I'll have to do is shovel 'em in."

"Well, they have to be gathered, one time or another," she said. "You ought to had that sinkhole filled up a long time ago."

"I just never seemed to get around to it," he answered. "But it's pretty important now."

The next morning Eli hitched the mules to the wagon and drove

to the back field. He had to get off the wagon and take down bars three times to get through the fences between the barn and the field, but he preferred the wagon to a wheelbarrow for this work. It would require a lot of rocks to fill that sinkhole.

He was unloading the second wagonload of rocks near the sinkhole when Tom Saltis climbed the fence and came past the scene of operations.

Tom's old eyes took in the situation. He stopped, worried a fresh chew of tobacco from a twist which he restored to a pocket of his overalls, and asked, "Why don't you dump them rocks right in there, Eli? What's a use pilin' 'em up? You'll be handlin' 'em twice."

"Yes, I know." Eli curbed his irritation. "But I've got to plug the bottom or it won't do any good to pour rocks down there. I aim to do the job right. I want this hole to stay filled for a long time."

Tom Saltis, who remembered when Eli was born, owned an adjoining farm. The old man chuckled now. "Well, it ain't none of my business, Eli. But if it was me, I'd plug the bottom and *then* pick up the rocks. That way you could've dumped 'em

right off the wagon into the hole and been done with 'em. But every man to his own way, is what I say." He trudged on across the rocky field, stumping along in his heavy shoes.

Eli Cole watched him, smiling a faint and secret smile. The old man knew how to fill a sinkhole, all right. But there were ways and ways.

When Eli had finished unloading the fourth wagonload of rocks, there was a large pile beside the sinkhole. The sun was going down.

Four wagonloads should be enough to fill the sinkhole. Eli stood beside the old wagon and thought about his wife and Barney Goode. Eli was a well-muscled man with sandy hair and a tanned face. He was not handsome like Barney Goode, he thought. But then, he was a great deal smarter.

HE SAT astride a kitchen chair and watched his wife prepare supper. Her gingham dress was fresh and clean, and her hair was carefully groomed and arranged. Was she expecting a visitor? Or had she already had a visitor, while he was working in the back field?

"Reckon I'd better walk over to the Goode place tonight," Eli said, watching his wife with intent eyes. "Want to see if Barney'll help plug the sinkhole tomorrow."

She glanced at him and went on with her work. She poured coffee into thick restaurant-type cups. "Why do you need help?" she asked.

"Got to put in a big rock first," he explained. "Big enough it won't go on down to China or somewhere. Be kinda hard to get one in by myself."

"Mr. Goode," she said, "is a good neighbor, isn't he? I guess he'll help you, if he isn't too busy."

"I don't think he's too busy right now," Eli said, watching her. "Seems he has time to run around lately. He been by here today?"

She paused with a platter of biscuits which she had just removed from the oven. She stood half-stooped for an instant. Then she straightened slowly and walked to the table. "Not today. He stopped a minute yesterday. I think it was yesterday."

He smiled. *Yes, it was yesterday. And probably today, too.*

After supper he rolled a cigarette and leaned back in his chair

to relax. Janet toyed with a fork and kept her eyes lowered.

Eli said, "I've got enough rock hauled to fill that sinkhole now. I'm anxious to get Barney to help fill it."

But he did not go to the Goode place that night. There was no need. A few minutes later, Barney knocked at the door. Eli got up and admitted him.

Goode had curly, chestnut hair; and a smooth, tanned face. He was younger than Eli, and a bachelor.

"Good to see you, Barney," Eli said. "Sit down."

"Started to town," Goode answered, seating himself beside the old-fashioned cupboard. "Can't stop long."

"Well, I'm sure glad you stopped. I was thinkin' about goin' over to your place."

Goode regarded Eli narrowly; then his gaze shifted to Janet and away. "That so?"

"Yes." Eli smiled. "I'm goin' to fill the old sinkhole back yonder and I need a little help. Thought I'd see if you'd help me drop in a big rock to plug the hole at the bottom."

Goode's shifting glance came to Eli. "Why, sure, Eli. What time you want to do that?"

"Kinda early in the mornin'. If it's convenient for you."

"I'll be right there, Eli. Count on it. . . . Now I'd better get on to town before it gets too late." He stood up. "See you in the morning."

When he had gone, Eli rubbed his hands together briskly and grinned. "I'll have this business over with pretty soon now," he said, watching his wife pour water from the teakettle into a dishpan on the stove. . . .

Eli Cole was filled with a strange excitement, and sleep was slow in coming. He lay listening to the night-sounds outside the house, and the quiet breathing of his wife. He thought of his plans for the morrow, regarding the filling of the sinkhole, and tried to restrain his eagerness and get to sleep; but it was late when sleep came.

He was up early in the morning. He went out to the back porch, splashed water on his face, and stood for a little while listening to the crowing of the roosters in the dawn. When he returned to the kitchen, Janet was up. Wearing an old housecoat, she was rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her yellow hair was tousled.

"Hurry up and get breakfast ready, Janet," he said. "Barney'll

be here pretty soon, and I want to be ready when he comes."

"Awfully early." Her full lips wore a sullen expression. "He won't be here for two hours yet. What's your hurry, anyway?"

"It's a great day for me," he asserted, spreading his arms wide. "This is the day I fill the sinkhole. I'll always remember it."

She gave him an oblique look and said in a surly tone, "Took an awfully sudden notion about it, I must say. That old sinkhole's been there for ages and you just left it alone. Now, all at once, you're all excited about filling it."

"I've been thinkin' about fillin' that sinkhole for several weeks now," Eli said casually. "I just didn't say anything about it."

Breakfast was over and the dishes put away before Barney Goode appeared. Eli sat on the back porch, where he smoked one cigarette after another while he waited. He could hardly restrain his impatience. When at last he saw Barney, garbed in overalls and ready for work, striding along the path across the meadow which adjoined the Cole farm, Eli jumped down off the porch, went out to the tool shed, and brought out a scoop shovel. It would be handy for the smaller rocks.

He saw his wife at the living-

room window, peering out between the curtains. Looking at Barney Goode. *All right, he thought, let her look.*

Barney Goode's long legs carried him swiftly past the barn. He called out a cheery greeting. Eli saw the other man's glance run along the side of the house to the window. Looking for Janet. *All right, he thought, let him look.*

"We're leavin' now, Janet," Eli called. He saw the curtains at the window stir a little. "I'll be back about noon, I reckon."

The field around the sinkhole was semi-barren land, dusty in the drouth of summer, looking faintly green at a distance because of the sparse bunches of grass. The two men climbed a brush-choked, worm-eaten rail fence and started across the field toward the sinkhole, Eli carrying the scoop across his shoulder.

"That's a big pile of rocks you've got there," Barney Goode said. "Ought to be enough."

"I think there'll be plenty."

Arrived at the pile of stones, Eli threw down the scoop. "What I need help with, though, is a big rock to drop in first and plug up

the hole. It won't hold these little rocks unless that hole's plugged up."

"That's right. We'll have to find one."

"I figured a rock big enough to stop up that hole would be too heavy for me to handle by myself. That's why I asked you to lend a hand."

Goode said, "Glad to help." He threw down the cigarette he had been smoking, ground it under his heel and turned to look across the field. "Got one spotted anywhere?"

"Yeah. Right over there."

Goode looked. A large rock lay beside a bush a few yards away. "Oh. Right handy, eh?"

"That's why I didn't bring the wagon and team. Figured we could get it over here without much trouble."

"Sure we can. Come on."

They tugged and wrestled the big rock over to the edge of the sinkhole. Then they straightened, panting, and paused to roll cigarettes.

"That's a mean job," Eli said. "Worst is over now. Sure appreciate your help."

"That's all right." Goode lit his cigarette. "Glad to help."

They smoked in silence until the cigarettes were short. They

pulled out big handkerchiefs and mopped their faces with them. Then they were ready to resume work.

"Ready?" Eli asked.

"Let's go."

They bent, one at either side of the big rock, got as firm handholds as possible, and heaved. The rock rolled down the sloping wall of the sinkhole and effectively blocked the small opening at the bottom. They straightened, smiling.

"Sure couldn't have got it done that easy by myself," Eli said. "I can do the rest, all right."

Goode stooped, picked up one of the smaller rocks and tossed it down into the sinkhole, where it clattered against the large one. His back was toward Eli now. Eli backed swiftly away. He thrust his right hand inside the voluminous overalls he wore and drew out a .38 revolver.

"Turn around here, Barney," he said.

Barney turned. His eyes widened on the gun, he thrust out his hands in a pushing gesture, and his lean face paled. He took a step backward to the very brink of the sinkhole.

"Reason I brought you out here," Eli said softly, "was on ac-

count of Janet. Man that plays up to my wife ain't smart, Barney."

Goode's hands were shaking, and a dawning horror grew in his eyes. "Don't, Eli! I never—"

"Don't bother to lie," Eli cut in. "I know all about it. I decided I had to break it up by gettin' rid of you, Barney. That's when I made up my mind to fill the old sinkhole. We got the bottom stopped up now, Barney, but some day it'll break loose and let the rock down. Pretty sure to. All I've got to do now is shoot you and throw you into the hole and cover you up with all this rock. Nobody'll ever know what become of you."

"Eli, don't! They'll find it out. You'll never get away with it."

"Think maybe I can."

"I'll go away, Eli. I'll go plumb away from here and never come back."

Eli sat down on a large rock. He kept the nose of the revolver pointed at Goode. A smile touched his eyes.

"Now that's an idea, Barney," he said. "You just leave here right now and never come back. I won't shoot you till the next time I see you." He motioned with the gun. "Start now. That way."

Barney gasped. He spread his

trembling hands in front of him. "You won't shoot me in the back, Eli?"

"I won't shoot you," Eli said, "until the next time I see you, Barney."

Barney Goode turned and ran. Eli sat motionless until the man had disappeared from sight. Then he sighed, stowed away the revolver, and began filling the sinkhole. It was late afternoon when he finished.

When he got home Janet was preparing supper. He drew out the revolver and laid it on top of the cupboard.

Janet watched him uneasily from the stove. "What did you have that for?" she demanded. "You didn't need that to fill up a sinkhole, did you?"

He gave her an over-shoulder glance and said dourly, "Depends on what you want to put into the sinkhole, I reckon."

He gave her no further explanation, and he went over and sat down behind the table; but when he looked again, she was watching him queerly.

"Took me and Barney both to get the big rock in," he said casually. "After that I didn't need him any more."

The next afternoon Eli noticed that Janet's eyes held a shadow. She glanced frequently out of doors, as if looking for someone. He knew that she *was* looking for someone. He said nothing.

The day passed, but Barney Goode did not appear. In the evening Eli and Janet sat long at the supper table, though she ate little. At every sound from outside, she would lift her head and listen.

That night he awoke and found her gone from the bed. He arose softly and looked into the living room. She was asleep on the sofa.

Two days later, Janet went into the village and returned. An hour later the county sheriff and two deputies appeared. Eli went out to meet them.

"Eli," the sheriff said, "we're going over and throw all the rocks out of the sinkhole in your back field and see what's in it besides rocks. I'm warning you to be here when we get back."

"Why," Eli said, glancing over his shoulder at Janet in the doorway and smiling his secret smile, "I reckon I might as well just walk over there with you, Sheriff."

Complete Menace Novel

The Cocktail JUNGLE

by BRUCE ELLIOTT

A handsome fugitive found himself the prey of attractive women who sought to use his criminal mind for their own nefarious purposes.

1

THE man who had no place to go walked purposefully through the heat haze of the fetid night. To his left, writhing neon lights picked out the bars, the endless identical bars that make all cities look alike at night. He walked away into the darkness, away from the tenements and the hot-bed hotels, away from the noise



Reprint of the LION Novel, "One Is a Lonely Number." Copyright, 1952, by Bruce Elliott.

of the juke boxes, away from the swelter of poverty. Maybe, if he walked towards the Lake, away from skid row and the Loop, maybe down there he'd find a breath of air.

A sudden scream cut through the heat-hazed night. It was sharp enough and loud enough so that a cruising dolly car braked suddenly to a halt. One cop got unhurriedly out of the car. The driver sat and looked at a newspaper.

The man who had no place to go halted as the scream sounded.

There was no place to go, no place to run. Instead, he backed slowly into the deeper darkness of a hallway. He watched tensely as the cop walked across the pavement and entered the next house. Could he make a break for it? Was there any chance the cop who sat behind the wheel of the police car would spot him if he were to move down the street?

The sweat that poured down from his armpits was cold, cold as sickness, cold as death. Pressing his back against the cement of the hallway he heard the bright, artificial tones of a radio newscaster saying, "There has been another development in that sensational jail story! Of the ten convicts who escaped from Joliet,

in one of the biggest mass escapes in the prison's history, two men have just been re-captured!"

The heat was too much even for the mechanical enthusiasm of a radio announcer. His voice slowed a trifle from the machine-gun like delivery he had been using. The voice continued, "Joey Mao was caught without a fight after attempting to hold up a gas station." The man in the hallway bit his lip as he listened. Joey, the shiv man who'd sworn he'd die before he'd go back to the can. "The other convict, Benjamin Brinkerhoff, was arrested in Cicero yesterday afternoon in a movie house. This leaves eight of the convicts at large. Larry Camonille, one-time musician, who swapped his trumpet for a gun . . ."

Now the sweat was running as though from a faucet. He'd never heard his own name on the radio before. ". . . has been called the brains behind the jail break. According to Joey Mao, the idea for the escape came from the fertile brain of Camonille who . . ."

That was when the cop came back down the stairs, out onto the street and walked to the waiting car. The driver asked incuriously, "Anythin'?"

"Some jerk beatin' up on his

gal. Whyinhell do they always kick their broads in the belly when they get mad? No brains, that's what."

The car drove off.

The ten convicts had crushed out five days ago. Five days—and two of them had been picked up already. Two down and eight to go. He swore at himself. Seven to go, because he wasn't going back, that was for sure. He'd headed straight for Chicago. Five days had gone by.

The crew cut had been a good idea. It made him look younger, more Joe College. And with the University of Chicago campus right near his hideout, he looked like just another skinny student. Older than most maybe, but lots of older guys were going back to school on the G.I. bill. No, it had been a real bright idea.

It *had been* a bright idea. But now it was time to move on. The streets seemed to expand as he walked on. Not that there was any more air over here near the Lake, but it didn't seem to have been used as much, it didn't taste as if it had been in and out of a million lungs before it got to him. Besides these buildings were all dark and quiet. These people could sleep in their rooms. Perhaps they sweated just as much as

the tenement people but it was on clean linen on broad beds, and showers were near to give relief.

THERE wasn't much traffic on Michigan Boulevard. All the working stiffs who'd gone for a ride to cool off momentarily would have to be back in bed by now if they were going to get up in the morning.

