

MANHUNT

DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

A detailed illustration of a woman with blonde, curly hair lying on her back, wearing a red dress. Her eyes are closed, and her expression is serene. Two hands are placed on her back, one near her shoulders and the other lower down. The background is dark and textured.

"FIRST OFFENSE" by
EVAN HUNTER
author of
"BLACKBOARD JUNGLE"

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The kid felt pretty good. He was big time, now — he was even slated for the police lineup.

First Offense

BY
EVAN HUNTER

A Novelette

HE SAT in the police van with the collar of his leather jacket turned up, the bright silver studs sharp against the otherwise unrelieved black. He was seventeen years old, and he wore his hair in a high black crown. He carried his head high and erect because he knew he had a good profile, and he carried his mouth like a switch knife, ready to spring open at the slightest provocation. His hands were thrust deep into the jacket pockets, and his grey eyes reflected the walls of the van. There was excitement in his eyes, too, an almost holiday excitement. He tried to tell himself he was in trouble, but he couldn't quite believe it. His gradual descent to disbelief had been a spiral that had spun dizzily through the range of his emotions. Terror when the cop's flash had picked him out; blind



panic when he'd started to run; rebellion when the cop's firm hand had closed around the leather sleeve of his jacket; sullen resignation when the cop had thrown him into the RMP car; and then cocky stubbornness when they'd booked him at the local precinct.

The desk sergeant had looked him over curiously, with a strange aloofness in his Irish eyes.

"What's the matter, Fatty?" he'd asked.

The Sergeant stared at him implacably. "Put him away for the night," the Sergeant said.

He'd slept overnight in the precinct cell block, and he'd awakened with this strange excitement pulsing through his narrow body, and it was the excitement that had caused his disbelief. Trouble, hell! He'd been in trouble before, but it had never felt like this. This was different. This was a ball, man. This was like being initiated into a secret society someplace. His contempt for the police had grown when they refused him the opportunity to shave after breakfast. He was only seventeen, but he had a fairly decent beard, and a man should be allowed to shave in the morning, what the hell! But even the beard had somehow lent to the unreality of the situation, made him appear—in his own eyes—somehow more desperate, more sinister-looking. He knew he was in trouble, but the trouble was glamorous, and he surrounded it with the gossamer lie of make-believe. He was

living the story-book legend. He was big time now. They'd caught him and booked him, and he should have been scared but he was excited instead.

There was one other person in the van with him, a guy who'd spent the night in the cellblock, too. The guy was an obvious bum, and his breath stank of cheap wine, but he was better than nobody to talk to.

"Hey!" he said.

The bum looked up. "You talking to me?"

"Yeah. Where we going?"

"The lineup, kid," the bum said. "This your first offense?"

"This's the first time I got caught," he answered cockily.

"All felonies go to the lineup," the bum told him. "And also some special types of misdemeanors. You commit a felony?"

"Yeah," he said, hoping he sounded nonchalant. What'd they have this bum in for anyway? Sleeping on a park bench?

"Well, that's why you're going to the lineup. They have guys from every detective squad in the city there, to look you over. So they'll remember you next time. They put you on a stage, and they read off the offense, and the Chief of Detectives starts firing questions at you. What's your name, kid?"

"What's it to you?"

"Don't get smart, punk, or I'll break your arm," the bum said.

He looked at the bum curiously. He was a pretty big guy, with a

heavy growth of beard, and powerful shoulders. "My name's Stevie," he said.

"I'm Jim Skinner," the bum said. "When somebody's trying to give you advice, don't go hip on him."

"Yeah. Well, what's your advice?" he asked, not wanting to back down completely.

"When they get you up there, you don't have to answer anything. They'll throw questions, but you don't have to answer. Did you make a statement at the scene?"

"No," he answered.

"Good. Then don't make no statement now, either. They can't force you to. Just keep your mouth shut, and don't tell them nothing."

"I ain't afraid. They know all about it anyway," Stevie said.

The bum shrugged. Stevie sat in the van whistling, listening to the accompanying hum of the tires, hearing the secret hum of his blood beneath the other louder sound. He sat at the core of a self-imposed importance, basking in its warm glow, whistling contentedly, secretly happy. Beside him, Skinner leaned back against the wall of the van.

2.

When they arrived at the Center Street Headquarters, they put them in detention cells, awaiting the lineup which began at nine. At ten minutes to nine, they led him out of his cell, and a cop took him into the special prisoner's elevator.

"How's it feel being an elevator boy?" he asked the cop.

The cop didn't answer him. They went upstairs to the big room where the lineup was being held. A detective in front of them was pinning on his shield so he could get past the cop at the desk. They crossed the large gymnasium-like compartment, walking past the men sitting in folded chairs before the stage.

"Get a nice turnout, don't you?" Stevie said.

"You ever tried vaudeville?" the cop answered.

The blinds in the room had not been drawn yet, and Stevie could see everything clearly. The stage itself with the permanently fixed microphone hanging from a narrow metal tube above; the height markers — four feet, five feet, six feet — behind the mike on the wide white wall. The men in the seats, he knew, were all detectives and his sense of importance suddenly flared again when he realized these bulls had come from all over the city just to look at him. Behind the bulls was a raised platform with a sort of lecturer's stand on it. A microphone rested on the stand, and a chair was behind it, and he assumed this was where the Chief bull would sit. There were uniformed cops stationed here and there around the room, and there was one man in civilian clothing who sat at a desk in front of the stage.

"Who's that?" Stevie asked.

"Police stenographer," the cop

answered. "He's going to take down your words for posterity."

They walked behind the stage, and Stevie watched as other felony offenders from all over the city joined them. There was one woman, but all the rest were men, and he studied their faces carefully, hoping to pick up some tricks from them, hoping to learn the subtlety of their expressions. They didn't look like much. He was better-looking than all of them, and the knowledge pleased him. He'd be the star of this little shindig. The cop who'd been with him moved over to talk to a big broad who was obviously a policewoman. Stevie looked around, spotting Skinner and walking over to him.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"They'll pull the shades in a few minutes," Skinner said. "Then they'll turn on the spots and start the lineup. The spots won't blind you, but you won't be able to see the faces of any of the bulls out there."

"Who wants to see them mugs?" Stevie asked.

Skinner shrugged. "When your case is called, your arresting officer goes back and stands near the Chief of Detectives, just in case the Chief needs more dope from him. The Chief'll read off your name and the borough where you was pinched. A number'll follow the borough. Like he'll say 'Manhattan one' or 'Manhattan two.' That's just the number of the case from that borough. You're first, you get number one."

"Yeah," Stevie said.

"He'll tell the bulls what they got you on, and then he'll say either 'Statement' or 'No statement.' If you made a statement, chances are he won't ask many questions 'cause he won't want you to contradict anything damaging you already said. If there's no statement, he'll fire questions like a machine gun. But you don't have to answer nothing."

"Then what?"

"When he's through, you go downstairs to get mugged and printed. Then they take you over to the Criminal Courts Building for arraignment."

"They're gonna take my picture, huh?" Stevie asked.

"Yeah."

"You think there'll be reporters here?"

"Huh?"

"Reporters."

"Oh. Maybe. All the wire services hang out in a room across the street from where the vans pulled up. They got their own police radio in there, and they get the straight dope as soon as it's happening, in case they want to roll with it. There may be some reporters." Skinner paused. "Why? What'd you do?"

"It ain't so much what I done," Stevie said. "I was just wondering if we'd make the papers."

Skinner stared at him curiously. "You're all charged up, ain't you, Stevie?"

"Hell, no. Don't you think I know I'm in trouble?"

"Maybe you don't know just how much trouble," Skinner said.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"This ain't as exciting as you think, kid. Take my word for it."

"Sure, you know all about it."

"I been around a little," Skinner said drily.

"Sure, on park benches all over the country. I know I'm in trouble, don't worry."

"You kill anybody?"

"No," Stevie said.

"Assault?"

Stevie didn't answer.

"Whatever you done," Skinner advised, "and no matter how long you been doing it before they caught you, make like it's your first time. Tell them you done it, and then say you don't know why you done it, but you'll never do it again. It might help you, kid. You might get off with a suspended sentence."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. And then keep your nose clean afterwards, and you'll be okay."

"Keep my nose clean! Don't make me laugh, pal."

Skinner clutched Stevie's arm in a tight grip. "Kid, don't be a damn fool. If you can get out, get out now! I could of got out a hundred times, and I'm still with it, and it's no picnic. Get out before you get started."

Stevie shook off Skinner's hand. "Come on, will you?" he said, annoyed.

"Knock it off there," the cop said.

"We're ready to start."

"Take a look at your neighbors, kid," Skinner whispered. "Take a hard look. And then get out of it while you still can."

Stevie grimaced and turned away from Skinner. Skinner whirled him around to face him again, and there was a pleading desperation on the unshaven face, a mute reaching in the red-rimmed eyes before he spoke again. "Kid," he said, "listen to me. Take my advice. I've been . . ."

"Knock it off!" the cop warned again.

He was suddenly aware of the fact that the shades had been drawn and the room was dim. It was very quiet out there, and he hoped they would take him first. The excitement had risen to an almost fever pitch inside him, and he couldn't wait to get on that stage. What the hell was Skinner talking about anyway? *Take a look at your neighbors, kid.* The poor jerk probably had a wet brain. What the hell did the police bother with old drunks for, anyway?

3.

A uniformed cop led one of the men from behind the stage, and Stevie moved a little to his left, so that he could see the stage, hoping none of the cops would shove him back where he wouldn't have a good view. His cop and the policewoman were still talking, paying no attention to him. He smiled, unaware that the smile developed as a smirk,

and watched the first man mounting the steps to the stage.

The man's eyes were very small, and he kept blinking them, blinking them. He was bald at the back of his head, and he was wearing a Navy peacoat and dark tweed trousers, and his eyes were red-rimmed and sleepy-looking. He reached to the five-foot-six-inches marker on the wall behind him, and he stared out at the bulls, blinking.

"Assisi," the Chief of Detectives said, "Augustus, Manhattan one. 33 years old. Picked up in a bar on 43rd and Broadway, carrying a .45 Colt automatic. No statement. How about it, Gus?"

"How about what?" Assisi asked.

"Were you carrying a gun?"

"Yes, I was carrying a gun." Assisi seemed to realize his shoulders were slumped. He pulled them back suddenly, standing erect.

"Where, Gus?"

"In my pocket."

"What were you doing with the gun, Gus?"

"I was just carrying it."

"Why?"

"Listen, I'm not going to answer any questions," Assisi said. "You're gonna put me through a third-degree, I ain't answering nothing. I want a lawyer."

"You'll get plenty opportunity to have a lawyer," the Chief of Detectives said. "And nobody's giving you a third degree. We just want to know what you were doing with a gun."

"I've got a permit for the gun," Assisi said.

"We checked with Pistol Permits, and they say no. This is a Navy gun, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"I said yeah, it's a Navy gun."

"What were you doing with it? Why were you carrying it around?"

"I like guns."

"Why?"

"Why what? Why do I like guns? Because . . ."

"Why were you carrying it around?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you must have a reason for carrying a loaded .45. The gun *was* loaded, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was loaded."

"You have any other guns?"

"No."

"We found a .38 in your room. How about that one?"

"It's no good."

"What?"

"The .38."

"What do you mean, no good?"

"The firing mechanism is busted."

"You want a gun that works, is that it?"

"I didn't say that."

"You said the .38's no good because it won't fire, didn't you?"

"Well, what good's a gun that won't fire?"

"Why do you need a gun that fires?"

"I was just carrying it. I didn't shoot anybody, did I?"

"No, no you didn't. Were you planning on shooting somebody?"

"Sure," Assisi said. "That's just what I was planning."

"Who?"

"I don't know," Assisi said sarcastically. "Anybody. The first guy I saw, all right. Everybody, all right. I was planning on wholesale murder."

"Not murder, maybe, but a little larceny, huh?"

"Murder," Assisi insisted, in his stride now. "I was just going to shoot up the whole town. Okay? You happy now?"

"Where'd you get the gun?"

"In the Navy."

"Where?"

"From my ship."

"It's a stolen gun?"

"No, I found it."

"You stole government property, is that it?"

"I found it."

"When'd you get out of the Navy?"

"Three months ago."

"You worked since?"

"No."

"Where were you discharged?"

"Pensacola."

"Is that where you stole the gun?"

"I didn't steal it."

"Why'd you leave the Navy?"

Assisi hesitated for a long time.

"Why'd you leave the Navy?" the Chief of Detectives asked again.

"They kicked me out!" Assisi snapped.

"Why?"

"I was undesirable!" he shouted.

"Why?"

Assisi did not answer.

"Why?"

There was silence in the darkened room. Stevie watched Assisi's face, the twitching mouth, the blinking eyelids.

"Next case," the Chief of Detectives said.

Stevie watched as Assisi walked across the stage and down the steps on the other side, where the uniformed cop met him. He'd handled himself well, Assisi had. They'd rattled him a little at the end there, but on the whole he'd done a good job. So the guy was lugging a gun around, so what? He was right, wasn't he? He didn't shoot nobody, so what was all the fuss about? Cops! They had nothing else to do, they went around hauling in guys who were carrying guns. Poor bastard was a veteran, too, that was really rubbing it in. But he did a good job up there, even though he was nervous, you could see he was very nervous.

4.

A man and a woman walked past him and onto the stage. The man was very tall, topping the six-foot marker. The woman was shorter, a bleached blonde turning to fat.

"They picked them up together," Skinner whispered. "So they show them together. They figure a pair'll

always work as a pair, usually."

"How'd you like that Assisi?" Stevie whispered back. "He really had them bulls on the run, didn't he?"

Skinner didn't answer. The Chief of Detectives cleared his throat.

"MacGregor, Peter, aged 45, and Anderson, Marcia, aged 42, Bronx one. Got them in a parked car on the Grand Concourse. Back seat of the car was loaded with goods including luggage, a typewriter, a portable sewing machine, and a fur coat. No statements. What about all that stuff, Peter?"

"It's mine."

"The fur coat, too."

"No, that's Marcia's."

"You're not married, are you?"

"No."

"Living together?"

"Well, you know," Pete said.

"What about the stuff?" the Chief of Detectives said again.

"I told you," Pete said. "It's ours."

"What was it doing in the car?"

"Oh. Well, we were . . . uh . . ."

The man paused for a long time.

"We were going on a trip."

"Where to?"

"Where? Oh. To . . . uh . . ."

Again he paused, frowning, and Stevie smiled, thinking what a clown this guy was. This guy was better than a sideshow at Coney. This guy couldn't tell a lie without having to think about it for an hour. And the dumpy broad with him was a hot sketch, too. This act alone was

worth the price of admission.

"Uh . . ." Pete said, still fumbling for words. "Uh . . . we were going to . . . uh . . . Denver."

"What for?"

"Oh, just a little pleasure trip, you know," he said, attempting a smile.

"How much money were you carrying when we picked you up?"

"Forty dollars."

"You were going to Denver on forty dollars?"

"Well, it was fifty dollars. Yeah, it was more like fifty dollars."

"Come on, Pete, what were you doing with all that stuff in the car?"

"I told you. We were taking a trip."

"With a sewing machine, huh? You do a lot of sewing, Pete?"

"Marcia does."

"That right, Marcia?"

The blonde spoke in a high reedy voice. "Yeah, I do a lot of sewing."

"That fur coat, Marcia. Is it yours?"

"Sure."

"It has the initials G. D. on the lining. Those aren't your initials, are they, Marcia?"

"No."

"Whose are they?"

"Search me. We bought that coat in a hock shop."

"Where?"

"Myrtle Avenue, Brooklyn. You know where that is?"

"Yes, I know where it is. What about that luggage? It had initials on it, too. And they weren't yours

or Pete's. How about it?"

"We got that in a hockshop, too."

"And the typewriter?"

"That's Pete's."

"Are you a typist, Pete?"

"Well, I fool around a little, you know."

"We're going to check all this stuff against our Stolen Goods list, you know that, don't you?"

"We got all that stuff in hock shops," Pete said. "If it's stolen, we don't know nothing about it."

"Were you going to Denver with him, Marcia?"

"Oh, sure."

"When did you both decide to go? A few minutes ago?"

"We decided last week sometime."

"Were you going to Denver by way of the Grand Concourse?"

"Huh?" Pete said.

"Your car was parked on the Grand Concourse. What were you doing there with a carload of stolen goods?"

"It wasn't stolen," Pete said.

"We were on our way to Yonkers," the woman said.

"I thought you were going to Denver."

"Yeah, but we had to get the car fixed first. There was something wrong with the . . ." She paused, turning to Pete. "What was it, Pete? That thing that was wrong?"

Pete waited a long time before answering. "Uh . . . the . . . uh . . . the flywheel, yeah. There's a garage

up in Yonkers fixes them good, we heard. Flywheels, I mean."

"If you were going to Yonkers, why were you parked on the Concourse?"

"Well, we were having an argument."

"What kind of an argument?"

"Not an argument, really. Just a discussion, sort of."

"About what?"

"About what to eat."

"What!"

"About what to eat. I wanted to eat Chink's, but Marcia wanted a glass of milk and a piece of pie. So we were trying to decide whether we should go to the Chink's or the cafeteria. That's why we were parked on the Concourse."

"We found a wallet in your coat, Pete. It wasn't yours, was it?"

"No."

"Whose was it?"

"I don't know." He paused, then added hastily, "There wasn't no money in it."

"No, but there was identification. A Mr. Simon Granger. Where'd you get it, Pete?"

"I found it in the subway. There wasn't no money in it."

"Did you find all that other stuff in the subway, too?"

"No, sir, I bought that." He paused. "I was going to return the wallet, but I forgot to stick it in the mail."

"Too busy planning for the Denver trip, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"When's the last time you earned an honest dollar, Pete?"

Pete grinned. "Oh, about two, three years ago, I guess."

"Here're their records," the Chief of Detectives said. "Marcia, 1938, Sullivan Law; 1939, Concealing Birth of Issue; 1940, Possession of Narcotics . . . you still on the stuff, Marcia?"

"No."

"1942, Sullivan Law again; 1943, Narcotics again; 1947 . . . you had enough, Marcia?"

Marcia didn't answer.

"Pete," the Chief of Detectives said, "1940, attempted rape; 1941, Selective Service Act; 1942, assault and battery; 1943, attempted burglary; 1945, Living on Proceeds of Prostitution; 1947, assault and battery, did two years at Ossining."

"I never done no time," Pete said.

"According to this, you did."

"I never done no time," he insisted.

"1950," the Chief of Detectives went on, "Carnal Abuse of a Child." He paused. "Want to tell us about that one, Pete?"

"I . . . uh . . ." Pete swallowed. "I got nothing to say."

"You're ashamed of *some* things, that it?"

Pete didn't answer.

"Get them out of here," the Chief of Detectives said.

"See how long he kept them up there?" Skinner whispered. "He knows what they are, wants every

bull in the city to recognize them if they . . ."

"Come on," a detective said, taking Skinner's arm.

5.

Stevie watched as Skinner climbed the steps to the stage. Those two had really been something, all right. And just looking at them, you'd knever know they were such operators. You'd never know they . . .

"Skinner, James, Manhattan two. Aged fifty-one. Threw a garbage can through the plate glass window of a clothing shop on Third Avenue. Arresting officer found him inside the shop with a bundle of overcoats. No statement. That right, James?"

"I don't remember," Skinner said.

"Is it, or isn't it?"

"All I remember is waking up in jail this morning."

"You don't remember throwing that ashcan through the window?"

"No, sir."

"You don't remember taking those overcoats?"

"No, sir."

"Well, you must have done it, don't you think? The off-duty detective found you inside the store with the coats in your arms."

"I got only his word for that, sir."

"Well, his word is pretty good. Especially since he found you inside the store with your arms full of merchandise."

"I don't remember, sir."

"You've been here before, haven't you?"

"I don't remember, sir."

"What do you do for a living, James?"

"I'm unemployed, sir."

"When's the last time you worked?"

"I don't remember, sir."

"You don't remember much of anything, do you?"

"I have a poor memory, sir."

"Maybe the record has a better memory than you, James," the Chief of Detectives said.

"Maybe so, sir. I couldn't say."

"I hardly know where to start, James. You haven't been exactly an ideal citizen."

"Haven't I, sir?"

"Here's as good a place as any. 1948, assault and robbery; 1949, indecent exposure; 1951, burglary; 1952, assault and robbery again. You're quite a guy, aren't you, James?"

"If you say so, sir."

"I say so. Now how about that store?"

"I don't remember anything about a store, sir."

"Why'd you break into it?"

"I don't remember breaking into any store, sir."

"Hey, what's this?" the Chief of Detectives said suddenly.

"Sir?"

"Maybe we should've started back a little further, huh, James? Here, on your record. 1938, con-

victed of first degree murder, sentenced to execution."

The assembled bulls began murmuring among themselves. Stevie leaned forward eagerly, anxious to get a better look at this bum who'd offered him advice.

"What happened there, James?"

"What happened where, sir?"

"You were sentenced to death? How come you're still with us?"

"The case was appealed."

"And never retried?"

"No, sir."

"You're pretty lucky, aren't you?"

"I'm pretty *un*lucky, sir, you ask me."

"Is that right? You cheat the chair, and you call that unlucky. Well, the law won't slip up this time."

"I don't know anything about law, sir."

"You don't, huh?"

"No, sir. I only know that if you want to get a police station into action, all you have to do is buy a cheap bottle of wine and drink it quiet, minding your own business."

"And that's what you did, huh, James?"

"That's what I did, sir."

"And you don't remember breaking into that store?"

"I don't remember anything."

"All right, next case."

Skinner turned his head slowly, and his eyes met Stevie's squarely. Again, there was the same mute pleading in his eyes, and then he

turned his head away and shuffled off the stage and down the steps into the darkness.

The cop's hand closed around Stevie's bicep. For an instant, he didn't know what was happening, and then he realized his case was the next one. He shook off the cop's hand, squared his shoulders, lifted his head, and began climbing the steps.

6.

He felt taller all at once. He felt like an actor coming on after his cue. There was an aura of unreality about the stage and the darkened room beyond it, the bulls sitting in that room.

The Chief of Detectives was reading off the information about him, but he didn't hear it. He kept looking at the lights, which were not really so bright, they didn't blind him at all. Didn't they have brighter lights? Couldn't they put more lights on him so they could see him when he told his story?

He tried to make out the faces of the detectives, but he couldn't see them clearly, and he was aware of the Chief of Detectives' voice droning on and on, but he didn't hear what the man was saying; he heard only the hum of his voice. He glanced over his shoulder, trying to see how tall he was against the markers, and then he stood erect, his shoulders back, moving closer to the hanging microphone, wanting

to be sure his voice was heard when he began speaking.

"... no statement," the Chief of Detectives concluded. There was a long pause, and Stevie waited, holding his breath. "This your first offense, Steve?" the Chief of Detectives asked.

"Don't you know?" Stevie answered.

"I'm asking you."

"Yeah, it's my first offense."

"You want to tell us all about it?"

"There's nothing to tell. You know the whole story, anyway."

"Sure, but do you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Tell us the story, Steve."

"What are you making a big federal case out of a lousy stickup for? Ain't you got nothing better to do with your time?"

"We've got plenty of time, Steve."

"Well, I'm in a hurry."

"You're not going anyplace, kid. Tell us about it."

"What's there to tell? There was a candy store stuck up, that's all."

"Did you stick it up?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"We know you did."

"Then don't ask me stupid questions."

"Why'd you do it?"

"I ran out of butts."

"Come on, kid."

"I done it 'cause I wanted to."

"Why?"

"Look, you caught me cold, so

let's get this over with, huh? Why waste time with me?"

"We want to hear what you've got to say. Why'd you pick this particular candy store?"

"I just picked it. I put slips in a hat and picked this one out."

"You didn't really, did you, Steve?"

"No, I didn't really. I picked it 'cause there's an old crumb who runs it, and I figured it was a push-over."

"What time did you enter the store, Steve?"

"The old guy told you all this already, didn't he? Look, I know I'm up here so you can get a good look at me. All right, take your good look, and let's get it over with."

"What time, Steve?"

"I don't have to tell you nothing."

"Except that we know it already."

"Then why do you want to hear it again? Ten o'clock, all right? How does that fit?"

"A little early, isn't it?"

"How's eleven? Try that one for size."

"Let's make it twelve, and we'll be closer."

"Make it whatever you want to," Stevie said, pleased with the way he was handling this. They knew all about it, anyway, so he might as well have himself a ball, show them they couldn't shove him around.

"You went into the store at twelve, is that right?"

"If you say so, Chief."

"Did you have a gun?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"Just me. I scared him with a dirty look, that's all."

"You had a switch knife, didn't you?"

"You found one on me, so why ask?"

"Did you use the knife?"

"No."

"You din't tell the old man to open the cash register or you'd cut him up? Isn't that what you said?"

"I didn't make a tape recording of what I said."

"But you did threaten him with the knife. You did force him to open the cash register, holding the knife on him."

"I suppose so."

"How much money did you get?"

"You've got the dough. Why don't you count it?"

"We already have. Twelve dollars, is that right?"

"I didn't get a chance to count it. The Law showed."

"When did the Law show?"

"When I was leaving. In the alley-way. Ask the cop who pinched me. He knows when."

"Something happened before you left, though."

"Nothing happened. I cleaned out the register and then blew. Period."

"Your knife had blood on it."

"Yeah? I was cleaning chickens last night."

"You stabbed the owner of that store, didn't you?"

"Me? I never stabbed nobody in my whole life."

"Why'd you stab him?"

"I didn't."

"Where'd you stab him?"

"I didn't stab him."

"Did he start yelling?"

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

"You stabbed him, Steve. We know you did."

"You're full of it."

"Don't get smart, Steve."

"Ain't you had your look yet? What the hell more do you want?"

"We want you to tell us why you stabbed the owner of that store."

"And I told you I didn't stab him."

"He was taken to the hospital last night with six knife wounds in his chest and abdomen. Now how about that, Steve?"

"Save your questioning for the Detective Squad Room. I ain't saying another word."

"You had your money. Why'd you stab him?"

Stevie did not answer.

"Were you afraid?"

"Afraid of what?" Stevie answered defiantly.

"I don't know. Afraid he'd tell who held him up? Afraid he'd start yelling? What were you afraid of, kid?"

"I wasn't afraid of nothing. I

told the old crumb to keep his mouth shut. He shoulda listened to me."

"He didn't keep his mouth shut?"

"Ask him."

"I'm asking you!"

"No, he didn't keep his mouth shut. He started yelling. Right after I'd cleaned out the drawer. The damn jerk, for a lousy twelve bucks he starts yelling."

"What'd you do?"

"I told him to shut up."

"And he didn't."

"No, he didn't. So I hit him, and he still kept yelling. So . . . so I gave him the knife."

"Six times?"

"I don't know how many times. I just . . . gave it to him. He shouldn't have yelled. You ask him if I did any harm to him before that. Go ahead, ask him. He'll tell you. I didn't even touch the crumb before he started yelling. Go to the hospital and ask him if I touched him. Go ahead, ask him."

"We can't, Steve."

"Wh . . ."

"He died this morning."

"He . . ." For a moment, Stevie could not think clearly. Died? Is that what he'd said? The room was curiously still now. It had been silently attentive before, but this was something else, something different, and the stillness suddenly chilled him, and he looked down at his shoes.

"I . . . I didn't mean him to pass away," he mumbled.

The police stenographer looked up. "To what?"

"To pass away," a uniformed cop repeated, whispering.

"What?" the stenographer asked again.

"He didn't mean him to pass away!" the cop shouted.

The cop's voice echoed in the silent room. The stenographer bent his head and began scribbling in his pad.

"Next case," the Chief of Detectives said.

Stevie walked off the stage, his mind curiously blank, his feet strangely leaden. He followed the

cop to the door, and then walked with him to the elevator. They were both silent as the doors closed.

"You picked an important one for your first one," the cop said.

"He shouldn't have died on me," Stevie answered.

"You shouldn't have stabbed him," the cop said.

He tried to remember what Skinner had said to him before the lineup, but the noise of the elevator was loud in his ears, and he couldn't think clearly. He could only remember the word "neighbors" as the elevator dropped to the basement to join them.





"My son's in trouble," the Senator told Chester Drum. "Find him and bring him back — no matter what it costs."

A Chester Drum Story

BY STEPHEN MARLOWE

My Son and Heir

HE WORE the face of a successful politician the way other people wear a suit of clothing. His dewlaps, which would have brought envious lowing from a prize Brahma steer, made the stubborn jaw look only resolute and determined. His coloring was florid, his lips a

tight line of restraint, his high-bridged nose as bold and arresting as an exclamation point in the Congressional Record. His earnest eyes said he wanted nothing but the best for his constituents. His powerful voice said he could probably get it.