The edge of the Lake, the park, were as he remembered them. He smiled wryly as he thought of the last time he'd sat and looked out over the water.

His "girl" had been with him then. Sitting next to him on the park bench. She had told him how she loved him and how she'd wait for him. Had he known even then that she lied? He wondered. He'd known he didn't love her. Where he'd been fooled was in thinking she loved him.

When his plan had worked out, when he'd been able to bring off the jail break successfully, when he had come running back not so much to her, but to the get-away money she'd been holding for him, he hadn't been too surprised to find her gone.

Of course he'd wanted to kill her, but that had passed away. He could look back at it a little more

calmly now. She'd ruined him by not waiting, but he could see that four years, ten months and eleven days had been a long time for a twenty-one year old to wait.

So now there was no girl, and no dough. He'd banked on the money to get him south, to Mexico where his one lung would work a lot longer, keep him alive for years maybe.

He could hear the doctor saying, "No exertion, take it easy, no smoking, no drinking, no women." No nothing. "After all, you've only got one lung left, and it's held together by adhesions. You must take it easy."

Thirty-two years old and dead.

A corpse looking for a place to lie down and pull up the earth around it.

Walking faster now, he headed for his rooming house. He didn't bother to go to his room. But he did go to the third floor, the one his room was on. He hoped there was no one in the toilet that serviced the whole floor. It was empty. It was late now, three-thirty. The house was quiet.

He locked the door and stepped up on the toilet seat. He reached up to the water closet. Bending his wrist he pushed his reaching fingers down into the water. It was warm. His heart almost

stopped beating when his searching fingers felt nothing. It couldn't be, no one would think of looking in here. His pulse pounded again as the tips of his fingers felt the rubber encased gun he had dropped there the first night he hit town. It was all right. He had what he needed.

He stepped down to the floor and got his nails into the tough rubber of the balloon. He ripped it off the gun. Shiny with grease the .38 glittered in his hand.

Pulling his trousers away from his belly he inserted the gun in his waist band. Then he yanked some of the cloth of his shirt up out of his pants and draped it around the butt of the gun. It looked all right. His flat gut took care of that. No bulge gave away the hiding place of his passport to Mexico.

He hurried back down the stairs and onto the street. But the heat caught up with him again and he had to slow down. He could try to grab a hitch west, or, and this seemed wiser, ride the rods.

2

WHEN the bums in the freight car had told him that they were rolling somewhere between Chilli-

cothe and Lawrence, Ohio, Camonille had jumped off. The idea of a small town appealed to him. The boys in blue were a lot less alert the farther one got from big cities. Maybe he could somehow raise a little money.

He could feel the difference in the heat that surrounded him. This was country heat, cleaner and easier to take than Chicago's mugginess. He stood on a rock near a billboard that screamed about the honesty and integrity of a local candidate for political office and looked around him.

The scene had all the unreality of an advertisement in a slick magazine. The green of the rolling hills was completely unbelievable. It looked like the color that comes out of an artist's tube before it is mixed. Peace, quiet and contentment seemed palpable. He tried to pretend that here in the Bible Belt he'd be able to hide out, get a fresh start.

He made his way to a road that roughly paralleled the railroad. No cars honked irascible horns or clattered to screaming halts. There were no cars.

He slumped to the ground in the shade of a tree and waited. He was slowed down. His body soaked up the warmth and felt better for it. Finally he dozed off.

The day dozed with him.

He woke with his belly reminding him that it had been too long. Three cars passed him by in the next ten minutes. None even slowed down at his gesturing thumb.

The sound of another car approaching caught his attention. He rose and prepared to run out and signal it. But when he saw that it was a bright, shiny Cadillac, he relaxed and waited for it to pass. People who own fancy new cars don't pick up hitchhikers. Top down, the convertible made a frame for the blonde who drove it. Damn few if any women will pick up a hitch-hiker. Then he saw the car come to a halt.

He made his way slowly to the car. Let her look him over, give her time to give the car the gas. That way he wouldn't be too mad when she drove off without him.

But she waited.

His hand on the door he said, "Sure you wanna give me a lift?"

"Hop in. You look like you need a ride." Her voice was surprising. The careful make-up, the chemically lightened hair, the harsh lines around her eyes, the care with which she held up her chin to hide the crepey skin around her neck, the expensive foundation garment that pulled

and pushed her body into a semblance of youthfulness had not prepared him for the sound that came from her lustful-looking mouth. Her tone was low, warm, and exciting.

He ran his eyes over her. She waited patiently, busying herself with the job of driving the car, till he was through inspecting her. Then she spoke as if she had read his mind. "Must have been a beauty ten or fifteen years ago."

He made a protesting gesture with his hand.

"Relax, I'm used to it." She turned and her smile hid all the things which the make-up did not. It made her lovely. She asked, "Where can I drop you and what do you want to do?"

"Anyplace I can get a job."

"What can you do? What kind of work are you good at?"

That voice. He tried to make his ears deaf to it. What kind of work could he do? A good question. Only the answer wasn't much of a much. The only things he could do at all well were not likely to be much in demand in a small town. He knew how to blow a trumpet and he wasn't at all bad with a gun.

Aloud he said, "Anything'll do. Pearl diver, anything."

Her voice was amused, "Pearl diver?"

"You know, wash dishes, clean out a greasy spoon, anything so I can get a stake together."

"The only greasy spoon in these parts is a hamburger joint. I don't know if they need any help, but we'll go see."

She flipped on the car radio, and they drove along, cooler air descending as the sun went down. The perfume that came from her was gentle, clean, almost but not quite sweet. He slumped a little farther, appreciating the soft leather, the pressure of the springs, and listened to the radio's low music.

She said, "There are cigarets in the glove compartment. Light one for me, will you?"

Dragging the smoke down into him made him feel even better. He wondered why she was on his side. He asked as he gave her a cigaret, "How come?"

"Lame dogs, stray cats, you know, middleaged ladies go in for that sort of thing, if they miss out on Eastern religions."

She was kidding herself, but he could see it came hard. She wanted him to protest, say she wasn't middleaged, or even if she were she was still attractive, exciting . . .

But he said, "Glad it was me instead of some mangy alley cat."

The half light was kind. With the sun down, and just the greyish purple twilight all around, the



years dropped from her. He couldn't see her left hand. He asked, "Married?"

She lifted her hand so he could see her fourth finger. There was a wedding ring on it. "You could say that, but it wouldn't be true. No. I'm a widow."

"Rough," he said, wondering if she wanted comfort.

"Not particularly. He was no bargain, but he was rich."

She was really laying her cards on the table. Just then some neon lights flickered ahead of them. A sign said, "Welcome Inn."

"You'll have to forgive Max for the sign; he's not very bright."

"If he'll give me a job I'll forgive him anything including bad breath."

"That he's got."

She parked the car near what she had called a hamburger joint. It was a lot more than that. Perhaps hamburgers were sold there, but it was a big fancy roadhouse.

"No one pays much attention to the cocktail hour out in these parts," she said as she pulled the key out of the ignition. "Come on, let's see what Max has to say for himself."

The place was large, clean, and far from crowded. Some men and women sat at the horseshoe shaped bar, but they knew each other, and had said just about everything there was to say. They looked up with real interest when the blonde walked in with Camonille.

A man called, "Hey Vera, come on over and let's play kneesie."

"Later, Carl, I'm busy. Where's Max?"

"Out back," the man said, pointing to a door at the left of the bar.

Conscious of the way he looked, knowing that the men at the bar were amused at his appearance as the blonde's squire, Camonille found himself getting angry.

Loud enough so his voice could be overheard, he asked the blonde, "These cruds the best this section has to offer?"

"You mean the gentlemen at

the bar? Sure, they're the cream of local café society."

Holding the door open for her with exaggerated gentility he felt her brush against him. "Don't get your skirt all dirty," he said.

She looked down at the dirt that was scuffed into his trousers and said, "Been a long time since anyone worried about that."

IN THE other room a big man, fat without being soft, sat and read a newspaper. Feet up on a scuffed desk, tie pulled down, hair showing at the V of his shirt, he slammed the paper down and said, "Hi Vera." He scowled when he saw Camonille. "This bum bothering you, honey?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Max, what man ever bothers me?"

That made the scowl deeper. Max said, "You shouldn't say things like that, honey, it makes people talk."

She made an expressive sound with her pursed lips and then said, "Man here says he's an expert pearl diver. That mean anything to you?"

"Sure, I know what a pearl diver is but I don't need one."

She sat on the edge of the desk and said, "Sure you do, Max, you

know you do. Everyone's complaining about how dirty your dishes are."

"Whoever found a spot of dirt on one of my . . ." He realized she was kidding and finished, "Okay, g'wan to the kitchen, Mac, and get something to eat. You look like you could use it."

His heavy voice sounded querulous as Camonille went out of the room. He was complaining plaintively, "Now look, Vera, you gotta stop picking up bums. One of these days you're gonna get your brains beat out by one of these guys!"

"So? Who'll be sorry?"

Camonille closed the door as Max said worriedly, "Well, me, honey. I'd be sorry. You know that."

Following his nose brought him to the kitchen. It was big, spotless, and noisy as a boiler factory. The chef was a tiny man, sparrow-like in build and actions, and was making all the sounds. A youngster, maybe nineteen or twenty, was cowering away from the cook.

The boy was a head bigger than the man who was berating him. The cook yelled, "What do I care what those pigs want? They'll eat what I give them and like it. Don't you come in here

sucking around saying that somebody wants a steak well done! There's never been a well done steak come out of my kitchen, and as long as I'm cooking there won't be. Now go out there and tell that stupid idiot that anyone who would eat a steak well done would eat garbage, and say that I said so."

The boy gulped and squeaked, "But Mr. Warren, you know I can't do that! You know that the customers . . ."

"Know, know, know!" The little man grabbed up a pot of boiling water and slammed it to a back burner on the stove. Water spilled, hissing as it hit the gas, and made the cook even angrier. He was about to scream at the boy again when he saw Camonille in the doorway.

"Now what? Don't tell me the customers have gall enough to come into my kitchen and tell me what to do . . ." His voice ran down as he saw Camonille's clothes. "You're no customer. What is it?"

"Max told me to come in here to eat. And after I eat to get to work."

"Work? Work? What kind of work? I do all the work around this place! Without me Max would be out of business! And

don't you forget it. Ask him if you don't believe me. Just ask him!"

The boy was grateful for the interruption. He said, "I—I—I have to get back to work." He ran out of the kitchen.

The little cook grinned. He said, "Okay man, flop. Let me see if I can't remove some of that hungry look. Don't act so surprised. I was on the bum when I came here too. Max is a good guy."

He heaped a plate high. On the center of the plate was a medium rare steak an inch-and-a-quarter thick. Flanking it were Irish potatoes, small as marbles, white as a woman's belly, topped with fragrant green parsley. Asparagus, fresh, not too thick through, were buried under a yellow flood of Hollandaise sauce. The aroma coming up to Camonille's nose made him feel faint.

The cook eyed him for a second and then said, "No sauce Bernaise on that steak. Might make you sick if you haven't eaten in as long as it looks like you haven't."

Then the little man let him alone. Camonille was grateful.

It was only when the plate was empty and a hunk of bread rubbed over it no longer changed color that Camonille leaned back

and muttered, "That's the best food I ever ate."

The youngster, the waiter, had been in and out many times while Camonille was eating, but it was only when the plate was empty that the boy asked, "Gee, you were really hungry, weren't you, mister?"

Nodding, Camonille lit a cigarette and said, "Now then, where can I wash up before I get to work?"

The cook gestured with a hand that held a spatula, "In there."

Camonille stripped to the waist, worked up a lather and soaped himself well. He was wiping himself dry with paper towels when he realized that the employees' toilet was separated from the customers' only by a partition. Above the sound of water he could hear a man's voice rumbling, "Boy, I've seen Vera tie one on lots of times, but this one's a beaut."

Another man's voice higher in timbre said, "The drunker she is the better for me."

"You'll do all right tonight."

Both men laughed.

BACK in the kitchen the little cook said, "There's an apron over there."

Camonille put it on and attacked the dishes in the sink. They towered towards the ceiling, but it didn't matter. It was a never-ending job. The more he washed, the more there was to wash. But it wasn't too bad a job, it didn't tire your mind, no matter what it did to your feet, or your hands.

The night wore on, more and more noise came in from the bar, and less dishes. The cook was just making up sandwiches now and grumbling about the indignity of it.

"Me, making up a lousy cheese sandwich. Why if they only had the palates . . . but they haven't and there's no use complaining about it." The knowledge did not stop his complaints.

The owner, Max, poked his head into the kitchen, looked with approval at the dishes that Camonille had washed and stacked, and said, "How was he, Warren?"

"Fine, Max, just fine. We needed someone else, we've been working Benny too hard. It's no easy job for a kid like that to wait on tables and clean up too."

"If you say so." Max turned his heavy head to Camonille. "You can flop here. There's a cot out in the garage."

"Thanks a lot."

"I'd pay you now, but I think you oughta stick around for a while."

"I don't need any money if I can sleep here."

"There's cigarets behind the bar," Max said and closed the door.

"Leave the bottle alone and you can stay here as long as you want," the little cook said.

"I'm not a drunk."

"Funny guy, Max, seems like just because he makes his money outa liquor he feels guilty every time we get a real lush in here."

The door swung open again. The youngster Benny said, "Can I go now, please, Mr. Warren? I gotta date."

"Nothing I can say is gonna keep you away from little hot pants. Sure, beat it."

The boy was stung enough to try and fight back, "Gee, I wish you wouldn't talk about Jan that way."

The little cook flipped a suddenly lackadaisical hand. "Beat it, Benny. All of us go to hell in a bucket anyhow. What difference does it make?"

He made himself a salad, sliced paper-thin pieces of Italian ham into the lettuce, broke up some Roquefort cheese into it, and

doused it with oil and vinegar.

"Poor kid."

"What's the matter?" Camonille asked, not that he was interested but he could see the cook wanted to talk.

"He's going out with a girl that's gonna fix his wagon but good. Little tramp!"

"Make a play for her and get your toes stepped on?" Camonille grinned.

"Dammit, yes." The little man tried to work up a fury, but ended by smiling weakly. "Yeah. I like 'em young."

The door slammed open.

"You! C'mere." Max pointed at Camonille. His jaws were clenched hard. Little muscles bunched and writhed on his cheeks as he strove for self-control.

"Yes sir?"

"Get Vera out of here. You're the only one she wants to take her home. Me, I'm not good enough. G'wan, get her to hell outa here, fast!"

Most of the men and women at the bar were a little high.

But the blonde was blind drunk.