His name was Eugene Ohland

and somehow he looked in trouble up to and including his mane of white Senatorial hair.

"Come in, Senator," I said. "I thought this was way past your bedtime."

"I'm sorry to bother you at home like this, Drum."

"That's why the home number's in the book. You never know when you're going to make a buck. Besides," I added, "it's early. See? The milkman hasn't even come yet."

He sighed and followed me into my apartment, which is near the Uline Arena in Washington, D. C. We made our way like moths to a torchlamp in the living room. The Senator sat down. I fixed two gin and tonics and brought them over. The Senator was standing up now. He drank the gin and tonic without registering approval or disapproval. I gave him mine and he drank that one, too. His lips opened slightly as if he would make the sound ah, but no sound came out.

"What's the trouble?" I said.

"It's the kid. He's a nice boy, Drum. Isn't he?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Didn't you ever meet him?"

"Once or twice at Senator Hartsell's place in Georgetown."

"Well, he's wild. No harm, though. You understand? Does a boy good. I was a pretty wild youngster myself, but I settled down. Everything I tell you is in confidence, you realize."

"I won't tell your colleagues you were a wild kid."

"I'm glad you mentioned Senator Hartsell. He recommended you. Said you could keep a secret."

I looked at my wristwatch. It was almost three A.M. "Try me," I suggested.

"Why do you try so hard to be cute, Drum?"

"Because it's expected of me. Because it's three o'clock in the morning and I'm trying damn hard not to bite your head off. Now will you tell me what you want?"

"The kid took a girl out to our cabin near the Luray Caverns."

"He's free, white and twenty-one, as the expression goes," I said.

"She's not. She's under-age, Drum. He took her across the state line into Virginia. I want you to get out there and bring them back, in a hurry and quietly. You'll do it?"

I shrugged and lit a cigaret. I studied his face through the smoke. He looked more worried than that. He seemed the type who might explode every twenty years or so, like Vesuvius. But he was simmering toward an eruption right about now.

The telephone's ring made a muscle in his jaw throb. I picked up the receiver and said, "At the time signal it will be exactly three A.M."

"Isn't this Mr. Drum's residence?"

"Last I heard, it was. But the United States Senate is moving in."

The voice, which belonged to a woman, sounded relieved. But only

slightly. "Is Senator Ohland there?"

I handed the receiver to the Senator and put out my cigaret. He grunted a few times and stared straight ahead at the tendrils of smoke that hung on the hot still air. His eyes took on a martyred look which the constituents back home would swallow, hook, line and sinker.

"Stop bleating," he said. "I can hear you. Yes, if you want. Pick up Dr. Stedman along the way. Yes. Yes. That's why I'm here. In about two, two-and-a-half hours, I suppose." He hung up and waited for me to say something. I said, "Why don't you do it yourself?"

"Go out there myself, you mean? Oh, I'll go along with you, Drum. Sometimes he gets a little violent when he puts a few under his belt. But my son's a good boy."

"What did the telephone call have to do with it?" I said.

"My wife. Naturally, she's worried."

"So worried that you tell her to bring a doctor along?"

"We're wasting time, Drum. I'll give you five hundred dollars if you drive me out there, win, lose, or draw. What the hell have you got to lose?"

I slipped out of the pajama jacket and headed for the bedroom. I rubbed my whiskers, which needed shaving but would wait until the morning. I climbed into my underwear and said, "For five hundred bucks, I'll drive you."

"No questions until we get there?"

"Cross my heart," I said.

"You're a strong-looking son-of-a-bitch," he said as I explored the closet for a shirt and trousers. There was nothing to say to that one. He looked just like a Senator.

Ten minutes later we took my De Soto convertible along M Street to Thomas Circle and beyond it to the Weather Bureau, which had promised rain for the morning and which was probably right if the hot, moist, starless, windless night meant anything. Soon we were driving across the Francis Scott Key Bridge, where the Potomac River was much too wide for George Washington or even Dizzy Dean to throw a silver dollar over. Pretty soon Route 211 began to rise and meander through the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I turned on the radio and an all-night disk jockey played a platter called the Filibuster Blues. He played other items, too, and offered amusing verbal bits in a voice like Arthur Godfrey with a bad cold.

The eastern sky was already light when the two-lane highway took us down into Page Valley. Dark heavy clouds scraped the hilltops. Three or four times I had thought Senator Ohland was asleep, but every time I looked at him he was gazing off into space, thinking whatever Senators with wayward boys and unvoiced worries will think.

Now he said, "That's Massanutton Mountain up ahead. You take the first right turn up there. It isn't far."

We began to climb the mountain. The sky opened its sluice gates without warning and we were drenched by the time the black top of the convertible rose up out of the boot to protect us.

"Over there," Senator Ohland said.

It was a dirt road with grass growing between two deep tire-ruts. If we remained up there any length of time and came down this way, it would be a quagmire.

"Hell," I said, "maybe the boy already took her home."

"No," he said.

I shrugged. The rain made noises on the canvas top. The Senator lit a cigaret with the dash lighter and forgot to exhale smoke. It was almost six o'clock on my wristwatch when a cabin loomed against the gray sky up ahead. Two cars were parked outside, a Caddy Fleetwood with the Senator's initials and a low number on the license plate and a small, bright MG the color of a teen-ager's sexiest lipstick.

"Whatever you see," Senator Ohland said, "is just between us."

"Sure," I said. "All I try not to do is break the law."

"You didn't say that in Washington, Drum."

"I assume my clients are honest until they prove otherwise. I assume they assume I'm honest."

"You're a private detective," he said, as if that meant I couldn't possibly be honest.

It didn't get an answer from me. Senator Ohland was on his way through the rain and mud toward the cabin before the De Soto rolled to a stop. I parked on the narrow dirt road so neither the Caddy nor the MG could get by unless I moved the convertible. I locked the doors so no one could release the hand-brake and start the De Soto rolling all the way down to Page Valley. I don't know why I did it.

The rain beat down steadily, rustling oak and mountain laurel and blue Virginia pine. I sprinted through the mud and between the front of the Caddy and rear of the MG. I clomped across the cabin's porch. The door was not closed.

There was a generator shed in back. You could hear it buzzing faintly through the rain. The main room of the cabin was brightly lit and too artfully rustic with rough-hewn maple furniture, a large plank-topped table on which were the remains of a chicken dinner in paper plates, a couple of deer heads with fair to middling antlers sharing the side wall with three long rifles.

Senator Ohland had crossed the room and disappeared through a doorway in the rear as I entered. Mrs. Ohland was in the front room with her son. I recognized them from their pictures and from the few times I had clinked cocktail glasses with them in various Georgetown

or Chevy Chase homes.

Roy Ohland sat on a stiff wooden chair of the style they call rustic colonial in these parts. He was a good-looking blond lad of twenty-two or so, with his father's expressive eyes and his mother's regular features. But he didn't look so good right now. The expressive eyes were crying and the still-boyish voice was sobbing and the features which had been bred carefully in his mother's family since the landing of the Mayflower were twisted into a grimace of remorse.

"There, baby," Mrs. Ohland said, standing over him and rocking his head against her heavy breast. "There, baby. Everything's going to be all right. You didn't mean it, baby. Did you? Of course you didn't mean it. There, baby. There, there, there." She stroked his temple, where the blond hair was still brushed back neatly from the bronzed skin. She was a tall woman who had struggled all her life with the caloric charts and was giving ground slowly. Her hair was that particularly unflattering mixture of blond and gray which hits natural blonds in their forties if for some reason they don't hit the bleaching bottle.

She looked up and saw me and her expression was what you might expect if she had seen me climbing Massanutton Mountain on my hands. "You go in there," she said, pointing through the doorway.

I shrugged and went in there.

Dr. Stedman was closing his little

black bag. His back was toward me and so was the Senator's. They stood before a maple-posted bed, blocking it from my view.

"Five thousand dollars," Senator Ohland said.

"I don't need your money, Gene."

"Just to say you never came up here. Just to forget it."

"I have my doctor's oath —"

"Damn it, who got your boy into Annapolis? Tell me that."

"Ask me anything else, Gene. Anything. I'm grateful, you know that."

"This is what I want. What the hell else can I do? Who the hell was she, anyway? A little tramp. She doesn't matter. Roy matters. He's my son, Arnis. My boy. He's all we've got since his brother died in Korea. Arnis, I'm begging you."

"Don't talk like that. We're friends. You don't have to talk like that."

"Thirty years in politics, Arnis. All down the drain, unless you do this for me. You've got to." I thought the Senator didn't know I was there behind him, but he said, "Come on in, Drum. You might as well see it too. Dr. Stedman here has just agreed to help."

I went around the doctor's short, stocky form. A dim night lamp shed yellow light on the single sheet which covered a woman's form on the bed. She was covered from head to foot and looked very small. Neither of them tried to stop me when I lifted the sheet slowly back.

She was young and she would not grow older. What I could see of her, which was down to the waist, was naked. Her eyes were shut but I thought Dr. Stedman must have shut them. He had not been able or hadn't tried to force her swollen tongue back between her lips. There was nothing he could do about the purple marks, four fingers and a thumb, on each side of her windpipe.

"You shouldn't have sent for me at all," Dr. Stedman said. "Why in God's name did you send for me?"

"I didn't know she was dead," the Senator said. "Roy called home and said he was in trouble. It was enough for me. I got Drum, here. Then Roy called again and Mildred called me at Drum's place. She was hurt, Roy said. He didn't say she was dead."

"Will you call the cops or shall I?" I asked Dr. Stedman.

"Now, just a minute," the Senator said. He covered the girl's face with the sheet. I heard his boy sobbing again from the other room. "I didn't have you drive me up here to call any cops, Drum."

I lit a cigaret. I had been in the presence of death unexpectedly and my hands were trembling. If you don't like it, you can get yourself another private detective. I said, "All right, I'll buy that. You didn't. Why did you have me come up here?"

"A wild kid," the Senator said. "But he's got a great future. I had to

start from the bottom, Drum, and look at me. He's starting from damn close to the top."

"You haven't answered my question."

"The girl matters to you? You know her? Hell, she's dead now. Do you think I like it any better than you do? Do you think I'll pat the kid on the back for it? He's going to regret this."

"Sure," I said. "You'll probably cut his allowance in half for a month."

"I swear to God, Drum, I feel worse about this than you do. But will calling the cops help anyone? Will it help the girl? Will it help *you* in any way?"

There was more of it, but all I heard was the voice, the good, rich, politician's voice, and the rain outside. The rain was like applause. It was a very fine speech. It was the same kind of speech that said significant things every day in the Senate about the income tax or the state of the stock market or the troubled waters off Formosa. It was the same kind of speech that went home, canned, to the constituents in Senator Ohland's state. When he finished I wanted to hit him. Not because of what he said: I hadn't heard it. Because he could use the same voice to solve the nation's problems, to win votes and to cover up a murder for his son.

"You still haven't told me why you wanted me up here," I said.

"Roy said the girl was hurt. I

already told you that." He was very cool. The girl on the bed meant nothing. Nothing. I didn't say anything. He went on:

"I wanted you even before that. Even when Roy said only that there was trouble. Roy can take care of himself. If he calls to say there's trouble —"

"God damn it," I said. "Why don't you forget the rhetoric and answer my question?"

"Look at the time. It's early. Look at the weather. No one's around. You understand? How much money do you make in a year, Drum?"

I said it depended on how much hot water how many Congressmen floundered in. It fell flat even to me. I scowled.

"Whatever it is, I'll double it. We take the body someplace. Far away. We leave it on the road or anywhere you say. That's what I'll pay you for. There are things you know about that I don't. I want you to obliterate every trace that girl may have left in this cabin. Every trace. Is that clear? She didn't bleed. She was strangled, you saw that. It shouldn't be difficult."

"Where's the telephone?" I said.

"Wait a minute, Drum. I'm talking to you. Are you yellow? Is that it? I thought Senator Hartsell was a better judge of people."

"A girl died this morning. Your son killed her."

His voice took on the look of his eyes. The martyr's look. The

martyr's sad, resigned voice. "I know what you're going to say. You're going to say there are laws. Aren't you? Laws which say my boy must pay the price which society demands. Listen to me, Drum. That's my job. Making laws. Not that kind of law, but laws which this country lives by. A man gets to be a cynic, making laws. A man realizes —"

"I'm no cynic, I guess," I said. I headed toward the doorway to the larger room. But Mrs. Ohland stood there. She was holding a rifle against her hip easily, as if she knew how to use it. The long barrel was pointing at my groin.

"Let's talk it over," she suggested.

We did and we didn't. Mrs. Ohland did all the talking. Her husband went inside to the other room, where the boy was. She had never seriously considered the possibility that either Dr. Stedman or I might say no. She had spent too much of her life inside an echo chamber, I thought. She spent five minutes fishing around for the type of payment Dr. Stedman might accept. She was saving the hired help for last. If I say the word, she told the physician, you're all through in Georgetown. There are other doctors.

She never got to me. Suddenly there was a scream from the other room. Mrs. Ohland whirled around with her long rifle and ran through the doorway shouting, "Stop it, Eugenel!" I turned my head.

Senator Ohland was not sparing the rod. He drove his son across the room with hard, open-handed blows. His palms struck Roy's cheeks and neck with a sound like applause. Mrs. Ohland ran between them. She was a big woman, almost as big as the Senator. She held the rifle at present arms and pushed it against her husband's chest, driving him back across the room. "What's the matter with you?" she said. "Hasn't he been through enough? Do you like to hit him? I always thought you liked to hit him."

"He stood there and lied to me. I swear to God, I'll kill him."

"If you touch him again —"

"Why did he have to lie? Are we the cops? Aren't we sticking our necks out?"

"Stop shouting."

"I'll tell you why he lied," Senator Ohland said. "Because you're his mother, he lied. He has nothing to worry about. You'd let him crawl back into the womb if he could."

A large vein throbbed on the side of the Senator's neck. His face was livid. I watched him and I watched his wife and for the first, last and only time I felt sorry for Roy Ohland. One of his parents pushed and the other one pulled. All his life, his emotions had been drawn and quartered. One of these days, I thought and while thinking it looked at his mother and father again and stopped caring, he was going to close a door someplace inside his mind and find

himself locked in a room for schizophrenics only. But hell, Drum: you're a private eye out to make a buck and those things are not supposed to matter.

"You, Drum," Mrs. Ohland said, turning away from her husband. "Take the girl out to my car. Put her in the back seat and wait for me."

"How the hell are you going to get away with it?" I said. "Are you going to kill the doctor? Are you going to kill me?"

She jabbed the rifle at my navel. She held it as steady as a battle-wagon holds its sixteen-inch guns. She was thinking with her spleen or her liver or the seat of her pants but I looked at her face and knew that for the moment at least if it was good enough for her it had to be good enough for me.

I went inside and wrapped the dead girl in the sheet and got down on my knees alongside the bed so I could roll her on my shoulder. She weighed less than I had thought and she was incredibly loose and limp, almost boneless, because the rigor had not yet set in. I walked back into the main room with it slung across my shoulder like that and Senator Ohland turned away. Roy's eyes were glazed. Mrs. Ohland was wiping silverware off carefully with a napkin.

One of the arms came loose from the sheet, the hand touching the small of my back every time I took a step. The rain was coming down

harder now. It sounded like the steady booming roar of surf. I said, "Roy, what did you lie to your father about?"

"I didn't lie," Roy said. "I didn't lie, mister. I swear I didn't."

"Take her outside," Mrs. Ohland said.

Roy blinked. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking behind me. "What are you doing with her?" he said.

"Better ask your mother, son."

"But you can't take her out in the rain like that. She isn't even dressed."

"Hurry up," Mrs. Ohland whispered fiercely. It was a very extravagant sound. It must have hurt her. It was worse than a shout.

I didn't hurry. I heard someone moving toward me, toward my back. I thought it was Roy. Something touched the thing I was carrying.

"She's cold!" Roy screamed. "She's so cold. . . ."

"Take her outside or I'll kill you," Mrs. Ohland said.

I crossed the porch with my burden and floundered in the mud. It was a gray, wet world. I put what I was carrying on the rear seat of the Cadillac. I shut the door. Mrs. Ohland and her rifle were on the porch, watching me. I wondered how well she could see through the rain. I couldn't see very well. I wondered how well she could shoot.

I ducked behind the Caddy's big fin and heard the rifle go boom. The Caddy's windshield made the sound

that shatterproof glass makes when it is suddenly opaque with a million lines and wrinkles. I crouched low and reached the door of the De Soto and plunged inside, dripping water all over the leather upholstery. You have thirty seconds, Mrs. Ohland, if you really want to kill me. Thirty seconds. That's all you have.

She didn't use them. I opened the glove compartment and said to myself, Chester Drum, you're a fool. You ought to release the handbrake and roll on down the mountain. There's a crazy woman up there who would like to kill you. There's also an M.D. who is in this thing just like you are. Unfortunately.

I took out the Magnum .357 and vowed to keep it in the shoulder rig where it belonged from now on. But I had vowed that vow before. The damned thing is uncomfortable. I broke the piece and checked its magazine and slid it in the rig. It was uncomfortable.

Rolling down the window, I stuck my head out. Mrs. Ohland was no longer on the porch. Inside—or cut? I closed the window and slid across the seat. She might have a bead on the driver's door. I went out the other side of the car and got down on all fours in a hurry. Then I advanced at a crouching run toward the Caddy. Mrs. Ohland's rifle crashed, but she was miles off. I heard the slug bounce off a rock far to my left and whine away down the mountainside. She was firing from the porch, I thought, on the wrong

side of the three cars between us.

I reached the front of the Caddy and eased the Magnum from the shoulder rig. I crouched lower because the MG couldn't hide a good-sized fox terrier. Mrs. Ohland was on the porch, all right. I could hear her breathing strenuously even through the sound of the rain. When I reached the front of the MG I saw her there. Rain water cascading from the eaves of the porch made a silver curtain between us. The rifle was pointing some sixty degrees in the wrong direction.

I made it to the porch in three long running strides. She brought the rifle around and lunged forward with it as if she was doing the long thrust of a bayonet drill. I caught the barrel and twisted it and got the surprise of my life. Mrs. Ohland twisted back, but her hands were dry. I lost my hold on the rifle and my footing on the wet steps and fell back on my duff in the mud. I rolled over three times into a clump of leathery rhododendron. Three distinct orange flashes split the gray morning but the noise was of one long peal of thunder as three bullets plowed into the rhododendron. One of them tore off the heel of my shoe and made my foot go numb.

I stood up quickly and at a distance of no more than twenty feet did the most ungentlemanly thing I could think of. I shot Mrs. Ohland in the left forearm and didn't pick up the rifle when she dropped it.

We went inside the cabin together.

Dr. Stedman was dressing her arm and mumbling something about a broken bone in her wrist. "Small bone," he said. "Won't need a cast." He could understand that. He wanted to talk about it. He did not want to talk about other things.

I gave the Senator a cigaret. It was damp but he didn't mind. He said nothing because there was nothing for him to say. Roy was holding his mother's other hand while Dr. Stedman worked on her wounded arm. Roy wasn't talking, either.

Somebody had to say something. So I said, "Let me tell you what you were lying about, Roy."

"How do you know what he was lying about?" the Senator said.

I was weary. I smelled the stink of gun powder from the Magnum's muzzle. I said, "What he was talking about. He wasn't lying. Where you, Roy?"

Roy said nothing.

"I don't know the details," I said. "It's not my job to find them. The police can find the details. But it was something like this, wasn't it, Roy? You and the girl both had too much to drink. You made her. Didn't you?"

Roy nodded. He squeezed his mother's hand. She turned her head away from him, like an injured lover.

"But she had too much to drink," I said. "She passed out and you got scared."

The Senator looked at me doubtfully. He didn't have to put it into words. He was thinking: Roy would-

n't lose his head over a little thing like that.

"Roy wouldn't come crying to you, Senator," I said. "That's why you thought he was so tough. You must have lost rapport with him about twenty years ago. Trouble is, Roy never grew out of his Oedipus complex."

"Why don't you shut up?" Roy said.

"He called his mother. He always called his mother. He shared things with her. If he was scared he wanted her to hold his hand, even over a long distance telephone. He must have blacked out a little himself, because when he saw the girl unconscious he thought he had hurt her. So he called home again. He was still drunk."

"I remember now," Roy said. "She hadn't moved. She was the same way. On the bed."

"Mrs. Ohland drove out with you, Dr. Stedman. Then what happened?"

"Roy wasn't in here," Dr. Stedman said. "She said to find him. I went outside looking for him. It was just starting to rain. I found him in back near the generator shed."

"How long did it take you?"

"I don't know. Fifteen minutes."

"Long enough for Mrs. Ohland to strangle the unconscious girl?"

"What are you saying?" Senator Ohland shouted. "She had no reason. She —"

"Long enough," Dr. Stedman said softly.

"You sensed she was your rival, didn't you, Mrs. Ohland?" I asked.

"She was no good for Roy. She could only hurt him. But she meant nothing to him. She was a tramp." Her son's hand had gone slack in hers, but she squeezed it. She wouldn't let it go.

Roy withdrew his hand. He got up and walked to the cold fireplace. Mrs. Ohland pushed the doctor's restraining hand away and walked slowly toward her son.

"Is that what you told your father, Roy?" I said. "That you didn't kill anyone?"

"No," Roy said. "No, I didn't. I didn't know what he was talking about. Oh, God —"

Mrs. Ohland touched his shoulder with her good hand. He did not turn around. He did not raise his voice. He said, utterly without expression, "Don't touch me."

"What am I going to do?" Mrs. Ohland wailed. "What am I going to do now?" She began to sob. The Senator did not go to her. Dr. Stedman finished bandaging her wrist.

The Senator went outside on the porch. I could hear him pacing back and forth heavily. After a while Roy went and joined him. Dr. Stedman looked at me. I jerked my head toward the wall telephone.

"I'll call the police now," Dr. Stedman said.





The Good Boy

Harley was a good boy. He did whatever his mother told him — up to and including robbery and murder.

IF DOING what your mother tells you makes a good boy out of you, then that would have been an apt description for Harley LaMarr. The only trouble was his mother never told him to kill — although she herself set him a good example by killing his father.

Harley had been living away from home, perhaps because he couldn't stand the constant quarreling that went on there, perhaps because he just wanted to live alone. He was a quiet young man, not given to violence, a fellow who took things calmly and in his stride. Therefore, he displayed no outward sign of

*A True Story From
Actual Case Records*

BY ANDREW J. BURRIS

emotion when the police came for him one day to report that his father had been murdered, stabbed to death by his mother. The mother had confessed readily and had admitted the killing to the police. She and her husband had been quarreling, as they often did, only this fight was a lot noisier and more brutal than any of the others had been. The shouting and the name-calling had soon reached the stage where the two of them stepped up the action and started trading blows. After this it seemed only natural that both of them should make a grab for the kitchen knife on the table.

The mother won the race, and Harley's father died very quickly after the knife was plunged into his heart.

Harley visited his mother in jail, but they didn't say much to each other. The mother asked only that he give his father a decent burial.

Harley, being a good son, did just as his mother told him. He went to an undertaker, arranged for a lavish funeral — to be paid for on the installment plan — and then went and watched them lower his father into the ground.

After this, Harley's financial troubles began.

Never too well off to begin with, he found it hard to meet the payments on the funeral expenses. Then he lost his job, and it was now impossible for him to pay. However, his mother had asked him to bury his father, and to Harley this meant

paying for the funeral also. A promise to a mother was a solemn promise, and he meant to keep it.

He had no means of making a loan, and, when he had finished rummaging around through his possessions, the only thing of value he could find was an old rifle. It wasn't in very good shape, and Harley knew it wouldn't bring much from a pawnshop, certainly not enough to meet the payment due on his father's funeral. But there's more than one way to make money with a gun, and so Harley took the next big step in keeping his promise to his mother — and also in following in her footsteps.

He took the gun with him and set out to make it a little more valuable to him by getting some bullets for it. He went to a store, showed the man behind the counter the gun and asked for some shells for it. He explained to the man that he didn't know what type ammunition it took, so he had brought it along with him in order to make sure he got the right kind.

Once he had the bullets, Harley's next move was to load the gun and use it to get the money he needed. Naturally, there was only one way to do this — to hold up someone and take his money away from him. To make sure that he got enough loot on the first try, Harley selected a quiet street in a part of town where he knew wealthy people lived. He had the gun hidden under his coat, and he stood on the corner and

waited while deciding what to do next.

He didn't have to wait long. A new car drove up to the corner and stopped for the light. At the wheel was a woman, alone in the car, wearing an expensive looking fur coat. Harley moved fast, stepped out into the street, opened the door of the car, and sat down next to the woman. He took out the rifle and told her to keep quiet and to start driving.

He forced the woman to drive him out of the city limits, warning her that he'd kill her if she tried to get away or tried to attract anyone's attention. He also quite calmly told her that he only wanted to rob her of her money.

At a suitable spot, he told the woman to stop the car and get out, but when he reached for her purse, the woman made the big mistake of trying to resist him.

And so, just as his mother had reached for the kitchen knife, Harley's finger reached for the trigger. He got out of the car, shot the

woman in the head, and she died instantly.

He took the few dollars he found in her purse, put her body in the back seat of the car, and then drove away. He dumped the body in a ditch and then abandoned the car.

In his haste and his excitement, he forgot to take the fur coat or any of the woman's jewelry, which certainly would have helped him make the payments for the funeral. However, it turned out he needn't have worried about this, for he never had time to make the payment.

Once the crime was publicized in the newspapers, the man who had sold him the bullets came forward and told what he knew. After this, it was routine police work to track Harley down and arrest him.

He confessed as readily as his mother had done, and when Harley finally went to the execution chamber, there was at least one thing which needn't have been on his mind. He didn't have to worry about who was going to pay for his funeral — the state did.



Custody

WHEN the bell sounded, I reached out and pushed down the alarm-clock button. The same bell kept ringing.

Sleepily I pulled on the bed lamp

and reached for the clock again. Then I came three-fourths awake and picked up the bedside phone.

"Harry Maddon?" a voice inquired in my ear after I said hello.

When I said yes, the voice went on, "Lieutenant Grange of Homicide. I'm over at your former wife's place on Water Street. Know where that is?"

I came completely awake. "Of

BY RICHARD DEMING

When the police called him, Harry only had one question. Who was dead — his wife, or his son?



course, Lieutenant. What's up?"

"Could you get over here right away?"

"What's up?" I repeated.

"It'll keep till you get here, Mr. Maddon. Want me to send a car?"

"I have one," I said. Glancing at the clock, I saw it was two A.M. "Be there by two-twenty."

I took five minutes to throw a handful of water in my face, brush my teeth and dress. It was twenty blocks to my ex-wife Hazel's flat, but I pulled up behind the squad car parked in front of the building at exactly two-twenty.

Naturally, questions were racing through my mind all during the fifteen-minute drive. Lieutenant Grange had said Homicide, which presumably meant someone was dead. I wondered if Hazel, in a drunken rage, had finally killed her equally drunken second husband. Or vice versa.

There was a third possibility which I didn't like to think about. That Hazel, or George, or both of them had killed Tommy.

Even the thought of that possibility made my jaw muscles bunch with rage. I suppose most fathers love their sons, but my feeling for Tommy went beyond ordinary paternal love. He was all I had left from my wrecked marriage, and he was the only person in the world I really gave a damn about. His attachment to me was just as strong, I knew, and the most frustrating thing for both of us about the

settlement was that I was to see him only on Sunday afternoons.

If anything had happened to Tommy, there was going to be at least one more murder tonight, I resolved.

But that fear left my mind a moment after Lieutenant Grange opened the door to me. Beyond him, sitting on the front-room sofa in pajamas and a robe, I saw Tommy.

Before I could even reply to the lieutenant's query of, "Mr. Maddon?" Tommy saw me too and flew across the room to throw his arms about my neck.

He started to sob onto my shoulder, and I patted his back and said, "Hold it, skipper. There's nothing to worry about now that your old man's here."

Leading him back to the sofa, I said, "Just sit down, Tommy, until I can find out what this is all about."

Obediently he reseated himself, but tears continued to trickle down his cheeks.

I turned back to the lieutenant, introduced myself and shook his hand. He was a tall, slim man of middle age with sparse, graying hair and a thin, intelligent face.

"You said Homicide, Lieutenant?" I asked. "What happened?"

"Show you in a minute," he said. "Main reason I called you over here is on account of the boy. Got room to put him up at your place?"

"Of course," I said. "For how long?"

He regarded me thoughtfully.

"The kid says he'd like to live with you permanently. We had quite a talk, and he thinks his father's a pretty swell guy."

"I think he's a pretty swell guy too," I said. "There's nothing I'd like better than to have him permanently. I fought for custody when my wife and I were divorced. But it seems the courts automatically grant the mother custody if she wants it, even if she's a tramp. I've got Sunday visiting privileges."