Hair mussed, her eyes almost closed, she sat on the little bar stool. She was weaving as she sat and crooned to herself, "Want the young one. Want the young one,

with the evil eyes. That's the one I want."

The front of her blouse was pulled down, the straps of her brassiere and slip were showing, some spilled alcohol made an erratic wet line down her chest.

She didn't recognize him at first. When she did she puckered up her now misshapen lips, her smeared lipstick making a sorry ruin that was worse when she smiled, and he could see the red on her teeth.

She reached out to him, her hands grasping, possessive. "Take me home, honey, take li'l Vera home and put her to bed like a good li'l boy."

He got his hands under her armpits, the too soft flesh bunching up around his fingers as he lifted. They both swayed as he tried to direct her feet towards the door.

"Get outa the way," Max said and putting an arm around her waist, took over the job.

Outside, after Max had propped her up in the front seat, he asked, "You drive?"

Camonille nodded, got into the car, slid under the wheel, and wondered what he'd do if a cop stopped him and asked for his license.

"Where does she live?" asked Camonille.

"Go down this road two miles, you'll see a cut-off going to the right. Can't miss it. The only house at the end of a dirt road. Big house. White. Green roof."

"I'll get her there."

"See that you do." Max turned heavily and walked off into the darkness. Then he turned and shouted suddenly as though losing control of himself, "And don't hurt her . . . or . . ."

Camonille drove off into the darkness. The mechanics of driving occupied him at first but then when he became used to doing something he had not done in almost five years, as his body remembered the sequence of actions that made the car respond, his mind was free to work again.

He was getting bogged down, he thought. Max's place was liable to be more of a hindrance than a help. A guy on the lam had no time for playing footsy with a broad, let alone a middle-aged drunken one. He had no right to be driving a car. But then he pressed his waist against the wheel of the car and felt the solidity of the gun and felt better. No cop was going to drag him off unless there was no other way out.

The woman next to him

slumped over against his side. He was half pleased and half repulsed by her nearness. It'd been a long time.

He concentrated on getting her home. Ahead of him the single eye of a motorcycle blinked through the darkness. The lights of the car he was driving picked out the buttons and badge of a cop as the motorcycle came closer.

The cop made a U-turn and drew up next to the car. "Pull over."

Camonille obeyed.

The gun, he thought sickly. Why hadn't he hidden the gun in the toilet back at Max's joint? If the cop should frisk him he was done for.

Unless, the dark thought came out of hiding, unless he was willing to shoot to kill. . . .

3

CAMONILLE breathed deeply. "What's up?"

The policeman straddling his motorcycle, looking into the car, made a face as he saw the woman. "Oh, it's her again."

This was what Camonille had been hoping, that she was enough of a local character to serve as a sort of passport for him. The cop looked at him incuriously and

asked, "Who're you? You're not one of the regulars."

"New man, working at the Welcome Inn for Max."

"Y'know where she lives?"

"I'm not too sure. It's near here, though, isn't it?"

"Follow me." The cop drove off.

Letting pent-up air out of him, Camonille followed the motorcycle. So far so good.

Five minutes later the cop slowed to a stop and called out, "Take this dirt road. You can't miss her house."

"Thanks."

The house loomed up out of the darkness in front of him. No wonder they'd said he couldn't miss it. No wonder, too, that Vera had said her late husband had been rich! It was a showplace, snowy white walls, pleasantly informal architecture, the only drawback, he thought, looking at the almost unconscious woman next to him, was the occupant of the house.

It was a tough job getting her out of the car. She had gone rubber-legged now. He pressed a button next to the door and waited. A house this size must have servants. He'd turn her over to one of them, go back to the joint and get some badly needed sleep.

There was no answer.

Swearing, he opened her purse, fumbled futilely through the conglomeration of junk with which all women load their pocketbooks, and finally realized that her keys must be on the chain in the car's ignition. He let her slump into a metal chaise longue on the porch of the house and went back to the car.

Twenty feet from the house he looked up at the second floor. There was a light on now. Then someone had heard him ring the bell. Angrily he stalked back to the front door and tried to deduce which key would be the one for the lock. Pressing his hand on the knob, he felt the door open. It hadn't even been locked.

He kicked it ajar and returned to the woman. She was snoring now.

He grabbed one of her arms and brought it up around his neck. Half carrying, half dragging her dead weight, he managed to get her through the front door. Once inside the house, he yelled, "Hey! Come down here and help me!"

No answer.

He was tempted to leave her right in the doorway but decided against it when he remembered his obligation to her. He flicked

on a light switch and looked around him. The rooms he could see off the foyer were pleasant, not opulently decorated, but it was clear that money and taste had gone into their design.

The stairs were a big problem. When he had muscled her up to the top of them he had to pause and catch his breath. It felt as though angry claws were tearing at his single lung. He pushed the woman into a chair, leaned against the wall and waited for his strength to return. Spaced along the stairwell were so many doors that it was impossible to decide which one was closed on the room from which he had seen the light coming.

He opened the nearest door. Darkness. He turned on the lights and knew that this was the woman's room. Proof of her alcoholism was everywhere. Originally the bedroom must have been charming, but countless forgotten cigarets had burned themselves to embers, leaving their scars on the furniture, in the rug, reminders of the self-destructive carelessness of the drunk.

It wasn't too hard getting Vera into the room. He threw her on the bed where she landed bonelessly, sprawled out, her skirt high over her knees, the attractive

roundedness of her thighs white above the tops of her high-drawn, tightly pulled-up stockings.

Standing over the bed, indecision gripping him, he became aware that he was being observed.

Starting nervously, he turned completely around. Framed in the doorway, hand dancing with palsy, an old, old woman balanced herself on two feeble legs and a thin cane. The cane jounced in her shaking hand.

Pale lavender dressing gown pulled tight around her skeletal thinness, the woman regarded him coldly through bifocals that were low on the bridge of her nose. Age had made her face like that of an old male Indian. Copper-colored skin, gaunt face, high cheekbones, topped by thinning yellow-white hair; her eyes, the only young thing about her, turned and stared at the woman on the bed.

The surprise made him feel youthful and guilty. Abashed, he said, "She's a little under the weather."

"She's drunk, the disgusting pig!"

There wasn't much he could say since the old woman had spoken only the truth.

"Do you want to take over and see she's made comfortable?"

"My son moldering in the grave and she still alive, breathing, drinking, lusting?"

Teetering, the old woman turned and retreated slowly into the hallway. "Night after night, I sit in my chair, waiting, praying for the good Lord to strike her down, the painted tramp! Some night my prayers will be answered . . ."

The door closed.

A little shaken, Camonille felt suddenly sorry for the unconscious woman. He turned out the lights and left. Downstairs he slammed the front door behind him. Let the old bat curse him for a change.

No sense, he thought, in driving the car back to Max's. It wasn't too far away and maybe the walk would make him feel better.

It didn't.

Turning on the light in the kitchen he remembered that Max had been reading a newspaper when Vera had brought him in for his "job interview."

It was a crumpled ball in the wastepaper basket next to Max's desk. He straightened it out and went back to the kitchen. Feeling like a really respectable citizen he poured himself a big glass of milk

and smoothed the paper out on the table.

The jail break was no longer front-page. He had turned back to the furniture advertisements before he found a headline that said, "Two More Cons Caught." He read, "Baronov, long time Crown Prince of the lonely hearts racket, was identified and arrested today when . . ."

Picking up the milk, Camonille decided that he was glad that Baronov had been caught. Preying on lonely women was a racket he did not like.

The police were optimistic about the eventual recapture of all ten of the escaped men. Larry Camonille was again identified as the brains behind the break. There was no new information. Distance from the scene of the actual escape controlled the newspaper space on the story.

Give him, Camonille thought, one more week on the loose and the odds would tip way over in his favor. He drank some more milk, read the sports page, the comics, and went back to his narrow cot.

The next day went slowly. There was not much work to be done around the roadhouse till dusk. There was no luncheon trade at all. Warren, the cook,

did not appear till three-thirty and he put Camonille to peeling potatoes and washing lettuce. Benny, the waiter, came in looking older than he had the day before.

The cook ribbed him, "You look like you need some raw oysters, sonny."

The boy said, "Why don't you quit needling me, Mr. Warren. Jan told me last night why you hate her so much."

Squelched, the little cook made himself busy banging pots and pans around the stove.

Max entered the kitchen and said, "Vera phoned me. Thanks for being nice to her."

"It's the least I could do; I needed help badly and she came through for me."

After Max left the kitchen, Camonille asked the cook, "What kind of a section is this? Where are we? I haven't even had a chance to look around and get my bearings."

Warren gave a last tentative poke to a loin of pork he was roasting, closed the oven door and said, "Ummm, let's see. We're a couple of miles away from four largish cities. Max draws on the suburbs of the cities for his customers. If you made a cross, the cities would be at the ends of the

straight lines and this place would be at the center. Chillicothe's to the north, Lawrence to the south, North Perham to the westish, and a smaller city, Ableton, roughly to the east. Why?"

"No special reason. It just occurred to me since I came here that I might just as well be working in a joint in New York or Chicago. You see the same kind of people coming in and getting drunk."

"Main reason most of the customers come in here to get drunk is because they wanna be in New York or in Europe and they can't get away. Successful businessmen, bored, and their even more bored wives . . ." Warren chewed on a celery stalk reflectively. "There's a lot of inherited money around here, too. Upper middle class people, waiting for momma or poppa or grandma to die so they can do what they want to do . . . you know."

"Yeah," Camonille assented. "I know."

"That's what's wrong with Vera. She was pregnant when her husband died and he left a will making his mother executor till the unborn baby came of age . . ."

"What happened?"

"The kid was born dead, the

dough's all tied up and Vera can't touch it till the old lady kicks off."

"Rough."

"Same kind of louse-up with Jan, the girl Benny's running around with, only she's an orphan. Guess maybe there's a good reason why most people are screwed up."

"Guess so," Camonille said and went off to speak to Max. For some reason the tension that had gripped him ever since he had escaped from jail was gone. This job was a cushion, protecting him with a sense of false security. He had made up his mind what he had to do. It was going to be a lousy trick to steal from Max, but that was what he was going to have to do and soon.

THE burly middle-aged man looked up as Camonille opened the office door. "Oh, it's you. What can I do for you?"

"I don't want to be a nuisance, but I wonder if you could advance me enough money to pick up some clothes."

"Sure, sure." Max handed him a ten-dollar bill. "That be enough for a shirt and a pair of slacks?"

"Where'd be the best place for me to go and buy them?"

"Benny's gonna run into Ableton to pick up some things I need. Ride with him in the station wagon. Be sure the kid gets back here by five-thirty. He has a habit of stalling when I send him on an errand."

Camonille nodded and left.

The youngster was getting into the car. "Hold it," Camonille called. "I'm goin' with you."

Benny smiled, "Good, hop in."

Camonille got the feel of the countryside on that ride. He could see the money that tied Max's customers to the area. Big houses and small, all well-kept, well run.

Farms with barns freshly painted; no visible sign of poverty. It was rich America. The outskirts of Ableton, the suburbs, might have been Westchester in New York, or the Gold Coast in Chicago.

Cutting in on his thoughts, Benny asked, almost shyly, "What's your name?"

"John Chavez," said Larry Camonille.

"Glad to know you. I'm Ben Able."

"Able, Ableton, any connection?"

"Oh, sure, the city was named after one of my great, great grandparents. We used to have a lot of dough. But that was a long time

ago." Then as an afterthought, "Where do you want to go in town?"

"Anyplace I can get a cheap pair of work slacks and a shirt."

Benny pointed to a store. "Why don't you try over there? I have to pick up some special cigars for Max. He has them made for him."

Camonille noticed a candy and newspaper store next to the men's haberdasher. "You going there?"

"Uh-huh."

"Meet you there."

They separated. Camonille's purchases were soon made. The candy store served as a teenage hangout. Gangling boys, pretty girls, changing-voiced kids who had just started to shave, girls whose complexions were just beginning to clear up after puberty's onslaught, giggled and fought, made plans in lowered voices, cluttered up the shop, got in everyone's way, dawdled over cokes, ate sandwiches and read the magazines on the stands.

Camonille ordered a coke and looked around for Benny. There was no sign of him at first. It was only when Camonille had looked into each of the booths that he saw Benny with what looked like a boy with tousled red hair in the last booth.

A soda jerk in his late teens

scooped up Camonille's quarter, made change, and asked, "Anything else, sir?"

"Yeah, call Benny and tell him I'm ready when he is, will you?"

The soda jerk made his way to the rear of the counter and yelled shrilly, "Drop what you got, Benny, you're wanted up front."

Embarrassed, Benny shot to his feet, spilling a flat plate of ice-cream onto the table in front of him. Camonille felt the blood pound into his temples when he saw that the redheaded "boy" with Benny was a girl with a poodle cut.

Estimating that she was approximately her boyfriend's age, Camonille watched hungrily as the couple walked towards him. The girl's heart-shaped face with its oblique eyes and pouting mouth was carried proudly on a slender neck that surmounted a beautiful body. Her youthful and firm figure pressed the emerald green sweater. A rusty-brown pleated nylon skirt swirled as she walked towards him. Put her in high heels, and her calves would slim down, he mused, slightly surprised at what her appearance was doing to him. He realized that the thing exciting him was a sort of taunting expression which made her completely adult looking.

Benny said a little breathlessly, "Uh, Mr. Chavez, this is my girl, Jan Bolling. Jan, this is Mr. Chavez."

She didn't speak, but looked at him with heavy lidded eyes. He tried to be amused at the frankness of her, but she was too stimulating for amusement. Finally a small smile crooked up the corner of her over made-up full lips.

"Hi." She extended a small hand.

He shook it and felt her fingers wriggle as he squeezed her hand in his. Suddenly he could understand a little better why Warren was so bitter about having been rejected by this girl.

"Can I drop you off somewhere?" Benny asked her timidly.

"Sure," she answered, not taking her eyes off Camonille.

Camonille maneuvered it so that she and the boy preceded him out of the store. Placing one foot almost exactly in front of the other, like a model, made her jiggle and sway.

Benny insinuated his arm around her waist, protectively, as though to establish that she was his, but she shrugged him away impatiently. She paused in front of the magazine stands in the front of the store and with much

thought picked out an armful of true confession and true detective magazines.

It was Benny who paid for them. Camonille was aware of a silence that descended on the teenaged youngsters when Jan and Benny neared them. The boys watched Jan secretly. The girls turned their back on her.

Squashed together in the front seat of the station wagon, Camonille felt the girl press her thigh against his. Benny drove silently and sullenly. Camonille asked, "Do you want to drop me off somewhere and then take Jan wherever she wants to go?"

"Thanks, but her house is on the way back to Max's."

She wriggled a little and turning to Camonille said, "I've been trying to make Benny get a crew cut like yours for a long time."

Childishly, the boy snapped, "You promised to call me Ben!"

Patting him on the cheek she said, "Down, boy, down!"

With the sun pouring in from the car's side window Camonille could see the place on her neck where she had stopped putting on the sun-tan make-up. Her own skin was almost as dark as the liquid she had applied.

The car slowed to a halt. Camo-

nille got out, allowing her to exit. The house was not in a class with Vera's, but it was no hovel. Weeds sprouted in the yard, needing a week's work to put the lawn to rights, but the house itself was in good repair.

Benny and Camonille sat in silence and watched the girl walk to the house. Camonille said, "Who does she live with?"

"A woman she calls her aunt, really she's just a housekeeper. Jan's an orphan."

Across the thirty feet that separated them, the girl called, "Next time you'll know the way. . . ." She waved at Camonille and went into the house.

Gears grating as the youngster got his car going, Benny almost cried, "Damn her, damn her, damn her!"

"Like that, huh?"

"Anybody in pants." The boy set his face and said nothing further on the drive back to the roadhouse.

Parking the station wagon in the garage near Camonille's cot, Benny said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Chavez, it's not your fault—but I've been in love with her for so long that. . . ."

Camonille patted him on the shoulder and said nothing.

EVEN in the kitchen Camonille could hear the sound of a quarrel going on. Warren and he stopped work to listen. The cook said, "The Baxters again. Must be them. Come on."

Following the little man's narrow back, Camonille was able to see into the bar proper from the door that led to the service section of the bar.

The bartender, middleaged, greying at the temples, sour-faced, was saying, "Please, Mrs. Baxter, don't."

It wasn't doing much good. Only a handful of customers sat and drank holding onto the bar with their elbows. The quarreling husband and wife had turned on their stools till they were facing each other. She had picked up a heavy handbag and was smashing it in her husband's face.

One, two, three times she slashed his cheeks before the man covered his face with his hands. All the time, her voice pitched fish-wife high, she was screaming at him every obscenity that Camonille had ever heard.

Shame was the paramount emotion on the man's craggy, rather good-looking face. Square jaw,

strong nose, deep-set eyes that now were averted, the man clenched his fists as he took his hands down from where they had been serving to protect him.

Despite the rage distorting the woman's face, she, too, was good-looking, handsome rather than pretty, blue-black hair drawn back severely above a wide brow, heavy-lidded blue eyes shocking against the darkness of the rest of her coloring.

The woman was saying something about her husband's being cheap as dirt when Max came through the front door of his place.

Camonille could see Max flush angrily. The bartender said helplessly to his boss, "I'm sorry, I



tried not to serve them—but they were sober when they came in and she made a stink and—"

"All right, all right." Max held up a hand for silence. The law

says we gotta serve 'em if they got money and if they're not drunk. He's a good enough lawyer, still, to know his rights. But," Max turned from the bartender to the man the cook had called Baxter, "look Nicky, y'know I like you. Why do you put us all on a spot like this—with her?"

The woman erupted in an even more towering rage. Backhanding her husband so that one of the big jewels in a dinner-ring on her finger ripped a jagged path across the man's right cheek, she spat. "You gutless imitation of a man, are you goin' to sit there and let your lawful wife get insulted by this fat ex-bootlegger?"

Little drops of blood dripped slowly towards the man's chin. The woman screamed, "Well, are you? Of course you are. What the hell do you care what anyone says or thinks about me? How I could ever have thought I loved you is beyond me. I must have been out of my mind."

The man shrugged, slid off the bar stool and threw some crumpled bills onto the bar. He grabbed his wife by the arm, pulling her off her stool, and turning, said to Max, "I'm sorry, Max. I thought it was going to be different. She promised. I guess I'm the one who's out of his mind."

"Real brave, aren't you," the woman said, "real brave when it's me you're pushing around. You can take your hand off me now, you've made me black and blue, I suppose that's all you wanted to do, hurt me, hurt me the way you always do."

Benny carefully held his tray above his head as he passed the angry man and woman. Camonille wondered why the young waiter looked so concerned.

"Pretty early in the day for them to get that tight," Warren observed.

"That kind of thing go on often?"

"Sure, all the time."

Camonille and Warren went back to their duties in the kitchen. The waiter followed them. He was mumbling to himself. Warren snapped, "What's wrong, kid?"

"Some lawyer Jan's dad got to take care of her—some lawyer."

"Take it easy, youngster, Baxter was a good man when Mr. Bolling was alive. It's only since he married that bum that he's fallen apart."

The twenty-year-old's weakly handsome face was haggard with worry. He said, "Maybe if Baxter was decent Jan wouldn't be the way she is." Then he ducked

out of the kitchen ashamed of what he had said.

"What was all that about?" Camonille asked.

Warren made a face. "I dunno, not really. I expect that the girl's father thought that Baxter would serve sort of as a guardian as well as executor of his will. But since Baxter married, *he* needs a guardian. Why the hell men take that kind of stuff from women is beyond me."

Camonille said slowly, "Some of them like it. Most of them. Or they wouldn't put up with it."

"Maybe you got something there. We better cut out acting like two old hens and get to work. Dinner hour's here."

Benny entered the kitchen, slammed down a tray and said, "Max is mad, Mr. Chavez. Mad at you, I think."

"At me? Why?" Camonille asked.

"That lady he likes so much is here and she wants you to come out front and have dinner with her, and he's mad, as mad as can be."

Vera!

Camonille dried his hands and went outside. She looked a little hungover but not as much as he would have expected. The kid had been right. The boss was

furious. He said, "Won't you join the lady? Sit down. Have a bite to eat with her. I'm not good enough for her."

He turned and walked away, his hard heels clattering as he expressed his dislike even with his back.

Lighting a cigaret, the blonde said, "Go ahead, man, sit down. Max's bark is worse than his bite."

Camonille sat down.

Vera said, "I want to thank you. And I realize I don't even know your name," she said.

"Chavez, Johnny Chavez."

She leaned towards him and the smell of her perfume was good. "I'm doubly grateful to you. First for taking me home, and second for whatever you did to my sainted mother-in-law. She's been furious all day."

He waved away her gratitude. Benny was at his elbow, waiting rigidly and properly for the food order. Camonille looked up and said, "Suppose, Vera, we put ourselves in the cook's hands and let him prepare what he wants to?"

"Fine with me. But bring a couple of bourbon and waters first."

The dining-room was filling up now. Camonille knew that he and Vera were being stared at, but it

didn't seem too important now. She had something on her mind, something that she was building up to.

After Benny delivered the drinks, the blonde sat and considered hers for a long time. Camonille dumped his liquor into the water glass and sipped at it. Vera picked up her shot glass, threw its contents down her throat, made a face and said, "Let's get on with it, Johnny."

"Yes?"

"How bad's the trouble you're in?"

"Pretty bad."

"I'll make a deal with you."

THAT sounded interesting. Camonille swallowed half his drink and again waited. Benny interrupted and placed two bowls of vichysoisse in front of them.

The sharp, acrid, taste of the ice-cold, creamy soup was fine, Camonille decided; Warren was a real good cook.

Before Vera could continue with whatever it was she wanted to say, Max came over to their table. The apologetic tone and manner he was assuming obviously came hard. He said, "I'm sorry, Vera. It's none of my business what you do."

Camonille sat and wondered what the woman had in mind. Max was busy clumsily trying to make up to her. His way of doing this was to be expansive. Pulling a chair over to their table, he joined them in dinner, drank with them and ordered brandy to be poured in their coffee.

They had finished when Benny stepped to Max's side and said in a stage whisper, "Uh, boss, the Baxters are back. Looks like more trouble."

Cursing under his breath, Max rose from the table, apologized and went to the bar.

Vera waited till he was gone before she fumbled in her pocket-book and removed a billfold. She said, her voice low, "There are too many people near us now. Can I pick you up later and talk to you?"

Her hands were out of sight below the edge of the table. Camonille heard a tiny sound of paper being torn. He said, "Sure. If you want to stay up till I get done work."

Her hand crept into his lap. He looked down and saw that she was pressing a piece of paper into his hand. It was small enough so that he could hold it in his palm without anyone else being able to see it.

She had given him a torn half of a hundred-dollar bill.

Looking from it to her, he stuffed the useless half bill into his pocket and waited. She said, "I'll toot my car horn twice."

"Make it around one-thirty. I should be in the clear by then." He went into the kitchen.

If he could get the other half of the century note, Camonille thought, he'd leave on the instant. Wondering what she had in mind, sure that it was something illegal, he didn't notice Warren hiding in the passageway between the bar and kitchen until he had almost stumbled over the little man.

The cook was watching the bar avidly. Camonille turned and saw that the couple who had been fighting earlier were back in the same positions at the bar.

This time they were not fighting. They were kissing. Everyone in the bar had their eyes glued on the man and woman. Baxter was kissing his wife as though they were alone in their own room. Their mouths together, she had her hands fastened around the back of his head, pressing it to her.

Camonille said, "Oh, brother!"

"See, I guess you were right. He

does like to be clouted around by her."

It was only when their two heads separated that Camonille could see the dried blood, like a relief map, standing out as a reminder of the slashing the pocket-book had inflicted on the man's face.

Leaving Warren to his peeping-tom activities, Camonille tackled the mountain of dishes that waited for him. Later, Max came into the kitchen and said, "I think I like it better when the Baxters are fighting."

"They're quite a couple at that."

"Look," Max said, "I know it's not your fault, I'm sorry about earlier, Chavez."

"Think nothing of it." Camonille had come to a place where he could take a breather. He lit a cigaret and asked, "What's Vera's last name?"

Max said, "Pool. That's the name she married into."

Warren asked, "Can I make you a snack, boss?"

"You and your little snacks," Max said, mock ferociously, and patted his protruding stomach. "Look what they've done to me already."

"One more won't do much."

"Sure, go ahead and whip something up."

The cook asked, "Get rid of the Baxters?"

"Finally, yeah." Max shook his head. "There's gonna be some kind of a blow-up with them one of these days and I just hope it doesn't happen here."

It was a relaxed, stag kind of atmosphere and the men talked desultorily. Camonille glanced at the clock on the wall and realized that it was twenty after one. He said, "Mind if I knock off, boss? I'm a little bushed."

Max was eating happily. "Sure, go ahead," and went on talking baseball to Warren who was sitting companionably close at the table nibbling on a salad. Benny was cleaning up preparatory to leaving. The two of them washed up at the same bowl in the men's room. Camonille said, "G'night," as he left the boy combing his too-long hair.

"'Night, Mr. Chavez," Benny smiled.

At the toilet door Camonille stopped, asked, "Got a date to-night?"

The youngster said, "Yeah, that's why I'm rushing. Gotta pick her up in town. She's at a dance but she's ditching the guy she

went with and gonna wait for me."

"G'night again," Camonille said and walked to the garage. No sign of Vera's car but it was still a couple of minutes early. Suddenly realizing he really was tired he entered his room. Might as well flop until Vera got there.

He didn't even bother to flick on the light. Feeling his way, he sat down. It was so dark in the contained space that he didn't realize at first that there was someone else there.

He pushed out his palms exploratively. They met something and a kind of jolt went through him.

Striking a match he looked down into Jan's face. Her eyes were narrowed, her lips parted. She said flatly, "Surprised?"

Outside the garage a car horn honked once, twice. Inside Camonille did not drop the match until the flame had burned his fingers.

The horn honked twice again.

5

LYING back, resting, Camonille heard Vera's car drive away. With her went the other half of the hundred-dollar bill, but right

then it did not seem very important.

He reached, fumbling for his cigalets. "Smoke?" he asked.

"Sure." The girl's voice was husky.

He lighted one for her and himself. Gently he kissed her again.

She said, "Time for me to get home or my aunt will snatch me baldheaded. She'll be mad anyhow unless I can get in without her hearing me."

When Camonille opened the door he was aware of a little flurry of sound. He waited, tense. Joining him, Jan asked, "What's wrong?"

"I dunno. Thought I heard something."

"Chipmunks, or squirrels. They're all over the place."

Whatever had made the noise had stopped. In dead silence they stood there. There was no traffic. It was a dead world, in which they were the only living creatures. The slim crescent of a waning moon was the only sign of light.

Squeezing his hand she said, "You're nice."

"Thank you. You're nice too." It was all he could do to force his tired mind to keep up a desultory conversation. Luckily

she didn't demand much in the way of a reply.

She said suddenly, "Benny!"
"Huh?"

"I forgot all about him. I was supposed to meet him in Ableton." She giggled. "Oooh, will he be mad! He'll snap his cap!"

Poor kid, Larry Camonille thought. What a dynamo he had been fooling with. . . . Aloud he asked, "Jealous?"

"Man, oh man. Is he jealous." Tossing her head like a colt she went on, "He has no right to be. . . . I've promised him that if he'll only do what I want him to, I'll be good, real good to him."

Not really caring, Camonille asked, "What do you want him to do?"

Lifting her face, looking directly into his, she said, "I—I need help."

First Vera and now Jan. He asked, "Legal or illegal?"

She didn't boggle at the question. "Illegal."

Even as his exhausted brain wondered as to why he had been chosen by the two women, he knew the answer, or part of it. He was a new element. Vera was old enough and bright enough to know he was outside the law, even though she didn't care particu-

larly why. But how had Jan smelled him out?

These situations must have been long in the making, waiting, waiting for someone like him to come along and bring them to a boil.

Staring down at her curious young-old eyes, wondering just what was going on behind their curtain, fatigue welled up within him. He could not restrain it. Putting the back of his hand to his mouth he let his tiredness be summed up in an almost jaw-breaking yawn.

Suddenly angry, she broke away from him, ran swiftly into the dark night, her voice trailing behind her, "Good night, Larry. I'll see you tomorrow!"

So tired was he that she had disappeared completely into the night before the realization of what she had said penetrated his exhausted mind.

Benny had introduced him as Johnny Chavez. Yet Jan had called him Larry. . . . She knew who he was!

Before Camonille could move, even if he had intended to try to find Jan in the night, he again heard the flurry of sound which they had heard before—which Jan had said might be chipmunks or squirrels.

Benny walked stiffly into the pale moonlight and confronted Camonille. "Damn you," he said bitterly to Camonille. "Damn you."

Camonille watched Benny's clenched fists warily, waiting for the explosion, but the boy finally shrugged and walked away into the night.

Fumbling a cigaret into his mouth, Camonille leaned against the garage door. He should have followed Jan—and killed her. She knew who he was. She. . . .

So absorbed in his thoughts was he that he was not aware of the car, running without lights, which slid to a silent stop near the garage.

"Been tom-cattin'?" Vera Pool asked, her voice whisper low, just carrying across the fifty feet that separated him from her car where she sat.