"I don't think you'll have much trouble getting custody after tonight," Grange told me. "Come in the bedroom."

As we passed into the hall in the center of the flat, I saw through the open kitchen door that it wasn't Hazel who was the corpse. She was seated at the kitchen table in a dirty housecoat, swaying in her chair and feebly protesting being spoon-fed black coffee by an oversized cop in uniform. Her still attractive face was puffy from drink and her soft blonde hair hung in damp strings about her face.

When I paused in the hallway, the lieutenant said, "She's still blotto, but we'll have her sobered up enough to talk before long."

Then he opened the bedroom door.

The overhead light was on so that I got the full impact of the scene at once. George Kerry, Hazel's second husband, sprawled across the double bed in his pajamas. He lay on his back, so that I could see his

gaunt face was unshaven, as usual, and his mouth sagged open to disclose his discolored and uneven teeth. The stain on his left breast was only a small round spot. I learned later that he hadn't bled much because the bullet in his heart had killed him instantly, and you stop bleeding after you're dead.

"Your former wife was sitting in that chair, passed out, when we arrived," Grange said, pointing to the flowered chintz easy chair diagonally across the room from the bed. "The gun was still in her hand, and the angle of the shot was such that it seems likely she was sitting there when she shot him. We haven't been able to get her coherent enough to get a statement from her yet, but we have the boy's account of what happened."

I frowned at him. "You mean you questioned a twelve-year-old kid about a thing like this?"

"There aren't any other witnesses," he said patiently. "We were gentle as possible with him, but we had to know the story. He'll probably have to testify in court too."

After a moment's reflection, I reluctantly accepted this. Though it went against my protective instinct, I realized that if Tommy was the only witness, naturally he'd have to testify.

"Just what happened?" I asked.

"The kid said it started early this evening. Both of them were drinking, which I gathered was a nightly routine, and they got in an argu-

ment over money. By nine o'clock they were screaming at each other. Once she slapped him and he knocked her down. That ended the argument up till bedtime, but both of them continued to tank up on opposite sides of the room and glare at each other. The kid says he went to bed in his own room at ten, but couldn't sleep. After a time he heard them stumbling around getting ready for bed, and guesses that was about eleven-thirty. Maybe fifteen minutes later the argument started again in the bedroom. Your former wife screamed something about killing Kerry, and then there was a shot. Everything was quiet after that, but the kid was too scared to go investigate for a good five or ten minutes. Eventually he screwed up nerve enough to go peep in their bedroom. The ceiling light was on like now, Kerry was where he is and the kid's mother was in the chair passed out. Some neighbors knocked about then to inquire about the shot, and Tommy let them in. The neighbors phoned us at twelve twenty-five."

"I see," I said. "Mind if I talk to Hazel?"

"We'll both talk to her, if she's in shape to make sense. Come on."

He preceded me into the kitchen and we stood watching the uniformed cop pour coffee into my ex-wife. He was no longer spoon-feeding her, but was holding the cup up to her lips, urging her to drink. As we watched, she managed to get

a couple of swallows down, and spill a couple more. Then she pushed the cup away, rubbed the back of one hand across her mouth and groaned.

Setting the cup on the table, the cop said to the lieutenant, "I think she's beginning to come around, sir."

"Okay, we'll try her again," Grange said. Approaching Hazel, who had dropped her head backward against the back of the wooden chair and had closed her eyes, he said distinctly, "Mrs. Kerry!"

Hazel slowly opened her eyes and stared up at him.

"Can you understand me?" the lieutenant asked.

"Course I understand you," she said pettishly. "Who are you?"

"Lieutenant Grange. I'm a police officer. Do you know what happened here tonight, Mrs. Kerry?"

"Happened?" she asked vaguely. Then her gaze moved blearily to me. "That you, Harry? What are you doing here?"

I said to the lieutenant, "You're wasting your time. I've seen her in this state often enough to know you're not going to get any sense out of her for some hours yet. Until she sleeps it off."

Even as I spoke Hazel leaned her head back again and went to sleep sitting up.

"Guess you're right," Grange said disgustedly. To the cop he said, "Get a coat around her and run her down to Central District. Book her

for investigation, suspicion of homicide. Better throw a toothbrush and some clothes in a suitcase for her. She'll probably be away from home a long time."

"Yes, sir," the cop said.

Back in the front room, I told Tommy to go get dressed and pack a suitcase, that he was going home with me. He had stopped crying, and now his face lit up with an expression of relief which almost approached happiness. Eagerly he ran to his bedroom.

"We think of kids as defenseless," the lieutenant commented. "But they can take a lot more than we give them credit for. They seem to have a capacity for forgetting unpleasant things the instant something new grips their attention. Few minutes ago he was in the depths of despair. Then you tell him he's going home with you, and it's like he's getting ready for a vacation."

"He never liked Kerry," I said. "It was shock more than grief that upset him. And he probably doesn't yet realize what this means to his mother. He's happy because he's always wanted to live with me. He practically lives for our Sunday afternoons together. If he'd had the choice, he'd have stayed with me from the minute Hazel and I separated."

The lieutenant said gloomily, "Probably the kid will be better off to be out of a setup like this, where he had to be a witness to

drunken brawls. But it's a devil of a way to get a kid transferred to the parent he belongs with."

It was nearly four in the morning before I finally got Tommy settled in the spare bedroom of my apartment and he had dropped off to sleep. Then I reset my alarm clock for nine and went back to bed myself.

In the morning I let Tommy sleep. Mrs. Garret came in to do the semi-weekly cleaning at nine-thirty, just as I was finishing breakfast, and I told her Tommy was in the spare bedroom and not to awaken him. As I planned to be gone most of the day and didn't want the boy left alone, I arranged for Mrs. Garret to stay on until evening, give Tommy his lunch and generally supervise him.

Then I called the advertising agency where I work, told the chief what had happened and asked for a little time off. He said to take all the time I needed and that he'd spread my accounts around among the other boys until I was ready to come back to work.

Next I phoned Ed Harkness, who had handled my divorce suit against Hazel two years before. After I explained the situation and told him what I wanted, he said to meet him at Central District at eleven A.M.

I got there at ten of eleven. Ed showed up promptly on time. Ed

Harkness was a short, round man of about my age, thirty-five, timid-appearing for a lawyer, but the appearance was deceptive. In front of a jury he could be as suavely self-confident as a con man.

After shaking my hand and expressing sympathy for this latest trouble, he told the desk man he was Hazel's attorney and asked to see her. Ten minutes later a matron brought her from the women's cell block and left the three of us alone in an interview room which had a barred window.

Hazel's appearance had improved considerably from the previous night. She wore a clean black knit dress which clung to her still voluptuous figure, her face was carefully made up and her blonde hair was brushed to fall loosely about her shoulders. But her hangover showed in the dark circles under her eyes and in the way her hands trembled uncontrollably.

She looked from Ed Harkness to me, and tears formed in her eyes. "They told me you'd gotten me a lawyer, Harry," she said. "After all I've done to you, you're still willing to help me. Why do you bother?"

What do you say to a question like that? That it was because I pitied her? That even now I still thought she was a basically fine woman whose only real fault was the drinking which had ruined both our lives and had done a fair job of ruining Tommy's?

I said, "No matter what you ever do, you're still Tommy's mother."

Wearily she sank into one of the three straight-backed chairs in the room and asked for a cigarette.

When I had lit it for her, she said, "They tell me I killed George and then passed out. Or maybe it was the other way around. I guess Tommy will be happier now. He always wanted to live with you instead of me, Harry."

Ed Harkness said, "What do you mean, 'They tell you you killed George,' Hazel? Don't you remember what happened?"

"I don't even remember getting ready for bed. I woke up in my cell this morning wearing a nightgown and a robe, but the last I remember, I was still fully dressed."

Ed looked from her to me thoughtfully. "You saw her last night, Harry. Would you say she was that drunk?"

I nodded. "As drunk as I ever saw her."

"Who else saw her in that state?"

"Lieutenant Grange, another cop, Tommy, whatever technical cops had been there before I arrived, I suppose. And I understand some neighbors were in the flat shortly after the shooting."

"Hmm. Maybe we can make the blackout dodge stick. If we can convince the jury she couldn't possibly have known what she was doing."

"You mean plead temporary insanity?" I asked. "Can you work

that in a case of plain drunkenness?"

"It's a different law, but it's based on the same legal principle as temporary insanity. Under the law you aren't held to as great a degree of accountability when you commit an unpremeditated crime at a time when you aren't aware of what you're doing, as you would be if you were in full possession of your faculties."

He turned to Hazel. "You ever threaten your husband in front of anybody?"

Hazel made a rueful face. "Dozens of times. At the top of my voice. At one time or another everybody within a radius of blocks must have heard me yell that I'd kill him."

"That's not good," Ed said with a frown. Then more briskly, "All we can do is wait to see what the charge is going to be. Maybe the DA will only try for manslaughter. Or at the worst, second degree. If he decides not to attempt to establish premeditation, we may get away with a blackout plea."

Then he began to question Hazel about what she did remember of the evening. That wasn't much, except for the early part. She recalled slapping George and getting knocked down in return, and she remembered Tommy going to bed, because he came over and kissed her goodnight. But she couldn't recall getting ready for bed herself, or anything about the later argument in the bedroom which Tommy had said preceded the shot.

"I don't even know how I got hold of the gun," she said drearily. "I knew George had one, but I don't even know where he kept it."

"Has it been established as his gun?" Ed asked.

Hazel nodded. "I did that for them. They showed it to me awhile ago and I identified it. I'd seen George cleaning it a couple of times. It's a .38 revolver with a pearl handle. Shouldn't I have?"

"It doesn't matter," Ed said. "They'll double-check by tracing it from the manufacturer anyway. But from here on out I don't want you to say a word except when I'm present. Understand?"

Hazel said she did.

Ed told her he'd take up the question of bond immediately after arraignment if the indictment was for less than first-degree murder. He said the grand jury sat on Tuesdays and Thursdays and as it was now Wednesday, they'd probably consider her case tomorrow. Arraignment would probably follow immediately, or by Friday at the latest, so if she wasn't indicted for first-degree homicide he might be able to get her out on bond by the weekend.

He said there was no bond in first-degree cases.

The news didn't seem to cheer Hazel much.

That evening I tried to explain the situation to Tommy. I suspected

that he hadn't as yet realized what might happen to his mother, but he was intelligent enough to know that people who kill end up in jail and, once he got over the shock of his experience, I was afraid he might start getting hysterical about what the law was going to do to her.

I sat him in the front room and examined him carefully before I began.

He looked up at me expectantly, but I could detect no sign of disturbance in him.

When I had decided he seemed sufficiently over the shock of his experience to talk about it calmly, I said, "Tommy, you're big enough now so we can talk man-to-man instead of just as father to son. You've been through an experience no kid your age should have to face, but it can't be undone. Have you thought yet about what changes are going to result from what happened last night?"

"Sure, Dad," he said. "Won't I live with you for good now?"

"Yes, of course. But I don't mean just that. You know what happened, don't you?"

"You mean about Mom shooting George? Sure. I was there when it happened."

I said, "Have you thought of what's going to become of your mother?"

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I guess they'll keep her in jail, won't they? Forever."

"Possibly," I admitted. "You may

as well face that there's that chance right from the start. But I've engaged a lawyer for her, and maybe she'll go free if the lawyer can prove in court she didn't know what she was doing. We'll hope so anyway."

His eyes widened. "Then will I have to go back and live with her?"

In a tone of mild rebuke I said, "I don't think we ought even to consider that factor at this point. The important thing is your mother's welfare."

He looked so woebegone, I relented. "I imagine you'll be able to stay with me even if she's freed, skipper. I'll file a new suit for custody, and the fact that she killed her husband while under the influence of drink is bound to influence the court's decision as to which of us will make the best parent. But you do want your mother to get out of jail, don't you?"

He hesitated before saying dubiously, "Sure, Dad. If I can keep staying with you."

I frowned at him. "That's a funny way to express yourself. You mean you'd rather have your mother spend the rest of her life in jail than go back to living with her?"

Tommy looked up at me wide-eyed, his lower lip trembling. After a time he said, "You don't know how awful it was, Dad. The two of them always drinking and fighting. The other kids in the neighborhood all knew how they did, and they talked about it in front of me and made me so ashamed, half the time

I felt like running away. Don't make me go back to her, Dad."

I felt a mixture of compassion at what he'd been through and shock at his seeming callousness to his mother's situation. "I'll keep you with me if I possibly can, Tommy," I told him. "But the important thing right now is your mother. I intend to do everything I can to save her."

Tommy looked down at his hands without saying anything.

"There's at least a chance this lawyer I hired can get her off," I said. "There's a law that if people don't know what they're doing, they can't be held responsible for it. Or at least not as responsible as when they do know what they're doing."

"Didn't Mom even know she'd shot George?" Tommy asked.

"She doesn't remember anything after you went to bed. Not even getting ready for bed herself. She doesn't even know how she got hold of the gun. She says she didn't even know where George kept it."

"In the top part of the kitchen cabinet," Tommy said. "Behind the stuff stored up there."

The remark didn't mean anything to me at the moment. It wasn't until after I had sent the boy off to bed a short time later, and was reviewing our talk in my mind in an effort to decide whether or not I'd been wise in making his mother's situation clear to him, that its full significance penetrated.

Then I summoned up a mental

image of the kitchen cabinet he'd referred to from the few occasions I'd been in Kerry's flat. As I recalled it, the storage compartment at the top was just below the ceiling, where it couldn't be reached without standing on a chair. And Tommy'd said the gun was kept behind the things stored there.

I tried to visualize Hazel, so drunk she even swayed when sitting down, standing on a chair and groping past the clutter of items stored in such places for the gun. The picture refused to form.

Besides, Hazel claimed she hadn't even known where the gun was kept. There was no reason to believe she'd lied, inasmuch as she made no attempt to deny the shooting, and obviously thought she had killed George.

But Tommy had known.

Rising, I went into the spare bedroom, switched on the corner lamp and looked down at my son's face. He was sleeping peacefully, a smile of contentment on his lips.

There wasn't anything in the world that meant more to me than my son, I told myself. Nor anything in the world which meant more to him than I did. How much I meant, and the extent to which he was willing to go to be with me, I'd never before even begun to realize.

Switching off the lamp, I returned to the front room and collapsed into an easy chair.

"My God!" I said aloud, to no one. "What do I do now?"