Walking toward her, he wondered again if it mightn't be the smartest thing he could do to throw in with her, do what she wanted, and blow, beat it, get out of this quiet little cesspool of sickness and cross-purposes that was drowning him.

She opened the door of her car, patted the seat next to her and said, "Come on, sit down,

you look ready to fall flat on your face."

It felt good, just sitting. She didn't look at him, instead she kept her head turned a trifle to the side away from him so that she was looking at the wet ribbon of the highway that curved off into the distance. No cars passed by, they were alone.

"You must be richer than I'd thought," she said after a long, long while.

It took a moment for him to realize what she meant. Then he took the torn half of the hundred-dollar bill out of his pocket and held it in his fingers, worrying at it, straightening it, crumpling it, pulling at it. It was her move, and as long as he could sit he was willing to outwait her.

"Don't you want the rest of that bill? And more, lots more?"

He nodded.

She said, "This is a lot harder than I thought it'd be."

He slumped down in the seat, extended his legs, and lowered his eyelids till they were almost shut. His fingers stopped playing with the paper money.

"I don't quite know how to put it in words."

That was all right with him. He thought groggily, if she'd just

shut up and let him sleep he'd give her back the torn half of the bill.

Her head still turned away from him she said, "It'd be worth a lot of money to me if you'd do what I want you to."

A lot of money—a lot of money—the words were almost meaningless. His head tilted back against the seat of the convertible. Then he felt a few drops of water fall on his forehead.

It was raining.

She turned on the ignition, switched on the little motors that automatically lifted the cover of the car and was again silent as the umbrella-like hood came up and then down, clattering as it came to rest on the top of the windshield. Reaching over him she turned the handles that held the hood in place.

The patter of the rain on the canvas covering them was hypnotic in intensity. Lulled even more by the sound, he was close to deep sleep when she bit her bottom lip, leaned over him, shook him by the shoulders and said so rapidly that words all blended into one, "Damn-you-listen-to-me-I-want-you-to-kill-my-motherinlaw."

Only the word kill stood out. It

was enough to make him open his eyes and sit up a little straighter. He asked, "What?"

Teeth clenched, the words came out more slowly. "She's old, old and sick, she can't live really forever, it just seems that way. I'm not depriving her of much. She doesn't get any pleasure out of life now. She hasn't since her son died; the only time she comes alive is when she's devilling me. Why should she go on slowly strangling me, keeping me from doing what I want to do? The nights I've tried to get drunk enough to do it—but I can't; it takes some kind of guts I don't have.

"Please," she grasped his hand, pulled at it, "kill her for me. I'm getting older—I haven't got much more time to do the things I want to do. Give me my chance to live. Kill her." He looked at her, she was suffering.

She said, "And if I did murder her I'd be the first one they'd arrest. I've never made a secret of how I feel about her. But you, you're the stranger here, you'd have no motive, none at all that the cops could see. Please, please, please, kill her for me."

She was hurting his hand.

He pulled it loose and said, "For how much?"

His seeming acquiescence almost stunned her. It took a moment for her words to come out, "You will?"

"For how much?"

"Five hundred—a thousand, five thousand, how much do you want? I don't care. I'll be rich, free."

Six bullets and a gun to take him to Mexico. Now maybe all it would take would be one bullet. One lousy, pellet of lead to wipe out all the barriers he had to hurdle.

But it was too late and he was too tired. He said, "Let me sleep on it. Think about it." His words were thick; it was too much trouble even to move his lips.

Getting out of the car, walking towards the garage, took his last bit of strength. He barely heard her car drive away. He fell on the cot fully dressed, relaxed, took a deep breath and then he began to cough.

Racked and torn, his body jerking with pain, he hacked and strangled till something let go and a burst of blood came from his tortured lips.

Only then did he sleep. . . .

"Wake up," a man's voice said,

enviously. "Boy, you musta really had a night!"

He slowly opened his sleep-glued eyes, saw Warren looking down at him. "Rise and shine!"

He had trouble making his voice work, but he finally managed to croak, "Time for me to get to work?"

The little man gestured at the window, "Rain's come and gone and nightfall's here. So's business. Let's go."

Throwing ice-cold water in his face helped a little, but not much. A vague nightmare he had in his sleep still lurked in his tired brain. If that was what he had to look forward to if he killed the old woman, maybe he'd better find out what Jan wanted of him.

6

THE WORK and the night went fast. He was getting used to it. Barely stopping for a bite to eat, wasting but a single glance at the bar room when Jan's lawyer, Baxter, and his wife began their nightly drunken battle, he scraped dirty dishes, washed them, stacked them up to dry, kept as busy as he could, making physical motion mask what he was thinking.

The first break in the evening's chores came when Warren took

time out for a cup of coffee and a glance at the day's paper. Camonille kept right on working as the little man slurped his coffee, mumbled to himself and read various items aloud.

The item Camonille had been waiting for came at last. Warren cleared his throat and said, "They're not lousin' around with those escaped cons. Picked up another of them last night."

Who? he wondered as he shoved the remains of a dinner into the garbage pail. Who'd fallen by the way-side now?

"George Beddoes was picked up at the home of his long-time common-law wife, Fran Serley."

He stopped listening then. Georgey. The muscle man. The only nice guy in the whole pack. Too bad. But typical that he'd run right back to Fran. That was the only reason he'd joined the crush-out, he hadn't had much more time to go, he just couldn't live without her.

Camonille realized that half of the men who'd escaped with him were already back in prison, back there behind bars with even more time tabbed up against them. Maybe the whole idea had been jinxed from the beginning. Maybe he'd have been better off if he'd stayed . . . But that was ridicu-

lous, he thought, that way meant death, and he was going to live.

Depressed, he suddenly came to a decision. His only mistake had been to bog down in this hide-away that was getting too hot for him. He should never have stopped running. Horsing around with Jan and Vera could only lead to more trouble. It was past time now to get a little stake, a little dough from Max to get on the move again. There was something about the atmosphere of the roadhouse, of the people who were slowly decaying there, that had enmeshed him. Their troubles were no business of his, not for a guy on the lam. The only business that concerned him was escaping.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he mentally framed the note he was going to leave in Max's cash register that night. An I.O.U., not that he ever meant to pick it up, but the guy had been nice to him. And it was only dough, it wouldn't hurt the man.

He felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Warren said, "Hey, how come you feel so good? That's the first time I ever heard you whistling while you worked."

He shrugged and kept right

on. What a fool he'd been to ever let himself get caught up in the footless plans that Vera had in mind; he couldn't blame himself too much for Jan.

Thinking of Jan made him realize that he hadn't seen Benny all night. He asked Warren, "What's with our young waiter?"

The cook said, "Phoned in, said he was sick. Lucky we had an extra bartender who doesn't mind waiting on table."

Poor kid, Camonille thought, now that he could afford the luxury of pity, now that his mind was made up that he was getting off the merry-go-round.

He and Warren paused in what they were doing when Max, even more heavy faced than usual, came in and said, "Vera's waiting for you, Chavez."

The good mood faded. Escaping from people was harder in some ways than getting out of jail. He'd buoyed up her hopes by pretending to accede to her request . . . He said, "Tell her I'll see her later."

"I don't think you heard me, Chavez," Max's voice was harsh. "I said she wants to see you."

Camonille threw the towel into the sink and walked towards the door. "Okay, don't get your muscle up."

First he'd have to duck Vera, then Jan, steal some money from Max and start running. It would feel good to be alone again. People were starting to crowd in on him.

Vera's eyes were shining as he walked to the bar where she waited. He was her hope of Heaven, he thought as he looked at her. One murder and her life would be all straightened out, or would it?

Behind her he could see Mr. and Mrs. Baxter. They had passed the fighting part of their evening and were busy grasping each other, clutching at their curious kind of love.

The other people at the bar watched through half-closed eyes.

Sitting down next to Vera he saw it was going to be harder than he had expected.

She said, "Tonight?"

He nodded. Might as well lie. That way she'd be happy for a little while.

She leaned forward, as though kissing his ear, and whispered, "I've drawn the money out of the bank. I'll have it for you later, after you do it. Five thousand dollars in small bills."

Temptation returned.

Five grand for one bullet.

A lot of money for a simple act.

The tension of a trigger finger, the minute pull, the fractional amount of time it would take, such a lot of money. . . .

Her whispering voice went on, "I think I've been smart, I've thought of the perfect alibi."

Hardly listening, he thought of how easy five thousand dollars would make his trip to Mexico.

She went on, "All these years I've put off Max, stalled, played coy with him—well, tonight's the night!"

She waited for congratulations on her cleverness. But all he could think about was the money.

"I've got the house key right here . . ." Her hand fumbled, met his, pressed the flat metal into his hesitant palm. "She'll be in the third room from the stairs, to the left as you go to the second floor."

He pulled his head away from hers, tried to fight down the thoughts that swayed him. A lonely old woman, a dark night, an unheard shot, and then—escape. No one would suspect him. It was a lead-pipe cinch.

And after? It could mean a lot more dough. Vera'd be forever liable to calls for money. He need not work or steal. A discreetly worded note from Mexico, an insistent demand, would procure

lots more of the fortune the woman would inherit.

He caught a look in her eyes of low animal cunning. It was fleeting, but it was at variance with the picture she'd given him of herself. It worried him, nagged at him long after he'd left her at the bar, the key in his pocket, his assurance given that he would kill for her.

He made frequent trips to the door that opened on the bar. He watched her conduct with Max. She was going all out all right. It was as if, having once given Max her promise, she now wanted all the world to know about it.

When closing time came Warren stepped to Camonille's side and peeked through the door with him. Max was ushering out the last of the night's customers, the Baxters. Vera sat at the bar, tapping her foot impatiently.

Max came back to the bar, went behind it, picked up the paper money the register contained, then said more loudly than seemed called for, "Ah, what the hell, the money'll be safe here. Let's go, honey."

Warren said nothing at the moment. But Camonille could feel that this was an odd thing for Max to have done. It didn't fit. Max was no school boy with his

first crush—even though he seemed to be behaving like one.

"Looks like Max is finally making some time with that broad," Warren said.

"Yeah," Camonille said and wondered what the whole thing meant.

Trying to outwait Warren didn't work. The man seemed perfectly content to sit in the kitchen and talk all night. It forced Camonille to say, "Think I'll get off my feet for a while, maybe take a nap."

"Sure, see you tomorrow." The cook went on slicing up some filet mignon he was preparing for himself.

The night was quiet. The crazy-stone steps between the roadhouse and the garage were as crooked as the plans that Camonille could sense were being made.

He knew now, as surely as though the whole thing had been explained to him, why Vera had been willing to pay him anything, any price at all; he knew, too, why she did not fear his blackmailing her. They had almost jockeyed him into it, too, he thought, and felt cold fingers on his spine.

She might want the old woman killed but she was no babe in the woods. The only man she'd trust was one who was in love

with her, Max. Max couldn't kill the woman either, for the police would suspect him immediately knowing he carried the torch for Vera. Camonille wondered idly if she had carried the pretense far enough to really have the five thousand dollars in her purse. The five grand that she had no



intention of ever paying him. It would ruin her plan if he held her up and stole the dough.

He was angry at first, then angry at himself for having almost allowed himself to be used as a cat's paw. They were so transparent, and yet he'd almost gone for it. He could see the blue-print they had prepared. He was to kill the mother-in-law, then Max would kill him. Warren was a witness that he, Camonille, had seen Max leave a lot of money in the cash register. What a set up! Once dead he'd be left in the bar room, the empty cash register and his loaded pockets proof that Max

had found him looting the till and had shot him down, as law-abiding citizens are entitled to do.

No wonder Vera had picked him up on the road, still less wonder that Max, good, old, open-hearted Max had given a stranger a job.

Suppose, he wondered, suppose he turned the plan upside down and stole the money from the bar first? No, Max was probably staked out somewhere, waiting to see that he left for Vera's house. That would just be common sense.

Suddenly he realized his get-away money was gone! The small amount that Max normally left in the till and which he had meant to steal was now out of his reach, now was part of a deadfall. He could not touch it without springing the trap.

The deadly strands that surrounded him tightened when he thought, if I don't make a move . . . if I don't go to Vera's and shoot the old woman, they'll have to come after me . . . kill me first, get my gun and then frame it backwards.

His time was running out. He had to get going.

The skin across the back of his shoulders tightened with fear. For all he knew Max was someplace in the darkness—waiting. There

was nothing in the garage that belonged to Camonille. He had his gun at his belly. With no more money in his pockets than he had arrived with, except for the useless half of the torn hundred-dollar bill, he walked off, away from the roadhouse, away from the spider web that had almost enmeshed him.

Might as well go in the general direction of Vera's house, that'd take the pressure off Max, keep him from acting.

As he walked away he wondered how long the plan had been set up, waiting, how many bums she had picked up, and tried out, how many had run away, or if he was the first.

Taut nerves pulled tighter still when he heard the garage door open behind him. Ahead was a bush, and darkness. He dove for it, his hand grabbing his gun as he landed on all fours in that shadowy momentary safety.

RED hair shining like a beacon, Jan called softly, "It's only me. Where are you going? I've been waiting and waiting for you."

The merry-go-round speeded up. Was there no way out? He was angry, impatient, scared, all

at once. Whispering, he called, "C'mere."

Joining him, waiting for him to get to his feet, her big eyes were round and wondering as she asked, "What's wrong? Did—? Oh, Larry! Has someone spotted you?"

He put his hand over her mouth, looked about him. No sign of Max. Behind them there were trees. He pulled the girl after him as he retreated, whispering angrily, "Keep your fool mouth shut. All I need now is to have someone else realize who I am and I might as well put a bullet in my head."

"I—I'm sorry. I thought we were alone. Why are we running away? Who's after you?"

"Maybe no one. And maybe someone—with a gun and the desire to use it."

He asked, "Do you have a car?"

"No. No, I don't."

"I need one, bad."

"Benny's maybe? It's an old jalopy, but he always leaves the key in it. I borrow it sometimes."

"It'll have to do until I put some distance between me and here."

"Until *we* put some distance. . . ." she said, her voice trailing away.

His hand tightened on the gun. "What do you mean?"

"Larry, you've got to do something for me."

"Got to?" His voice was sullen. The gun felt comforting.

"I—I—didn't mean that the way it sounded. It—it's just that I need help so badly."

She needed help, he sneered to himself. Larry Camonille, boy scout. He'd stick with her till they got the car.

The darkness kept him from seeing what she was going through as they made their blind way through the trees that would lead to the road.

"I must tell you something." She barely moved her lips as she spoke. He could almost feel the embarrassment, the shame, come from her in waves. "I'm an—" the word came hard—"epileptic."

He grunted.