CRIME CAVALCADE

BY VINCENT H. GADDIS

Perfect Hide-Out

Joseph Robidoux, 32, was reported missing recently from Clairvauz Prison, Troyes, France. Two weeks later he was found — still in jail. Robidoux had managed to secure a duplicate set of keys. During the day he hid in various parts of the prison. At night he moved around and helped himself to food in the prison stores.

Leg Larceny

Police in Colorado Springs, Colo., arresting Jimmy Flynn, 40, as a pickpocket, were puzzled when they failed to find one of two billfolds that Flynn was supposed to have stolen in a downtown store. Finally one of the officers made Flynn remove his wooden leg. Within the hollow leg were six billfolds.

Jaundiced Judgment

A used car dealer in Louisville, Ky., told authorities that someone broke into his salesroom, took the keys to 14 cars, then drove off with a 1942 jalopy worth \$50 which the dealer described as "the worst on the lot."

Washer Wizard

Charles Heiser, 26, a Los Angeles

mechanic, invented a novel device that enabled him to steal about \$35,000, all in quarters, over a period of 18 months. The device enabled him to open the coin boxes on washing machines in tourist camps and similar places. As a result of his spree, 11 washing machine companies spent \$30,000 installing new equipment, caused several apartment house and camp managers to be fired on false accusations of looting the machines, nearly bankrupted two concerns, and sent the manager of one company to the hospital with a stomach ulcer. Heiser received a one-to-15-year prison sentence, and police withheld all details of his device from publication.

Unfair To Labor

In Sprague, Conn., an infuriated would-be holdup victim, Saul Rothstein, knocked a gun from a bandit's hand and saved his \$200. "I refused to give the money to the robber," Rothstein told police, "because he hadn't earned it."

Latin Style

A "healer" was arrested recently in Buenos Aires who was "curing" liver ailments by having her patients dance the mambo.

Cosy Cot

Accused by Memphis, Tenn., police of setting her hotel bed afire with a cigarette, Gertrude Dorman, 36, defended herself. "The bed was on fire when I got in it," she said. She was fined \$50.

Hot Temper

A Wichita Falls, Tex., woman set fire to her husband's pickup truck and late model car after smashing in the windshield of the truck with a baseball bat. The reason? Her husband wouldn't permit her to drive. Officers, who jailed her for suspicion of arson, said she "appeared slightly irritated."

Poison Loot

In Bloomington, Ill., Ralph Steele, operator of a pest control shop,

reported to police that thieves had made off with 38 bags of rat poison.

Tender Treatment

A pair of holdup men locked Los Angeles butchers Irving Gronsky and Harold Schott, along with a customer, into a 20-below-zero freezer after helping themselves to \$2,900 from a safe. Then they telephoned police and told them about it. The chilled trio was rescued 20 minutes later.

Out Of Service

Mexico City's radio-cable communication with the world was out for 12 hours recently. Arturo Salinas told investigating officials that he stole 10 feet of cable wire from the line near the city. He added that he sold the wire for \$5 to buy medicine for his mother's aching tooth.



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Outside the Cages

A Novelette

BY JACK WEBB



Snakes didn't bother Perkins. He liked them. But the man with the revolver made him a little bit uneasy . . .

AT NINE O'CLOCK on Thursday morning, Harvey Gault called me from a gas station at Calipatria and wanted to know if I could use a dozen red diamondbacks, the small-

est of which was a yard long. I asked him if he had been drinking and he said no, that one of his gangs, blasting to put in a highway, had shaken loose a rattlesnake den and there had never been so many snakes since Saint Patrick led the belly-march out of Ireland.

Being a thoughtful guy, Harvey had saved the king-sized for me. I told him I could use them, and he said he would be getting into town around ten that night and where did I want them since he wasn't going to sleep with them. I told him to skip the Zoo and bring them up to my apartment. He said he would for a drink and

that was the way we left it.

After that, because the crowd was still thin, I decided on a ten-minute break with my no-footed friends, left the reptile house and walked to the *Zoo Cafe* for my morning coffee.

From a rack in front of the cafe, I picked up a paper. For obvious reasons, I turned to the Monetti

stuff first. As usual, the district attorney was making an ass of himself:

"Speaking off the record for the *Record*, District Attorney Spell said, 'This is one time we have a witness that Vic Monetti can't intimidate. John Johnston takes care of lions and tigers for his pay. John won the Silver Star at Inchon. Here is one boy the Monetti mob can't back against the wall and we're taking good care of him.' . . ."

I finished my coffee, folded the paper under my arm, slid off the stool and winked at Gloria over by the coffee urn.

Gloria tried a smile that didn't quite come off. Gloria was Johnny's girl and Johnny had been in jail for ten days. Out of jail, his life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel. This had been explained to Gloria very carefully. But nobody had explained to her how to spend her lonely nights. She had red hair and eyes the color smoke is when there's fire underneath and she never had learned it was fun to curl up with a good book.

On the way out the door, I thought it might be nice to take her out for an evening. A nice thing to do. Too nice.

For a moment, I stood on the steps of the cafe and looked across to the pool of green water between the road and the first string of monkey cages. Two white swans and two black were floating on the pool. They held their wings like half-

furled sails and their breasts arched like the prows of fine ships. In an hour or so, Lintner would come along with a pail of grain and stale bread and the swans would feed. Then, they would go on being dream boats for the rest of the day. It must be a fine life, I decided, being a swan.

Over the edge of the bird-and-monkey mesa, somewhere along the canyon road, one of the big cats was kicking up a fuss. One of Johnny's cats, a tiger from the sound of it. A car started up down there and I could hear it in low gear and then in second as it climbed past the bear pits before it swung around the corner down the road from where I was standing and came toward me at three times the ten-mile speed limit.

It was one of ours, a grey Ford with the Zoo insignia on the front doors. Doc Fallon was driving. He braked as he came abreast and shouted, "Climb in."

I scrambled.

"Can you spare half an hour to run to town and pick up Johnny?"

"Sure. What's up?"

He shoved the Ford into gear and we jumped forward. "It's Princess. She's ready to kindle and that damned fool Ferguson can't move her."

We swept past the reptile house, scooted a couple of visitors to the edge of the road and skidded behind the executive offices. Doc went through the back door and grabbed the phone on his desk.

"Get me the District Attorney," he told Gladys on the board.

I knew why he needed Johnny. The last time the big Bengal had dropped a litter, we'd moved the male tiger and she had stayed in the grotto. The result had been disastrous. On the third day, she had destroyed the kittens in a fit of rage. Now, Doc wanted to move her into a cage with an open lattice bottom so that the kits might drop through as they were born and we could rear them on a bottle.

He cradled the phone and said, "Take my car and shake a leg. They're going to let him out with a couple of wet nurses."

"Wet nurses?"

"Detectives," Doc shouted after me.

That struck me funny. We were bringing him home to play with a tiger and the police department was providing a body guard to protect him from people.

2.

Downtown, I parked in a red zone before the City Hall. As I went up the front steps, a big, expensively dressed guy took in my monkey suit, the badge on my chest which said I was a *Zoo Officer* and the official car I'd left at the curb.

"You," he said. A hand like a Christmas ham snapped out and caught my arm.

With the heel of my free hand, I sliced down hard and sharp. He let

go with a yelp. I don't like to be touched. Not even by my friends. Add that to the fact I take care of snakes for a living and a psychiatrist could probably have a field day. Fortunately, I can't afford one.

We stood there measuring each other. His eyes were cagy, as aware as a hawk's. In a big, florid face, the nose veined, those eyes were surprising.

"You know who I am?" he asked.

"I don't give a damn."

"A monkey," he said, "a regular brass monkey." He pushed a fat finger at me. "Donahue." He tapped it into my chest. "Steve Donahue."

"Take your finger off my chest." I knew I wasn't playing it smart. It had been one of Big Steve Donahue's men, a two-bit punk named Cabelli, whom Johnny had seen killed by Vic Monetti in a lousy joint on South Market called *The Brite-Spot*.

"I could have you bent like a pretzel," he said softly. "I could have you broken in little pieces." But he dropped his fat finger.

I held onto myself. "What do you want?"

"That's better, son." He smiled without humor. "Me, they won't let see him. You, they will. You got a nice shiny badge; you're a public servant."

"You're talking about Johnston," I told him. "So what?"

Donahue reached into a pocket and found a buck's worth of panatella. His eyes examined the perfect

gold leaf. He said, "You tell him Steve Donahue wanted him to know there's a rumble around that Monetti's boys have had the word that no holds are barred."

I grinned at him. "So what are they going to do? Blow up the jail?"

He shook his head. "You're not very smart, son. Way I look at it, it means they're going to look up his family."

"They'll have to go a long way." I didn't say where.

"Fine," Donahue actually appeared relieved. "That's fine. I'm real anxious for that boy to testify."

"You should be." I brushed past him and went into the City Hall. Why the hell shouldn't Donahue be anxious? With Monetti in San Quentin on a one-way fare, he'd have the border trade all to himself. I knew that and I'd never seen the bum until two minutes ago.

They brought Johnny down in the elevator, a couple of close friends of his, standing out like cops in their felt hats, their middle-class business suits and thick-soled service oxfords.

I didn't know whether ten days in jail had aged Johnny any, but it certainly hadn't done his rough good humor any good. He looked like Victor Mature up to his ankles in boiling oil. He didn't introduce his friends.

On the way down the hall, I told him Doc's opinion of Ferguson.

Johnny swore and said, "If he's touched that cat, I'll skin him alive."

When we left the hall and got down onto the sidewalk, Johnny paused, feeling the sun on his back, looking up at the sky. He didn't say anything, he just stood there. I had a feeling that under his jacket, his muscles were moving, readjusting. If you've ever seen us let a big cat out of a crate into one of our open pits, you'll know what I'm talking about.

One of the cops said, "Let's get a move on."

I asked, "Is this a foursome, or are we going in two cars?"

Johnny came back to us then. "What do you say? How about letting me ride out with Ed? Just like I was a free man."

"Sure, Mr. Johnston." The smaller of the cops smiled. "That's okay with us. What we're doing is for your own protection, you know."

Johnny snorted.

The larger of the two went around the corner of the building to get a car from the police motor pool. The small man said his name was Harris. It didn't seem to make any difference to Johnny. We talked about the weather and how fine it was. That is, Harris and I did. We both were trying to be nice. It wasn't very comfortable, though.

3.

Then the big man came with the car and Harris said not to run through any red lights and we both laughed. Johnny and I got into the

Zoo Ford and the police followed.

Johnny sat beside me and stared somberly straight ahead. Finally, he spoke, "Ed, let me have the keys to your car and apartment."

There was a quiet desperation in his voice. I hadn't been so far off about a cat getting out of a cage. "Look," I said reasonably, "it's just five days until the trial. You've broken the back of the thing. Why not play it safe?"

He told me what I could do with playing safe. "The keys," he repeated. "Then, you stay in town for a dinner and a show." He reached for his wallet. "I'll stake you to both."

You could read him like a book. It was so obvious, so much a thing you could feel, it was frightening. I said, "I'll be damned if I'll let you drag Gloria into this. She's all they need. Right now, your touch is poison. Solid, genuine poison."

Johnny glanced at me sideways. Nothing pleasant was in his eyes. I had cobras that looked happier.

"Smitty been playing around with her?"

"Oh, Lord!" I groaned.

"Who, then?"

"Nobody, you damned ape. When I was on my way in to get you, Steve Donahue stopped me. Big Steve was anxious that you should know the word's come down through the Monetti organization that you're not to testify. If you're kept under wraps, then, it's to be your family. I let him know you didn't have a

family. At least, not around here. I think it's to his interest to pass the word around. Why give 'em Gloria?"

I watched his face in the rear vision mirror. It was a bad thing to see. It had gone white and raw and savage.

We rode in silence.

"But I'm not going back. Not to jail. Not to their damned protective custody!"

I stared straight ahead. "You'll keep away from Gloria?"

He didn't answer.

I thought about the stars in their courses. I thought about a story by de Maupassant where the hunter got two ducks for the price of one because mate would return to mate. I thought about those of us who worked in cages and how often we became like the animals we worked. And Johnny worked with the cats.

We arrived at the zoo.

4.

Doc Fallon, himself, opened the gate for us so we could drive on in. Then, he crowded in beside us and began to talk to Johnny about the Princess as though it were simply the morning after the night before. He paid no attention to the police car on our tail.

When we reached the service gate behind the grottoes, Johnny took over. The Princess was his baby and his alone. Fallon, the two cops and I were stopped at that

gate. Nobody except Johnny was going to be where the tigress could see him, hear him, or smell him.

The law didn't like that. The eyes of the law were to be kept on Johnston. Those were orders.

Doc dynamited that idea. He said, "I brought this boy out here to do a particular job. He's the only man who can accomplish it and what he says goes. All he asks is that we stay away from him and the cat, and by God, we're going to!

"For that matter, from where we stand here, you can see the service road all the way to the bear grottoes. Johnston is going down that road and around the canvas-covered end of that teakwood cage you can see sticking out. At that point, he'll slip into the service entrance of the grotto to a spot where he can control a pair of sliding doors, one to the grotto, the other to the cage.

"He'll be out of sight, but he'll be in no danger from other *human* agencies. The only alternate approach to where he'll be is through the tiger pit itself. Scarcely," Doc's eyes twinkled, "a route that would appeal to a petty gangster. Not with the big male tiger loose in there."

Doc won his point.

Johnny went through the service gate and we settled down to wait.

All we could hear was the murmur of Johnny's voice, soft and easy, and now and then, the harsh, guttural talk of the tigress.

We listened, and we waited.

At noon, I took the car and went

up to the cafe for sandwiches and containers of coffee. The detective called Harris went with me. He suggested a tour of the entire park. He wanted to look over the visiting firemen.

"What if they've imported out-of-town help?" I inquired.

Harris shook his head. "Not Monnetti. He's too cheap."

"If that's what you think of him, why hang onto Johnny? Johnny's a tough boy. He's been taking care of himself for quite a spell."

"Cheap, I said. That's got nothing to do with dangerous. Monnetti's dangerous as hell. Peculiarly so because his gang's loyal as hell. Blood line runs clear through it. Like the Mafia fifty years ago. All cousins, brothers, in-laws." Harris closed his fist. "Like that."

I asked another question. "Think they know Johnny's out here?"

"Why do you think we're taking this joy ride?" He wasn't looking at me. He was watching people.

5.

We stopped at the reptile house long enough for me to make a quick inspection. Everything was quiet. It was a good crowd today. We went on to the cafe.

Gloria came over. Her grey eyes were snapping. "Was that Johnny with you?"

Harris glanced at her sharply.

"The girl friend," I said. "Gloria, this is Sergeant Harris."

Harris said, "Pleased to meet you."

"Hello," said Gloria, and back at me, "Where's Johnny? Where can I see him?"

"Maybe on the way out," I turned to Harris. He had moved away. He was heading toward the restroom like a man in a hurry.

"Ed, listen to me. Where's Johnny?"

"Down in the canyon with a tiger. So's Doc. So's another cop." I was wondering about Harris.

"Why didn't he stop to see me?" I couldn't tell by her expression whether she was going to bawl or explode.

"He didn't have a chance," I said quickly. "Doc got him released under guard to take care of some trouble down on the cat string. He's here with a police escort. Can't you understand?"

The door to the restroom opened and two men came out. They were both dark, swarthy, and overdressed; sharp and expensively cheap. They also had something else in common, two chrome bracelets and some connecting links of steel chain. Harris was behind them.

As they went by us and out the door toward where I had parked the car, Harris called, "Hurry that food, Perkins."

"Ed!" She was leaning across the counter when I turned from the big scene. "Those men, Johnny?"

"He's a very popular guy," I told her. "You'd better get your word in early."

When I got to the car with the tray, Harris was in the back seat. His two friends were up in front. I opened the back door and set the tray on the floor. Then I got in and turned the key in the ignition. With all those shoulder pads, it felt kind of crowded.

Behind me, Harris said, "Maybe you'd like to meet the boys. The little one beside you is Rudy Monetti. His pal is Tom Lavinia."

"How do you do," I said. I drove slowly so as not to spill the coffee. I knew why Harris had introduced them. He was proving his point about Vic Monetti's gang. I think he also hoped I'd put a word in with Johnny, make him see the deal he was getting wasn't so rough after all.

I was beginning to have a great deal of respect for Mr. Harris, a medium-sized guy with a tired face. I wondered what had happened behind that restroom door when one man walked in after two.

"How did you spot them?" I asked. The wooden Indians beside me stared straight ahead.

Harris chuckled. "I didn't. They saw me and ducked too fast."

"They were in the cafe when we came in?"

"Right."

I thought about Gloria and began to worry some more. If she'd seen Johnny and then talked about him to the other girls in front of these two . . . If her love had been showing the way it usually did, bursting at her well filled seams . . .

When I parked in the canyon beside the police car, Harris let me get the tray out of the back before he moved his guests. He put them in the back of the police sedan and Brennan came over to lend a hand while Harris talked to the radio and translated the news of the capture to headquarters.

He told the radio he was booking Monetti and Lavinia on a CW.

"What's a CW?" I asked.

Harris held up two automatic pistols. One of them was big enough to blow your head off. "Concealed weapons," he said.

I took Doc his sandwich and coffee.

"Why don't you mosey back there with Johnny's?" he suggested. "It's been mighty quiet in there the last few minutes."

I eased through the service gate and went down the dusty road the meat wagon used. As I passed the canvas end of the kindling cage, I got a nasty growl. A growl close at hand. Princess was where they wanted her. She was out of the grotto and into the cage.

Johnny was nowhere in sight.

For a moment, I stood stark still. When I had it figured, I still stood there.

There was only one way he could have gone. Out through the front! Out past Prince who was as friendly and dependable as a runaway ten-ton truck.

The worst of it was that once he had moved through the steel door and locked it behind him, he had had to walk out of the cave into the pit, watching the tiger and edging along until, at some critical instant, he had turned, jumped, grabbed a couple of handfuls of trailing ivy and scaled a dozen feet or more of vine-covered, vertical wall. That Johnny was physically capable of such a foolhardy venture, I didn't doubt. The frightening, incredible thing was that he had gotten away with it. Take your cat on the parlor floor. Put a mouse in front of it. As long as the mouse is still, or moves slowly, the cat crouches tense with only the tail twitching. When the mouse runs, bingo! See what I mean?

Carrying a cold hamburger, I went back around the corner of the cage and faced the police.

They came to have a look. Only Doc didn't show much concern over Johnny's disappearance. He stood looking at Princess and saying quietly, "For a week, I've been trying to get that cat moved. He did it in an hour and a half. Did it without pushing her around. There's a cat man for you." He squatted on his heels and chucked at the tigress, "Hey, Princess, you ready to give us a family? Nice Princess. Pretty Princess . . ."

From a dark corner, she snarled.

Harris and Brennan were not impressed.

I said, "He's never been in jail

before. He saw no reason why he should be there. He took his chance here rather than go back."

"You in on it?" Brennan was larger than Harris. He had flat blue eyes, mean.

"Hell yes," I said.

Harris said, "We'd better get back to the car and turn this in. The chief may want to get out an all-points in a hurry. Thank God, we've got a Monetti to show."

"So your laundry's clean," Brennan growled.

"I didn't say that, Tom," Harris told him gently.

The rest of the afternoon was a long one.

I went back to my snakes and hung around trying to figure an angle. To call home, I would have to go through the board. Gladys was nosy as hell, the kind of a girl who would listen in to see if I was talking to a woman.

For Zoo visitors, I answered a couple of dozen questions, including the inevitable one about the hoop snake that grabbed its own tail in its mouth to roll downhill. I made a mental note: that took care of that one for this week. Tomorrow, it would be the glass snake that broke into pieces, or the one about rattlers not crawling over a horsehair rope, or snakes not dying until sundown or the snake that stings with its tongue. One thing you could say about working with reptiles. It didn't do much to increase your faith in the intelligence of man.

Around five, I got out of my monkey suit and climbed into an old flannel number.

Lintner gave me a ride into town.

7.

I dropped off at Sixth and Broadway and walked over to the *High Hat*. On a couple of sidecars, I decided Johnny was as safe at my place as anywhere. And, if he had contacted Gloria — well, it was my apartment, my liquor, my — I could dream it was me there with her. Oh hell, yes!

Grabbing a cab at the corner, I sat back and sweated out two miles and ten minutes. The sixty-four dollar question had nothing to do with any of the Monettis. My question was: What would a friend with a girl in my apartment say to a friend arriving with a carload of snakes?

I paid the cab and started across the street. The Jeep wagon Harvey Gault used on the desert was no place in sight. My watch said it was just five after ten. I sat on the front stoop and found some cigarettes.

A car parked down the block. It wasn't a wagon. I went back to watching the smoke curl from the cigarette between my fingers. I wasn't so nervous any more, but I was tired and let down and uncomfortable. I was a little upset, too, and when I figured out why, I tried on a grin with nothing behind

it. I was upset because my best friend was, probably, upstairs in my apartment with Gloria. Sitting outside on the steps, waiting, I felt a little immoral.

The man who had stepped from the car up the block stood before me. "Out of your monkey suit," he said, "you don't look so tough."

I glanced up at his big, florid face, up past the blimp he was smoking for a cigar. "You go to hell," I said to Big Steve Donahue.

"Simmer, son." Donahue stared down at me. "You need a haircut, a short one. Your friend was here. I got hungry. I dropped downtown for some dinner. I wondered if he was still here."

I studied him curiously. "You," I said, "always you alone. Monetti's got cousins and uncles and brothers and in-laws. They all work for him. How do you manage to go it alone?"

Big Steve said soberly, "Al Cabelli was my sidekick. Vic Monetti killed him. Al's going to be a hard man to replace. For now, I'll travel alone." He smiled, not with his eyes, "Picking the wrong boy could cause some misunderstandings. Nothing I couldn't take care of. Only, right now, I don't want to be bothered."

I was working on a good philosophical answer, only I didn't have time to use it. A car came down the block, picking up speed as it came. The ten inches of metal sticking out the front window might have been a length of lead pipe.

I kicked out with both feet and caught Steve Donahue in the ankles. At the same time, I rolled forward, knocking both of us flat. A lot of concrete and other stuff went flying around us.

"You all right?" That was from Donahue, somewhere far away.

I pushed myself to my feet and helped him up.

Windows and doors were opening all over the place.

"Hotrod backfired," I said loudly. "Startled me and I tripped. Knocked my friend flat."

Jim laughed and went back inside. The rest of the seeing-eyes began to do the same.

"Son," Steve Donahue said softly, "maybe you're as tough as you think."

Car lights came down the street again. I wondered how long this would go on before I'd need a padded cell. This time, it was Harvey. I'd know that Jeep wagon anywhere.

He pulled into the curb. "Man, have I got a thirst."

"You're not the only one. Where are my pets?"

Harvey glanced over my shoulder. "Say, don't I know you?"

"Don't think I've had the pleasure," Donahue told him.

"You know him," I said to Harvey. "He's a big television star. Remember the Kefauver show?"

"I'll be damned." Harvey turned

and flipped the light on in the back of his wagon. Four gunnysacks lay bunched on the floor. Harvey picked up two of them by their tied necks and handed them to me. The sacks were heavy. He hadn't been kidding about the size.

He backed out of the car with the second pair of sacks and kicked the door shut.

"What about your friends upstairs?" Donahue asked.

"To hell with 'em," I said. "Since the Chicago treatment, I've stopped being sentimental."

Gault knew something was going on, but he didn't ask any questions. He was that kind of a guy. A good man to drink with, a good man to say hello to. I was glad he had come along.

On the way upstairs, I spoke to Donahue who was bringing up the rear. "Why do you suppose they picked on us?"

"Thought you were Johnston," Big Steve said. "You're enough of a size to pass in the dark. The two of us together was too good to miss."

"They did," I said grimly.

"Not quite, Mister."

I looked over my shoulder. Now there were five of us on the stairs. The two down below had guns.

"So you made a mistake," I said. "I haven't called any cops. Go away."

"Just keep moving, Mister. Big Steve seen you at the City Hall. Big Steve came out here. We think he's looking for Johnston."

I made up my mind. I gripped the sack in my right hand with three fingers. That left the thumb and forefinger to go roving. I felt cautiously for the knot.

Before the door of 2E, I stopped flat-footed. "My keys," I said, "I haven't got my keys."

"You're a liar," the pint-sized gunsel told me calmly. "Put down your sacks and look in your pockets."

Before they thought of why I wouldn't have my keys, I bent and gently let down the two sacks. I didn't have the knot on the right one untied, but it was loose. As I came erect, my little finger caught under the top loop of cord and pulled. The loop came with my finger. Working to disentangle it, I got the whole length of cord free. I dropped it carelessly and stood.

Carefully, I went through my pockets, emptying them one by one and dropping the contents on the carpet.

"O.K., Mister," said the talkative cousin. "Knock and let's see who's at home."

Both of them stepped back to be clear of us and clear of the door.

I knocked.

"Who is it?" A quick, suspicious voice. Johnny's!

"Ed," I said.

Then, there were his footsteps, coming across the room. I bent to pick up my sacks. The eyes of the pugs were on the door, on the square white panel and the brass

knob below it. The knob was beginning to turn.

I grabbed the two lower ends of the open sack. I hoped the contents were well back toward me.

I came erect as though I'd been kicked in the pants. I flipped the open end of the sack out and forward with a snap like a housewife laying a clean sheet on a bed.

The biggest damned rattlesnake you ever saw went flying out the sack toward the boys with the guns. A shorter snake bounced onto the floor short of the mark.

A gun went off somewhere. One of the gunsels screamed. Gault threw his sacks. Not with the snakes set free but simply because they were something heavy he happened to have in his hands ready to throw.

Then he and I and Johnny were down on the floor with a couple of Monetti's boys, two guns and as many loose snakes. The snakes were buzzing like alarm clocks gone crazy.

It was all over quick.

The smallest of the pugs had been hit by the biggest snake. Hit hard in the leg. He sat there white-faced, rocking and sobbing. Gault went to work on him with a pocket knife while Johnny pulled off his belt and tossed it for a tourniquet. Johnny still sat on his catch.

I went into my apartment fast.

I said, "Hi," to Gloria. She was there somewhere on my way to the broom.

The buzzing of the alarm clocks went on.

I came back with the broom and pinned the big snake.

Gault pressed his lips to the little gangster's calf.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Sergeant Harris stood at the head of the stairwell, putting away his gun. Brennan was behind him.

Reaching down, I caught the pinned rattler hard behind the angles of its deadly jaws, raised its writhing fat five feet and carried it to the empty sack. "There's your boy," I said to Harris. "For the love of Pete, take him back and lock him up."

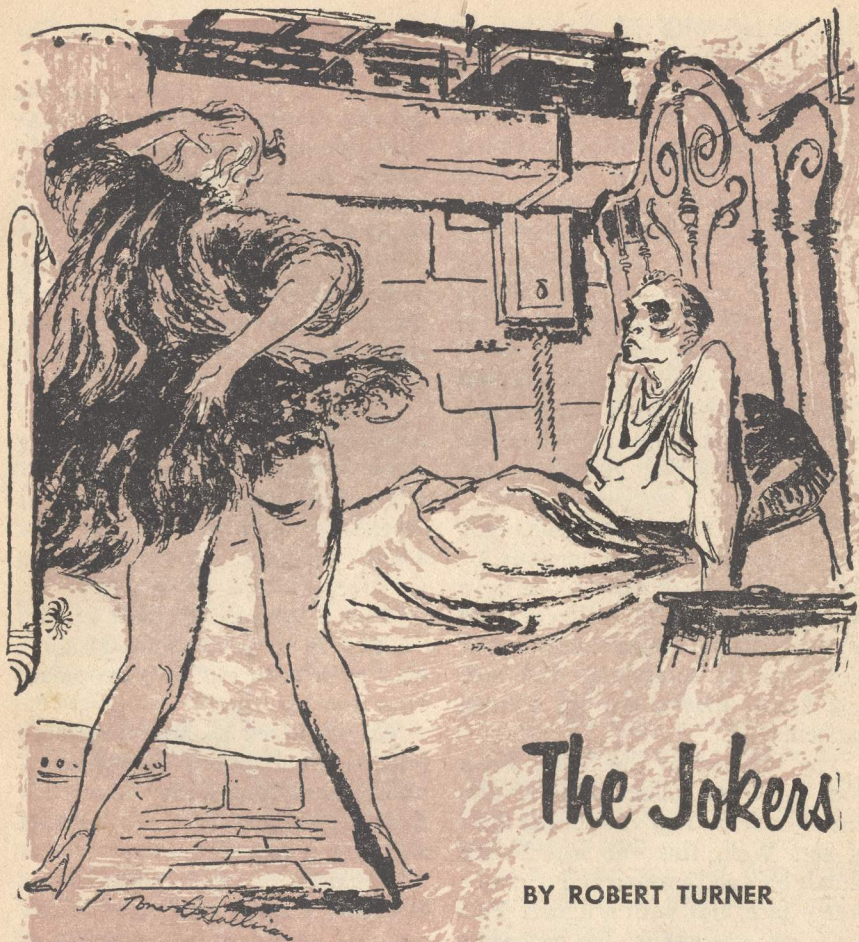
Harris grinned. "Happy to oblige," he told me.