"I can be cured." She said the words as though they were holy writ, the groundwork on which her life had been built. "And they won't let me be. They keep saying that our family doctor is doing all he can. . . . Well, maybe he is, but I can read, and I know in Chicago, or New York there are doctors who can help me, not let me gets fits the way my doctor does. There are drugs and treat-

ments that I can be given and I'm going to get them, no matter what."

"Who's they?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Baxter. I—" her voice was faltering again. "I didn't mean I'd tell the cops if you didn't help me. But when I recognized you in the candy store, and then went home and checked your face in the true detective magazines, made sure you were you, I meant to threaten you, force you to help me."

Her hand found his, twined around his fingers trustingly. There was an oddly appealing quality about her. Maybe it was just that they were two crooks, two sick ones—two of a kind.

"Look, Jan," he said slowly, "you know I'm hot. How can I help you?" Not that he was going to. But he was curious as to what she had in mind.

She paid no attention to his question, but went on as though speaking her thoughts aloud. "There's no risk—it's so easy. And really, it's not illegal. The money's mine."

She had led him to a house. Behind the house in the driveway was a car. She hadn't lied. It was beat up. But if it ran, it would fill the bill.

The house nearby was dark.

Getting into Benny's car he found that the key was in the ignition as she had said it would be. The brakes were on. The car was on a slight slope. If he eased off the brakes, maybe the car could coast out of earshot of the house. He was barely aware that she was in the seat next to him. All his attention was on stealing the car quietly.

The car slid silently down the drive. Out on the road, he flicked on the ignition and jazzed the motor. It hiccupped, stammered, but finally caught on. Once safely away from the house, Camonille brought his attention to bear on the girl.

"I'll drop you off at your house."

She shook her head no.

"Are you out of your mind? I'm as hot as a two-dollar pistol. You can't come with me."

"You don't know your way around here. I do. Listen to me and please don't argue. Take the next cutoff on the right. I know what I'm doing."

Pressing his belly against the waistband of his trousers, he debated again on whether or not to still her tongue forever, guarantee his safety.

If only she wasn't so pretty. . . . And so sick—like him.

SHE did not intrude herself as they drove through the darkness. Occasionally she'd tell him where to go, which fork of a road to take, but aside from that she was as busy with her secret thoughts as he. Her silence and the mechanics of driving were enough to lull his nerves back to normal.

He said, "I think we've gone far enough. There's no sign of anyone tailing us."

"There's a motel about five more miles along the road."

"Okay."

Crisp neon lines spelled out *Michohio* above some neat-looking cabins. He pulled into the place, pressed a button that had a little sign above it reading, *Night Bell*. The elderly man who opened the door, his pants held together with one hand, a registry book in the other, could not have been more incurious. Scrawling something that could have been Mr. and Mrs. Smathers, Camonille took the key the man offered him. The couple followed the old man to an open-doored cabin.

The interior was as neat as a pin. The old man showed them the facilities, sleepily said good night and left them.

Camonille washed up and

watched Jan in the mirror before him.

She said, "Just like newlyweds, isn't it?"

"I wasn't planning on a honeymoon," he answered dryly.

She unbuttoned her blouse and said, "Don't go away, I'll be right back."

Coming out of the bathroom she let her skirt drop to the floor and walked out of it. Clad in her bra, stockings and her brief pants, she walked towards him, her knees stiff like a model or a stripper.

She saw his face set in annoyance and said, "You're not mad at me are you?" She kissed him.

He said sharply, "Cut it out. This is no time for games. What's on your mind—besides a honeymoon?"

"You mean," her voice was husky, "you mean you'll help me?"

"I didn't say that. I just want to know what you're up to." The last woman who had wanted his help had needed a murder done. What did this one want?

Voice tiny with fear she told him. It was rather simple and had all the earmarks of another deadfall that would either kill him fast or slam him back into jail.

"I was left a lot of money," she began, "but Daddy trusted Mr. Baxter who was his lawyer. I guess he was a pretty good lawyer then or my father wouldn't have done what he did. Mr. Baxter is the executor of the will."

More last testaments, more dead hands trying to live on after death, Camonille thought.

"All the money will be mine in two more years when I'm twenty-one, but I need it now, not the little bit that he gives my 'aunt' to run the house and send me to school, but lots of money, enough to get me to a decent doctor and get me cured."

"How sure are you that you can be cured?"

"Not sure, really, but I read a lot and I've read about—" there was that pause again before she could say the word that labeled her, "epilepsy—and things that good doctors in good hospitals can do for people like me."

"And Baxter stalls you, tells you that the old country doc is plenty wise and knows just what's to be done?"

"Uh huh. The doctor's an old fool. All he does is mumble how they treated it when he was in medical school."

"You think Baxter's been dipping his fingers in the cash?"

"I do, that's the only reason I can see that he won't help. He was all ready to send me to New York—and then he married that—that—" her voice choked up—"woman he's married to."

"I don't see what I can do for you," he said flatly.

"Oh, but you can, you can! My inheritance is in bearer bonds and they're in a safety deposit box in Roxbury right near here in Michigan."

He asked, gently, "You mean all I gotta do is stick up a bank for you? You've got the wrong boy, honey. I never went on a heist like that in my life." No wonder Benny hadn't wanted any part of this.

"No, no. Look how easy it is. All you have to do is make Baxter open the safety deposit box. That's all. Bearer bonds can be cashed anywhere. They're as good as money."

"Just how do you think I'm going to make Baxter do this?"

The girl's hand went to the waistband of his trousers. She rested her hand on the gun there. "With this," she said.

"And after?"

"I'll split it with you, fifty-fifty. I don't care about all of it. All I'll need is enough to be cured."

"But you have no idea how much Baxter has left you."

"No," she said, "none at all. But there was a lot there originally, maybe fifty or sixty thousand dollars."

The whole thing depended on how much Baxter had swiped, if any. After all, thought Camonille, there was no proof that the lawyer had been stealing at all. If he had though, he'd have to go easy because he'd know that in two years he'd have to make it good. Unless—Camonille looked down at the girl's troubled face—unless the Baxters were not planning on Jan living that long. He wondered if epileptics live a normal life span. That might be why the lawyer was keeping Jan away from a decent doctor. Or maybe there was another reason why the lawyer had suddenly become a drunk. Perhaps he was trying to build himself up to killing the girl.

This was a pretty little rat race he'd stumbled into when he let Vera pick him up, Camonille thought wryly.

Aloud he said, "Then you think all I have to do is push a gun at Baxter, make him take me to the bank and then he'll calmly hand over the dough?"

"Don't you think it would

work?" The girl was astonished. "I thought if you let him see the gun, and then kept it in your pocket, threatening him with it, that he'd have to do what you wanted him to do."

"All depends on just how much I convince him that I'll shoot him." Camonille stopped. He had just spoken as if he was going along with the girl's insane plan.

"If you'll do it, if it works, I won't be a nuisance. I'll go away and leave you alone. You can go wherever you want to."

There was a new element here; her voice had some different emotion now. He said, "What do you mean you won't be a nuisance?"

"I mean just because I'm—in love with you—I won't try to hold onto you."

Grabbing her hair in both hands he looked down into her eyes. "You little creep! What do you know about love?"

She closed her eyes, would not look at him. "I don't care if you think I'm silly, but I *am* in love with you." He'd better, he thought, get away from her, he was becoming too aware of her. He leaned on the window sill looking out into the night, watching the neon light go on and off, on and off. . . .

He was aware of a rage build-

ing within him—a rage against the lawyer who was dooming this girl to sickness and perhaps death. He thought, I'll make that lousy punk pay. . . . I'll push my gun so deep, so deep in his belly he'll do anything I tell him to do.

Later, his last thought before he fell asleep was an odd one. Getting to Mexico by himself did not seem quite as perfect as it had up till then. After all, he thought sleepily, one is a lonely number . . . but two. . . . Two could be a different story.

8

THE next morning, they dawdled over coffee and eggs in the motel's restaurant. Enjoying his cigaret, Camonille said, "The dough's in a bank in Roxbury. Where's Baxter's office?"

"In the same place. He works in Roxbury and lives across the state line in Ohio. Lots of people do it."

He leaned back and considered the light on his cigaret. Refreshed by being away from the strangling atmosphere of cross purposes at Max's joint, it seemed possible once more that he was going to be able to make his own plans again. Of course dragging the girl along made a difference. Not

Mexico now, except as a way stop. He said, "If we can get some of the dough, and if you want to, you can go where you want to, get the medical attention you need—"

"What will you be doing, meanwhile?" Her eyes were worriedly chewing at him, drinking in his features, loving him, he saw with a start.

"Me? I'll beat my way down to Mexico, and then if I have some folding money make my way to the coast and grab a boat to Honduras or the Guianas. They don't worry about extradition down there, unless it's a murder rap you're wanted for."

"And then?" Her look did something to him, warmed up a part of him that he had thought cold and frozen for long years.

"And then, maybe you can join me. If you want to."

"I want to."

"Of course I'd only be able to stay there for a cooling-off period. It's too wet and muggy for a guy like me to live there. But in a little while I—we—could do down to one of the South American countries with mountains—where the air is clean and dry."

"Are you sick, too?" She was surprised.

He told her about the bacteria

that were eating up his only lung, and then they just sat and shared being with each other. The morning sun was high in the sky when he said, "But it all depends on my visit to Mr. Baxter, doesn't it, honey?"

Unwilling to break the mood they were in, she shivered a little and said after a long pause, "Yes, I guess so."

He rose and asked, "You sure Benny won't report his car as stolen?"

She shook her head. "I take it all the time. Of course he always bawls me out and says he'll call the cops but he never does."

"Not very likely any car thief would bother with that wreck at that."

She repeated Baxter's office address to him as he got in the car. She said, "Be careful, Larry—please."

"Buy some magazines, curl up in our cottage and I'll be back before you know what happened, with my pockets bulging."

He bent over the car door, kissed her on the top of her head, waved and drove away. Looking in the rear view mirror, he saw her standing, hands folded across her breasts, worry visible on her face. Then the road curved around and she was gone from

sight. When she was no longer visible some of the optimism that had buoyed him up drained away. Another town to face, another long chance that any alert eye would spot him, that he'd be picked up by the law, the hurdle in the shape of Baxter to be climbed.

Wouldn't it be smarter, he asked himself, to just keep on driving, switch cars, swipe the first one he could and just keep on going? Sure it would. He told himself that a hundred times, and all the while he never deviated from the road to Roxbury.

He drove through the outskirts, alert for Bainbridge Street which was his goal.

287 Bainbridge Street.

He slowed down the car and looked over the building. Five stories high, fairly recently built, with a women's clothing store on one side of it and a small movie theatre on the other, it was eminently respectable. As respectable as the school that nestled between two big buildings across the street.

Just as respectable as Baxter's office when he opened the door. A prim, once attractive, middle-aged woman wearing pince-nez looked up in some surprise when he asked for Mr. Baxter.

He was aware of her scrutiny, of the way her eyes, bitter blue behind the lenses of her glasses, took in his polo shirt, his battered slacks.

"Have you an appointment with Mr. Baxter?"

"Nope."

"Then I am afraid you cannot see him. He sees no one except by appointment."

Not arguing, he sat down on an over-upholstered chair and threw one leg over one of its arms. He lit a cigaret and said companionably as though prepared to stay all day if necessary, "Read any good books lately?"

She didn't snort, that wouldn't have been sufficiently ladylike, but she came as close to one as she could. She said, "Really, you can't just loiter here."

"Why not? For all you know Baxter may be sitting in there, panting, waiting to see me. I'd find out if I were you. Max sent me."

Even her back expressed how unlikely she thought this to be. She opened the door to the inner office just wide enough so that she could skitter through it and disappeared.

The door opened and he looked up questioningly. But it was not the secretary-receptionist who

came through the door. It was Mrs. Baxter. Seeing her this way, her face calm, without liquor or anger distorting it, she was really handsome. He let his eyes express their admiration for her blue-black hair that was still drawn back severely from her wide forehead, and for her ivory skin, a lot of which showed above the loose top of the peasant blouse which she wore. The arrogance with which she returned his stare, her startling blue eyes, startling because of her brunette coloring, all added up to a good reason why Baxter put up with her peculiarities.

She forced him to look away first. He rose when the prim, middle-aged woman opened the door and gestured for him to join her. As he walked through the door into the inner office he could feel Mrs. Baxter's eyes still on him.

It was hard to associate the man who sat behind the modern blond-wood desk, wearing clean linen, well-cut suit, shaved and powdered cheeks, his eyes coldly curious, with the drunken fool at the bar of Max's place.

Baxter asked, "What's up? What does Max Enders want?"

Camonille thought, this is the first time I ever heard Max's last

name. Enders. Aloud he said, "I hope you're not too busy today. I'm going to take up some of your time." While he spoke he edged around the big desk, made sure by a glance that the inter-office communicator was not on.

"Certainly I'm busy." Baxter was giving his clothes the up-and-down. He didn't seem to like what he saw. "Speak up, man, what is it?"

That was when Camonille brought the gun out of the waistband of his trousers.

All things considered, Baxter took it pretty well. There was a thin edge of alarm in his voice, but that was all. He said, "A holdup, eh?"

"In a way. Get your hat, we're going visiting."

Puzzled, the man obeyed.

Camonille said, as he put the gun in his trouser pocket, "This is going to be pointed right at your spine. Think about that before you get any fancy notions.

"Tell your secretary to go out and buy you a bottle of aspirins." Any guy that drank as much as Baxter did must need headache remedies often.

There was a click and Baxter spoke into the inter-office gadget. "Miss Elias? Will you call the police please?" His voice was so

confident that the move took Camonille by surprise. Baxter went on, "That's right, I'm being held up at gun's point."

That same gun point landed on the side of his forehead. He collapsed across the desk.

Camonille raced to the door, yanked it open and had his left hand over the secretary's mouth just as she spoke into the phone. "I want the pol—" She bit his hand and he was forced to pull her head back sharply to make her release her hold. Luckily, Camonille thought, there was no sign of Mrs. Baxter. He should be able to manage the woman and Baxter without too much trouble. He wiped the blood from his palm on the inside of his pocket and gestured with the gun.

"Get up."

The secretary obeyed.

As she did so he looked around the office. Two closet doors caught his eye. He pushed her ahead of him to the nearer one, the gun muzzle sunk in her back, and said, "Make it easy on yourself."

Pulling the closet door open, he began to worry about how long the lawyer would stay put. It hadn't been a hard rap and some people's skulls were pretty thick. A woman's plastic rain cape hung

in the closet. Camonille held the gun on the secretary with one hand and used the other to pick up the cape and grab it in his teeth. Shreds of plastic tore free as he pulled the cape away from his mouth.

He balled up one strip and pushed it into the woman's mouth, then used another section to tie around her head, holding the gag in place. Putting the gun back in his pocket he used both hands to tear off a longer strip. This he used to tie her hands behind her back. Only then did he push her into the closet and close the door. There was no lock on it, so he used one of the chairs as a prop beneath the door knob on the outside of the closet.

He rushed into the inner office just as Baxter sat up groggily and put his hands to his head. The lawyer moaned.

Camonille said, "If you're all through playing games, let's go."

"But where?"

"For a visit, Buster, and I'll do all the talking. My gun will be right here, see?" Camonille put it in his right pants pocket and let Baxter see his fist through the cloth. The gun butt felt reassuring as he marched behind the lawyer into the hall.

THEY went down the stairs to the street quietly. Standing in the doorway, a little flurry of people going by stopped Camonille. Pressing the muzzle of the gun into the small of Baxter's back he whispered, "Just in case you get frisky, I want you to know that not much more can happen to me than there is in the cards already. Keep that in mind before you try any more smart stuff. I've got nothing to lose by shooting a couple of holes in your backbone. Only you know how much you've got to lose."

Baxter said, "I get the point." He waited, then said, "But I still don't know where you want to go."

To anyone walking by, Camonille thought, they'd look like a pair of idlers, pausing in the shade before stepping into the blinding sunlight. Of course, they were rather ill-assorted; Baxter, extremely well dressed, he in a shirt and slacks, but it was mid-summer and lots of men were as casually dressed as he.

Camonille said, "We're going to pay a visit to the bank where Jan Bolling's father left her dough."

Baxter's spine stiffened.

"Get going," Camonille said.

On the street the two men walked alone, not side-by-side but with Baxter slightly ahead of Camonille, and to the right. That way his back was a constant target for the gun in Camonille's pocket. "How far do we have to go?" Camonille asked.

"Two blocks down and one to the right."

"Move a little faster, I haven't got all day." Camonille walked at Baxter's heels. His eyes darted from side to side, estimating, gauging the passersby. Was anyone paying attention to them? Not as far as he could see.

There was a bank building just ahead. The First National Bank of Roxbury.

The two men entered the cool rather dark place. Baxter waved to a bank guard who returned the salutation and said, "Hello, Mr. Baxter."

Baxter asked, "Where's Mr. Prince? I have to go down to the vault."

"I'll see if he's busy." The guard left them. Camonille tried to breathe deeply, rid himself of the tension that was making him too edgy.

The guard returned with the

man named Prince. Elderly, dry-faced, but with a rather pleasant smile, the man said, "What can I do for you, Mr. Baxter?"

Around them the business of the bank went on slowly.

"This is Mr. —" Baxter paused slightly, then manufactured a name, "Mr. Moore. He and I would like to go down to the safe deposit vault."

"Of course, Mr. Baxter. If you'll both just step this way, follow me," Prince said. The guard walked towards the door but was still within earshot.

Baxter said, "While we're here I'd like to have access to the Boling safe deposit box too."

Did the banker, Prince, pause slightly? He said, "Certainly, Mr. Baxter. Anything else we can do for you today?"

"I think that'll be all." Baxter was playing ball as far as Camonille could tell.

Prince led the way downstairs. After him came Baxter, then Camonille. They were down far enough so that Camonille could see the grey steel of the bank vault door, heavy and forbidding, the complicated works of the time clock mechanism, a design in shining brass and complex dials.

Prince touched one of the dials. Fear washed Camonille's mind

clean, left him standing flat-footed, completely unable to cope with what happened.

An alarm bell, loud as the crash of doom, was ringing, sounding throughout the bank and, Camonille knew, resounding in the nearest police department, summoning aid.

He whipped out the gun and slugged Baxter with all his strength. The man fell without a sound. But in the meanwhile Prince had jumped and ducked out of sight behind the vault door. No chance of getting him, nor time to do it.

Camonille whirled, went up the stairs two steps at a time.

The guard seemed as surprised



by the alarm bell as he had been. The man stood stupidly thirty feet away, near the door that lead to comparative freedom. Only when he saw Camonille, gun in hand, come into view, did his slack hand go to his pistol. But

it was in its holster and the flap was buttoned down. His fumbling gave Camonille time to race ten, fifteen feet closer to him. Around both men the people who had come to the bank in the normal course of their lives' daily routine stood shocked, faces almost ludicrous with amazement and fear.

The guard had his gun out now, but Camonille, skidding like a base runner feet first, hit the man in the shins. The guard toppled over backwards, his finger involuntarily tightening on the trigger of his gun. The sound of the shot, the clanging, maddeningly insistent alarm bell, all wove together in a nightmare pattern that drove Camonille to frenzy. Camonille cut the guard's face open with the sight in his gun, staggered to his feet and, as the guard moved and moaned, smashed the gun down on the man's temple. There was no further movement out of him.

Pausing for one swift look around, Camonille saw that the stunned spectators were incapable of movement. There was no menace to be feared from them.

He shoved the gun into his pocket and went through the bank door. Forcing himself to slow down, aware that the bell

was being heard out on the street, he turned as he left the bank entrance and looking back inside yelled at the people who were pausing on the street, "Help—Police—there's a hold-up gang in there! Guns—bullets—"

The small crowd edged back at the sound of his warning. Darting a look down the street, Camonille saw a cruising police car suddenly dart forward. They had either just heard the alarm bell or their shortwave radio had alerted them.

By the time the police drew up in front of the bank, Camonille was a block away. All attention was on the furor at the bank. People were streaming towards the center of attention, getting out of hurriedly parked cars, racing to see what was happening.

A key left in one of the parked cars caught Camonille's eye. Now was the time to swipe a car. To think was to act. It was a new car and it purred with suppressed power. Cutting away from the center of town, Camonille drove as fast as he could to the motel without attracting attention.

Even under the stress of his escape he was momentarily aware of what he thought was a car tailing him, but when he slowed down the car speeded up and

passed the motel as he drove into the entrance. The fact that the car continued right on going made Camonille dismiss it. Any cop would have come right after him. He'd been aware of the other car all the way from town, but it faded into the back of his mind as he saw Jan come running out of the cottage, her face alight with eagerness.

"You're all right!" she said, and it was a statement and a question at once. She came to the car and said, "I must have been crazy. You might have been killed! The money wasn't worth it."

"It sure wasn't, honey. I didn't get it. Everything blew up in my face."

The girl caught her breath, then said, "I don't care. You're safe and that's all that matters." She threw her arms around him as he got out of the car and almost sobbed, "All I could see while you were gone was you dead. . . ."

"Hop in the car," Camonille said as he saw the owner of the motel eyeing the new car. The old man remembered the old jalopy they'd driven into the motel; eyed the car that Camonille now had. Before his suspicion could become words, Camonille dragged the girl into the car.

She was next to him, and as they drove off the old man yelled, "My money—the rent—" His fury made him almost incoherent. "The police—I'll call them—"

Then the roar of the motor drowned him out and Camonille and the girl drove off into the distance.

9

WHEN THEY were out of sight of the motel, Camonille stopped the car, said, "You better drive for a while, honey. I'm no good."

She slid over him, got under the wheel and was smart enough not to say anything until he had leaned back, lit a cigaret and his hands had stopped shaking. Then she said, "Larry, what happened?"

He described what he had done, how he had shoved the secretary in the closet, forced Baxter to go to the bank . . . When he finished he said, "That's it. I don't know how or what blew the damn thing up, but I slipped somehow."

Heat waves shimmered on the empty road, then broke as a car appeared ahead of them. She said, "Larry, what bank did you go to?"

His fists clenched. Had it been that easy, that stupid? Had his big city background defeated

him? The fact that a town the size of Roxbury might have two or more banks had not even occurred to him. And Jan, knowing, had not thought to tell him. He said, "The First National."

The car in front stayed ahead of them. A few cars behind them idled along and occasionally one would pass them. But there was little traffic.

She said, "I never thought. It's the Federal Reserve that Dad's bonds are in."

So the tipoff had been that simple. It had come when Baxter had said that he wanted access to the Bolling safe-deposit box. The banker had known that Baxter would not make a mistake like that.

Camonille tried to laugh, but it came hard. "Funny, isn't it?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "Real funny. But, Larry, what do we do now?"

"Hide out, cool off, try again," Camonille said, just to have something to say. But he didn't really think he'd have the guts to try again. Not in Roxbury where any passerby might spot him. Not against Baxter who, now warned, would be constantly on the alert. "Do you know any safe place?"

She said, "I know of a lonely road deep in the woods."

He was beginning to worry. They were getting back nearer Max's place, and that car ahead was still poking along, still staying just in sight. He sat there, smoking, worrying. He did not even see the little cowpath that cut off from the road, but she saw it and drove down it. At last the other car was gone, Camonille thought. He was getting scatty. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing much outside of staying alive and out of jail. It had just been an accident that the other car had stayed ahead of them. That was all.

The cowpath turned, twisted and finally vanished. She said, "We may as well stop here."

He looked around them. The sun was past noon. The green of the foliage was almost blinding. They left the car under the trees, out of sight of the road. He lay down on the grass, collapsed almost, and he knew suddenly that he could not keep on pushing himself much more this way. The last week had been a far cry from the peace, quiet, rest, and good food that a doctor would demand for a guy in his condition, he thought. Food reminded him that they had not eaten since breakfast. He said, "Listen, Jan, if we can hold out till late tonight, I'll

knock off Max's cash register. Then we'll pick up another car and really get going. The thing is can you hold off on drinking and eating for another twelve hours or so?"

"Of course. Food is just about the last thing I'm interested in. And I'm not the least bit thirsty."

By nightfall she was sick with hunger and with thirst. The day had dragged dismally, taken for ever and ever. And when dark finally fell, there was no way of telling what time it was. Neither of them had a watch, and he wanted to be sure Max's was closed before he tackled it. That meant it would have to be two or three o'clock.

Now they sat in the stolen car and waited. He'd turned the radio on and off a hundred times. At first it would make the time go by faster, but then the eternal commercials got on his nerves so that he'd turn it off in anger. One news flash had said that four more of his fellow convicts had been picked up in a batch. They'd joined forces despite the advice he'd given them to split up. That left Vince Tornado still out. Vince and Larry Camonille. He brooded sullenly, aware that every passing minute made his time out of jail that much more precarious in-

stead of that much safer as he had hoped.

With Roxbury alerted, the word must surely have gone out that he was the one who'd gone into the bank. They'd throw the key away if they ever got him again. Of course, that was funny, because he wouldn't last long enough to serve a rap for spitting on the sidewalk.

She sat quietly next to him, her hand in his. In the silence of the night he could hear her stomach rumbling, wanting food.

Getting out of the car he picked up some pebbles and wiped them on his pants. "Open your mouth and close your eyes."

She did as he told her to, and he popped one of the pebbles into her mouth. He sucked on one, too, trying to manufacture some saliva. It worked a little.

He turned on the radio again and this time the police had allowed word to go out that the whole area around Roxbury had been cut off, that there was no chance that Larry Camonille . . . so they had recognized him! . . . could escape the road blocks covering every possible route.

She gasped when his name was spoken aloud by the radio announcer.

"Looks like we leave the car

here, honey," he spoke his thoughts aloud. "Our only chance now is on foot." He looked down at her. She was leaning back, her head against the back of the seat. "You'd better go home. No one wants you, no one's after you. You can get home without anyone ever knowing that you've been with me. It's your only chance now."

"Back to that house? Back to a paid housekeeper who despises me . . . back to Benny? How can I, Larry? You're the only thing I want."

Bickering made the time go faster. When the moon had descended far enough so that he was positive it must be after two o'clock, he got out of the car, kissed her and said, "No matter what you say, honey, tomorrow we split up and you go home."

That was if he ever returned from this jaunt. If he ran into Max, anything might happen. For all he knew Max might try to re-erect the frame that had failed the previous night.

Then pulling her out of the car he grabbed her to him, pressed her to his body so tightly that the breath was squeezed out of her. His hands pressed deep into her back, as though he was trying to make their two bodies one.

"Do you," she asked timorously, "love me just a little?"

He tried to be gay, released her, held his forefinger and thumb up under her nose, separated them about half an inch and said, "Just about this much."

It made her smile which was all he wanted to do. He walked away as she got back into the car. She waved to him happily as he looked back just before going around the clump of trees that hid the car from his view. Waving back he thought that this was just about the last thing he had ever bargained for, that now, of all times, he should fall in love.

Whatever road blocks there were, were not between the hide-away and Max Enders' joint. The place was dark and quiet. Camonille got down on his belly when he got within a hundred feet of the place and just waited.

He let at least fifteen minutes go by before he moved again. Then reassured that there was no one around, he got silently to his feet and went around to the back, to the kitchen door which he knew Warren rarely bothered to lock. Again he waited. Still complete and utter silence.

As he had hoped the door was unlocked. He entered the kitchen

and walked catfootedly to the door that led to the bar.

There was no one in sight. No sound broke the stillness. Making his way behind the bar he wondered just how loud the cash register would sound when he hit it. Pressing the "no sale" key, he found out. It seemed almost as loud as the alarm bell in the bank had. He cowered behind the cover of the bar and waited to see if the noise had attracted anyone's attention.

Quiet descended again and he pawed through the cash drawer. A lot of silver, perhaps ten or fifteen dollars' worth, a couple of five-dollar bills, a ten and a handful of ones were all scooped out and transferred to his waiting pocket.

He left as quietly as he had entered. It had seemed a long walk from where Jan and the car were to Max's place, but going back the distance seemed to shrink. It was amazing what a difference a little money made in the way he felt. As he walked down the cowpath towards the car he called out, "Jan—hey! It's me, with some loot for a change!"

There was no answer.

Worried, knowing the car was just around a bend ahead of him, he suddenly began to run. He

called again, louder now, "Jan! Answer me!"

Still no answer.

The car was just ahead, its outlines clear in the moonlight. But there was no feminine silhouette, no sign of Jan. Caution possessed him; he slowed down to a walk and, hand on gun, crept closer to the car. What the hell had gone wrong? Where could she have gone? Had she come to her senses and gone back home where she belonged, away from the ever-present danger which he represented?

He was next to the car now. Looking into the car's front seat he saw that Jan no longer needed protection. No one could ever hurt her again.

But she had been terribly hurt before death finally released her. The tire iron which someone had used to beat out her brains lay on the seat next to where she was but a crumpled heap. The two reds, those of her blood and her hair, were so intermingled that he could not look any longer. Her cheeks had been ripped by something sharp that had left tracks behind it.

He opened the car door, picked up her flaccid body, laid her gently to rest under a nearby tree.

Then there didn't seem to be anything else to do.

He sat down on the moss, next to her corpse, her cooling hand in his. Now he was done for. He had been neatly fitted for a frame. Larry Camonille would be wanted for a murder he had never committed.

He sat that way for a long, long time.

10

WHEN he rose, dawn was breaking and his body was almost as stiff as hers. He walked to the car and looked down at the stained front seat. Opening the door, he pulled out the seat, then he replaced it with the rear one. He lifted the bloodied seat and bringing it to where she lay, he placed her ruined head on it.

Then he got into the car and without a backward glance drove off.

Sorrow was washed away by black fury. He was now what Max and Vera had wanted him to be. A man with a gun and an all-consuming desire to use it.

Dark clouds covered the face of the rising sun. It began to spatter as he parked the car a few hundred feet from Benny Able's house.

Walking towards the back of the house, his hand on his gun, he was almost empty of emotions or plans. He was going to kill Benny. His tired mind could not see past that single objective.

He glanced around him as he neared the kitchen door. No one was in sight. Ducking under a window he moved closer to the door. He waited there silently for some fifteen minutes. He could hear a woman's voice inside, and Benny's. The kitchen door slammed and Camonille ducked behind a garbage can that supplied momentary cover. But he need not have worried. Benny, looking straight ahead, his youthful face careworn and haggard, came down the stairs and walked away from the house.

Camonille followed the unseeing figure that wandered aimlessly farther and farther away from the house.

When he was so close that he could hear Benny's breathing, the younger man suddenly realized with a start that he was being followed. Whirling, he gasped, "You!"

Taking the gun from his pocket, Camonille said flatly, "Yeah. Me."

"Where is she? Have you done anything to her?" Benny's face showed fear of the gun, but con-

cern for Jan seemed to be his paramount emotion.

"Me? Done anything to her? No."

"Then you don't know where she is either? I'd almost hoped she ran off with you, at least that way she'd be safe. Where can she be?"

"The same place you left her."

The words didn't seem to register. Benny said, "But if she's not with you, where can she be? She's never been gone this long before."

Finger tight on the trigger, Camonille considered just where he was going to put the first bullet.

"The same place *I* left her?" " his tone was full of delayed surprise. Benny asked, "What did you mean by that?"

"On the front seat of a car. With her brains splashed all over the place."

"What are you saying?"

Making the words as harsh as the bullets he intended to follow them with, Camonille described Jan's head.

White faced, his hands pressed against the sides of his face as though afraid he'd faint, Benny said, "No—no—it can't be. No one'd kill her—no one would want to—"

"No one in the whole world but you."

"Don't be ridiculous." Benny seemed suddenly more assured, more adult. He said, "Are you nuts? How could I kill her? Don't you understand, man, I love—loved her. . . . I couldn't hurt her. I couldn't."

If Benny had pleaded, if he had shown any fear, Camonille would have shot him in the guts. But the casual way he disregarded the gun, the way he discounted even the idea of the killing, was subtly convincing. Camonille let the gun droop in his hand. He said, "I almost believe you."

"You do believe me." Benny's voice was flat.

Camonille leaned back against a tree, lit a cigaret and told Benny where to find Jan. "Will you take care of her?"

"Of course," Benny said numbly, the true realization of death beginning to bite in. He tried to evince some interest in Camonille and asked, "But you? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find her murderer."

He walked slowly away. Behind him Benny squatted on his haunches like some primitive man, his face covered with his

hands, and as Camonille walked away he could hear the dry, racking sobs beginning.

A farm truck laden down with produce came by on the road. He didn't signal for a hitch but waited till it idled almost past him and then hitched on the back of it the way he'd done trolley cars when he was a kid. Laying back, not feeling the sharp edges of the boxes of lettuce that gouged into him, he ran over and over the events of the preceding days.

A sign on the road caught his eye. "Roxbury 5 Miles." Roxbury and the car that had tailed him and then preceded him. Whose was the anonymous face of the driver? Of course, there was no proof that the driver of the car had been interested in him . . . but if Benny had not killed Jan, and Camonille was convinced that the boy had not, then the car *had* to mean something.

It was a slender thread, but as he sat there he began to weave it together till it got thicker and thicker, stronger and stronger.

When the truck reached the outskirts of Roxbury he pushed some of the cases aside and hid behind and under them. It was a perilous cave under which he

hid, but it would have to suffice.

He put his faith in the hope that the police would be interested in cars leaving Roxbury, not those that were entering. He was right, too, for the road block inspection was most cursory. A uniformed trooper called out to the driver of the truck, "See anyone?"

The driver drawled back, "Nope."

And that was the end of the inspection. The truck drove on. Through the lattice-work of the cases Camonille could look back and watch as the police really searched a parked line of cars that pointed the other way, out of Roxbury.

When the truck was in mid-town, in the business section, Camonille hurriedly removed a binding rope that held the cases of produce in place, and pushed one case to the tail of the truck. When the truck paused for a light, he dropped off the back of it and pulled the case onto his shoulder. Looking, acting, and dressed like a truck employee, he walked off as though delivering the case.

He made his way to the alley beside the building which housed Baxter's office.

TURNING up the vegetable crate on its end he climbed onto it. This meant that by extending his arms he could grab the iron ladder that came down from the fire-escape. He gasped with strain as he managed to work his feet on the rungs. Then he hurried up the ladder to the first platform. Only then did he take time out to look behind him. He had not been spotted.

He kept as close to the face of the building as he could as he went up so that the chance of anyone in the building looking out a window and seeing him was made smaller; he hurried up the set of iron stairs. There was no guarantee, he thought, as he went higher, that the fire-escape would happen to be at one of Baxter's windows. When he got to Baxter's floor, he saw that luck of a sort was with him. The window opened on the reception room. He kept to one side of the open window and listened.

He could hear the middle-aged secretary's voice saying, evidently into the phone, "Well, the doctor says he's doing as well as can be expected. That was a terrible blow he received. No, he has not been able to determine what

made that horrible man Camonille do it. I think the man is crazy. He should be shot down like a mad dog."

Her voice paused, then she said, "What? No, no indeed, he can't think of any reason at all for the attack or for Camonille making him go to the First National Bank. No, our firm has always done most of its business with the Federal Reserve.

"Well, really, I think that if you newspapermen want to know that you should call Mr. Baxter at his home. Yes, his wife is at his side constantly."

That ended the conversation and most of Camonille's hopes. So he'd cold cocked Baxter so badly that the man was in bed. Therefore he could not have been the driver of the car—but if not Baxter, then who? Who had killed Jan?

Camonille moved swiftly through the window and threw his arms around the secretary's neck.

A suffocated strangling moan was the only sound that escaped her before his hands cut off any chance of her making a noise loud enough to attract help.

His voice deadly low, he said, "This is Camonille. The mad dog. The crazy man."

Body frozen with fear she stopped her futile struggling.

He said, "Who let you out of that closet yesterday?" Relaxing his hold on her neck slightly he moved one hand up till it was over her mouth. Then with his other hand behind her head so that he could instantly stifle any screams, he dropped the hand from her mouth a trifle. As he did he whispered, "One scream, and you're dead."

She moaned.

Repeating himself, he asked with quiet ferocity, "Who let you out of the closet?"

"Mrs. Baxter." The woman could barely make her words heard.

"How come she was around?" Hands tense, ready at the slightest sign to throttle her, he waited.

"Wh—when we heard Mr. Baxter say you were holding him up, when his voice sounded on the inter-office com, she darted into that closet." The woman's shaking finger pointed at the second closet.

"As soon as you and Mr. Baxter left, she came out of the closet, released me and left. That's all I know, believe me. Please believe me!"

"I do. Stop squealing."

Now he knew. Now the any-

mous face behind the driver's wheel had features. The hard, handsome face of Mrs. Baxter. This was the face of death. And he should have known it immediately. Should have known when he saw the jagged cuts that ran down Jan's face, those tracks so like the ones he had seen Mrs. Baxter inflict on her husband's face with her pocketbook. She must have worked herself up into a fury, slashing at Jan before she finally used the tire iron. Camonille took out his gun and using it as a prod, shoved the woman into the closet. The torn pieces of plastic rain cape were still there. He used them again.

He had just closed the closet door on the woman when the phone rang. He let it ring. After all it was the lunch hour and no one would be alarmed if the secretary didn't answer it. He slumped into a chair and made plans. He couldn't risk the streets. The road block would surely get him this time. That left only one way he could work it. Rising, he thumbed through an office telephone book. Mrs. Baxter had only heard his voice for a few seconds. It was a risk but one he must take.

Going to the secretary's desk, he opened one of the drawers. He

put some paper clips under his tongue and spoke aloud experimentally. He couldn't tell how much it disguised his tone.

The blood pounded in his temples when he heard her say, "Hello, who is it, please?"

"Lieutenant Campion. Mrs. Baxter, we think we've got Camonille."

A gasp.

He said, "Can you come down to your husband's office? There's been a little trouble and we want you to identify Camonille's body."

"He's dead?" She could not keep the jubilation from her voice, but then why should she? Camonille had attacked her husband. Of course she'd have a right to be happy that he had been killed. But he knew that she was happy on two counts.

With Jan dead and Camonille dead, the Baxters could stall as long as they wanted to. He knew that most Probate Courts were terrifically busy; that it takes months, sometimes years to probate a will. Now, Camonille thought, the Baxters would think they could relax and enjoy Jan's money.

Mrs. Baxter said crisply, "I'll be right down. It shouldn't take me more than twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes.

Camonille walked around the office not nervously, but with mounting anger. She'd hidden in the closet, waited till Baxter and he left, then followed them. She'd waited outside the bank in a car, and then it had been easy to tail him. Tail them, and then—kill Jan.

He stood at one of the windows that faced the street. Across the street from the office building was the school. Some high-sounding, fine words were chiseled across the front of it—words to live by. Camonille's lips fluttered derisively. He looked down into the street.

The air around him seemed to become solid. On the street he could see police cars driving up. They were staking out the whole block!

Damn and blast the woman to hell! She'd had enough brains to check with the cops, or she had recognized his voice after she'd hung up.

His body shook with fury. He rocked back and forth on his heels trying to think his way out.

He was out the window and halfway down the fire-escape when his brain again began to work to some avail. He'd followed his first impulse, which was to get

out of the office. But now what? The police hadn't yet filed into the alley, but they must be near. He was almost at the end of his rope. His driven body was not going to be of use much longer.

He dropped off the iron ladder and landed flat-footed in the alley near the vegetable crate that had come in so handy earlier. Picking it up, holding it on his right shoulder so that he could support it partially by his shoulder, partially by his right hand, he reached across his face with his left hand and steadied the crate. Then he was prepared to step out of the alley.

His left arm masked his nose, his mouth and his chin. Eyes alert, he stepped from the shadow of the alley into the street.

No cars drove down the street. The police had prevented that.

Across the street was the school. And on the steps of the school, her face alive with pleasure, with impatience and calculation, stood Mrs. Baxter. A big, black pocket-book, its patent leather shining, like her hair, hung from her arm. The car, the one that she had tailed him in, was parked in front of the school.

Slowly, like an automaton, he started across the pavement. No one paid him any attention till he

stepped off the curb into the gutter. Then a cop yelled, "Hey, stupid! Get outta there!"

Paying no attention, acting like a dumb delivery boy, he walked on. He was halfway across the street now. It was quiet. He was the only one moving now that the detectives were inside the office building. The policeman was in a quandary. Camonille could see that. The cop knew he must not make any sound that might tip off the man the police thought was waiting like a trapped rat in the office building.

The cop began to run down the street towards the man with the crate on his shoulder.

On the steps of the school Mrs. Baxter turned and saw the running policeman, the man in the dirty slacks and the polo shirt with the crate on his shoulder. At first she just glanced incuriously at and away from Camonille, but then her eyes snapped back towards him and they opened in recognition, and then fear.

She was perhaps twenty feet from him, Camonille judged, and the cop was over fifty feet away.

That was when she screamed to the cop, "That's him! The man you want, Camonille!"

It was too much for the police-

man to absorb. The man's mind was set, he thought Camonille was in the office.

And by that time Camonille had dropped the crate from his shoulder. The wooden slats broke and balls of green lettuce rolled around his feet. Stepping over them he walked towards the woman. Her face was rigid with fear now. Her fumbling hand was busy opening the big pocket-book. He wondered if it was the one that had ripped Jan's cheeks.

Camonille saw her take a gun out of the handbag.

The sight of the gun was another unexpected quantity to the cop; it divided his attention.

When she saw that Camonille did not stop his deadly slow walk towards her at the sight of the gun, she pulled the trigger. But her aim was bad.

Camonille walked closer to her and so far his hand had not even gone near his gun.

Behind him the cop resolved his indecision by suddenly blowing a blast on his whistle.

The woman suddenly ducked into the darkness of the school.

Behind him, as he followed her, Camonille could hear the sounds of pursuit.

Inside the school it was comparatively quiet.

For a second he stood stock still, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness. As he spotted her, she ducked behind a desk in the reception office.

That was when Camonille drew his gun.

Then he shot her.

The shot could not kill her because her head and most of her body was behind the desk. But her shoulder projected out from behind it and that was where the bullet hit her. She screamed.

The force of the bullet thrust her away from her partial cover, twisted her body so that she spun away from the desk.

Twisting, she fell forward on her hands and knees. The gun shone in her hand until it fell on the floor. He shot her again.

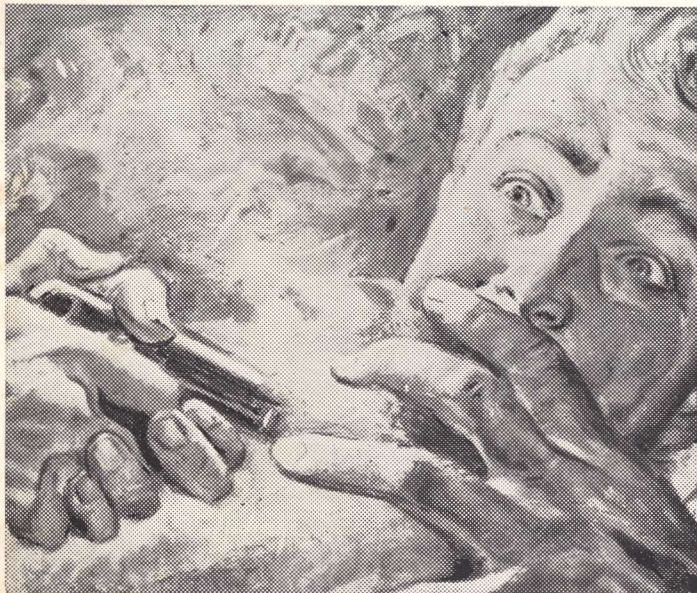
Behind him he could hear the scuffle of many feet. He faced the cops. He held his gun so that they would think he was menacing them. He fired high so that he'd miss.

The sound of his gun was drowned out by the answers from the police.

Stumbling, his body crashed forward, rolled over and over down the steps of the school. And as his body rolled downwards the police, taking no chances, shot him in the head.

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