Big Steve Donahue groaned and that was the first time I paid him any attention since he had sat down on the floor when the commotion started. He was leaning back against the wall, now, with his hands pressed over a lot of stomach. Blood was trickling between his fingers. That was where the wild shot had gone.

Harris saw it, too. He crossed to the big man's side and crouched. "You better call an ambulance, Tom," he said to Brennan.

I tried not to feel too bad about Donahue. I tried to figure that this was the way it would have to be with him whether it came this year or the next. I tried to forget that I had begun to like the bum.

I went down the hall to pin the second snake. It was coiled in the recess of the next doorway. A hell of a way to end a day.



The Jokers

BY ROBERT TURNER

It was a terrific joke. They couldn't stop laughing. And then somebody screamed . . .

You know how college guys are, always ready for hell or a frolic. Well, us Sigma Nu Delt guys really used to tear it back there at West-lake College. Take that night with

ol' Georgie Grootch, the Delt house handy man. Talk about crazy gags.

This Grootch was close to seven feet tall and with one of those big, bony frames and a long, hollow-

cheeked face with sad, sunken eyes, something like ol' Abe Lincoln's. Just by looking at him you knew he belonged to one of these pseudo-religious cults where they holler and roll on the floor and knock their heads against the wall and froth at the mouth and have themselves a real frenzy. He didn't drink or smoke, of course, and was always telling us Delt guys we ought to mend our sinning ways.

We liked him, though. He was really a good guy. Harmless, wouldn't hurt a fly. And he'd do anything for us Delt guys. We were real fond of ol' Georgie.

Well, this thing started one night out at the Shore Inn, a hangout for the college crowd. Four of us guys were out there, stag. We were tired of the squaws around campus and were out for something different, you know, maybe stir up a little excitement.

The star act of the Shore Inn's floor show was Lillie LaMarr, The Snake Dancer. You've seen the kind of act. Well, this one had brassy blonde hair and a round and stupidly pretty face, but with a figure. You never saw one like it. She had what it takes in carload lots.

Nobody in our bunch got very excited watching her this night, though. You see, Lil, she liked college guys, especially football players. We'd all dated her during the two weeks she was at the Inn. Lil was a good scout. She could get drunker than any of us and raise more hell.

She had a sense of humor, too. She could go along with a gag.

So we're sitting there, watching Lil and that big, doped-up ol' snake she uses in the act and suddenly Ozzie Dorman — you know Oz, made All-American tackle that year — he says, out of nowhere:

"Hey, you guys want to hear something funny? Guess who I found out is pure as the driven snow, like they say? This'll kill you. I meant to tell you before."

The other two guys, Tony Genaro and Dolf Froelich — you remember those two flashy backs — and myself, we all shut up and looked at Dorman. "Who, Oz?" I said after awhile. "I didn't know there was a gal in ——"

"Not a femme," Dorman cut in. "A guy. A full grown man. He ain't ever even been *out* with a woman. How you like that?"

We all stared at him. Dorman's buck-toothed mouth was grinning clear across his meaty face. He hunched his shoulders over the table and gave it to us, then.

"Grootch," he said. "Old Georgie Grootch. Honest to God! He *told* me. He swore it on a stack of Bibles."

"Nuts!" Genaro told him. "Grootch might be stupid but he's a human being like the rest of us and any guy thirty-six years old ——"

"You callin' me a liar?" Oz Dorman leaned across the table, his small close-set eyes glittering. Nobody ever called Oz anything. And lived.

"No, Oz," Genaro said, quickly. "Only it's kind of hard to believe."

Then Dorman calmed down and told us how one night he got to talking to Georgie Grootch and needling him — Oz is a great kidder — and the goop told him he hated women, that they were the source of all sin and he'd no more date one than he'd take poison. He told Oz that he'd promised his mother when she died that he'd never have anything to do with a woman, never even get married.

It seemed Grootch's father had been quite the Romeo down in the Tennessee hills where they lived when Grootch was a kid and finally ran away with some little chick from the village. So the old lady had it in for all young gals and sold Georgie, but good, that any kind of a hassle with a femme was the ultimate in damnation.

Then Oz said: "Y' know, guys, it's sad, when you think what that character's missing. He'll probably go right on and die in that condition. That's not right. It's not normal." Dorman's voice broke some at the end. We'd never heard him so doleful.

We saw this sly look come over his face, then, though, and we knew that a gag is cooking. Oz Dorman was the ringleader of our gang. Whenever there was any real hell-raising, Oz was the guy behind it. He'd been in steady trouble the two years he'd been on campus. If he got caught at any rough stuff again

he'd not only get bounced from the squad but be expelled. That didn't stop him, though. And he had some real good ideas. He had the nerve to carry them out, too, and he usually managed to shame the rest of us into going along with him.

"You know something," Dorman said, finally. "We got to help poor Grootch out."

We all thought about that. I looked at the other guys and they were starting to break out in grins and you could see the idea taking hold. "When, Oz?" Dolf Froelich said, excitedly. "Tonight?"

"How you going to work it?" I said. "If he won't even go out with a woman?"

"Don't be stupid!" Oz Dorman's ugly face got all aglow. He began to wash his huge hands together. He was watching Lilli LaMarr close her act and back off stage. "He don't have to. We bring a dame to him."

"Are you crazy?" Genaro said. Grootch lived in the cellar of the Delt house. "We'd never get her past Aunt Bessie."

Aunt Bessie was old Mrs. Malcolm, Delt's house mother. She was a good soul but tough, wouldn't take any nonsense. We didn't have a chance of getting a dame in there with Aunt Bessie on the job.

"Look," Dorman's little eyes narrowed. "Aunt Bessie's got a bad cold, hasn't she? You know what always happens. I saw her smuggling a package in tonight, just before we left." Oz grinned.

Every time the old lady got a cold she'd take a little bourbon, for medicinal purposes, she said. Somehow, she always took an overdose and about eleven o'clock she'd reel up to her room and was through for the night. The house could burn down around her and she wouldn't rouse. We knew. We pulled all kinds of hell when Aunt Bessie took too much cold medicine. One night we had half the babes from the Alpha house in for a party.

"Okay, Oz," I said. "Now, all we got to do is find the gal for Georgie."

Dorman reached out and grabbed a passing waiter by the seat of the pants. "Hey, garçon!" He held a buck scissored between his fingers. "Go tell Lil to come over to our table for a drink."

We stared at him, stunned. It was almost too much to think about. Big, gangly, dopey, bashful Georgie Grootch and Lilli LaMarr, the snake dancer. What a brain this Oz Dorman had. He rocked back in the booth and beamed at us.

Before anyone could get over the stupendous possibilities, while our imaginations were building it up and up, Lil, herself, came swivel-hipping between tables to our booth. We watched her, building the thing in our minds, looking at the shiny sheath of an evening gown she wore and at her full and painted mouth.

She swung onto the booth bench beside Dolf Froelich and me, pushing us over. She looked at us from

under artificial lashes in what was supposed to be a coy glance. "How are you muggs tonight?" she said in that throaty voice of hers. "You want to buy a farewell drink for Lil? You know I close here, tonight. I take the three A.M. train to K. C., where I open in a real high class dive, Saturday. I'm going to miss you boys. You been real sweet."

"Yeah," Dorman said. He whistled to the waiter. "Get Miss LaMarr a triple shot."

Lil made faint protest against the size of the drink but when it came she gulped it down. She said nothing when Oz Dorman ordered a refill right away. We kidded around with her for awhile the way Oz told us to do, without saying anything about the big gag, until Lil had tucked away three or four drinks and was getting giggly and flushed and a little loud. Then Oz Dorman threw her the pitch.

At first she'd have no part of it. She'd seen Georgie Grootch and knew what he was. Indignantly, she said: "What do you guys think I am, anyhow?"

"A good sport," Oz Dorman told her. "A real sport who doesn't mind helping a couple of pals have a few laughs and at the same time giving a poor old guy a break."

Well, after another drink, the idea seemed to take hold of Lil. Finally, she said: "I hadn't ought to have any part of this, but I been having lousy luck at the crap tables upstairs. Ain't got much pay left. I

could use some traveling money. You guys willing to pay for this deal?"

"How much?" Dorman said. "How about a sawbuck?"

Lilli LaMarr pursed her lips and put her hands out, palms up, and pushed with them.

"Twenty?" Dorman said.

She kept making that pushing motion until Dorman got up to fifty bucks. We all looked at each other. We'd got our subsidization dough from the Alumni Association the day before and were fairly flush.

Dorman turned to Lil. "Okay," he said. "But you got to do it our way. After the last show, you go back to your dressing room and just put on that fur coat of yours over your — pardon the expression — costume. Just the fur coat. Understand? Then when you bust into Georgie's room and wake him, you give him a private performance of your snake dance — without the snake, of course. If that don't make him change his mind about women, nothing will."

Lil said okay, she'd do it for us, but we'd have to take her suitcase along and drive her to the depot to catch that late train after the fun was over. We said okay and the thing was set.

While we waited for Lil to finish her last show at the Inn, we learned that Oz Dorman knew where Grootch had hidden an extra key to his room. We tried to figure some way to watch the excitement but

there wasn't any way. The only window in Grootch's room was up near the ceiling and it was below ground level, in one of those little pits, like. But we finally agreed it didn't matter much. We'd get plenty kicks out of just listening to Lil's spiel and Grootch's reactions.

When we were all set, we got out of the Inn and piled into Tony Genaro's convertible, after stashing Lil's suitcase in the luggage compartment. We were all loaded as the Shore Inn's dice by then and Lil and us whooped it up plenty during those ten miles back to the campus.

We had some trouble quieting her down but we finally did and got her into the Delt house without waking any of the other guys. Down cellar we found Grootch's extra key and while Lil let herself into the big goop's room, we hustled into the storage bin next to it and leaned against the thin plasterboard wall. I remember my heart felt as though it was going to jump right out of my chest. We almost died, trying to stifle laughs.

The light switch snicked on in Georgie Grootch's room and then, plain as anything, we heard Lil say, softly: "Hiya, Handsome. Wake up and talk to me awhile. I'm lonesome."

Then there was a sound like a bull buffalo drowning and Grootch's hoarse whisper said: "No, no, woman! Wh-what are you doing here? You — you're in the wrong place. You don't belong here. Get

out. Get out. You . . .” His voice trailed off.

There were some cooing sounds from Lil and then Georgie gasped: “Please! No, lady! . . . Get out, I say! You cannot tempt me! This is my hour of great temptation but I will be strong! Very strong!”

“I’ll say you are,” Lil’s voice said, laughing softly.

Then there was some thrashing around and over it Georgie Grootch’s harsh voice making protests that grew weaker and weaker. Then there were no voices at all for awhile.

Oz Dorman whispered: “Man are we going to have fun needling him about *this!*”

A little later we heard Georgie Grootch’s low, rumbling voice say: “Disciple of the devil!” Then there was a gasping sound and a kind of shrill half-scream that was cut off almost as soon as it started. We all backed away from the wall, staring at each other, color washing out of our faces. It had been that kind of scream.

“Wh-what’s going on in there?” Dolf Froelich managed in a kid-scared voice.

“I don’t know,” Dorman answered. He didn’t sound so good, either. It was the first time I’d ever seen him look so worried. Then he jerked his thumb toward the stairs. “We’d better scam. If the big jerk sees us when Lil comes out, he’ll know we were behind this gag and report us. We’ll wait for her, outside.” The rest of us never did catch

up with him as he broke for the stairs.

We sat in Genaro’s car, waiting, not talking much, you know how you get, pooped and bored and nervous, like, when a night’s fun is over and you want to get to bed but something’s keeping you from it.

For a long time we waited, almost an hour and finally Dorman, after some squirming, said in a funny voice: “Something’s wrong. She should’ve come out by now. We can’t wait for her all night. One of you go back with me and check.”

Nobody knocked themselves out volunteering but I was finally drafted for the job.

Downstairs again we knocked on Grootch’s door. We banged as hard as we dared without waking up the whole house but Georgie didn’t answer. Then, just as we were about to give up, we heard the door of the furnace room open. Georgie came out of it and locked the door behind him and walked toward us. He didn’t seem too surprised to see us. He just looked as though what passed for his mind was maybe a million miles away and he looked very pale and tired.

Dorman waited until he came up to us and then said: “All right, Georgie, where is she? Where’s Lil?”

He blinked like a big, dumb hound dog. At first I thought he was going to play innocent but then he said from deep in his throat: “That woman?” He said it like a curse. “She’s gone where she belongs!”

"What?" Dorman's voice was trembling. "What do you mean?"

Grootch's Adam's apple worked like crazy and then he said: "She's gone. I — sent her away."

Dorman said: "You mean she left by herself, went out the back way or something? Why? We were going to drive her —"

"She's gone," Grootch cut him off, staring fiercely and sort of unseeingly over our heads, his sunken eyes blazing. "Gone back to the devil's place that spawns her kind!"

I guess, tough as Dorman was, this wild look on old Grootch's face, and the sound of his voice, scared him a little, too, because he started backing toward the stairs. Weakly, he said:

"Oh, I see." He elbowed my ribs. "Let's go. Georgie says she — left by herself, probably cut through the back lot to the Avenue and took a cab or something into town or went back to the Inn. That's what he means."

I lost no time following Dorman, running like a jackrabbit out of the cellar. Outside we talked it over with the other guys and it took us some time and arguing but we finally figured it. It was crazy, but Lil must've got scared of Georgie's rantings or maybe figured we thought she'd flubbed the deal and might try to take her money back, or something. So she just checked out.

Dorman said leave her suitcase in the back of the car and she'd probably stop back for it. It was a funny thing, though, but I don't think she ever did. I don't know whatever happened to that suitcase, really, because none of us ever talked much about the thing after that.

Things were different after that, too. I don't know, it seemed as though all the spark had gone out of us guys or something. And everything kind of seemed to happen after that. The gang busted up. Oz Dorman, that crazy guy, a week later he got into a drunken brawl in town and killed some punk with a beer bottle. They put Oz away on a manslaughter rap. I transferred out of Westlake the end of that term and so did Tony and Dolf. We were glad to go, too. It gave us the willies whenever we saw Georgie Grootch, the way he'd sit around all the time, out in the back yard, looking down at those enormous hands of his, the big fingers splayed and mumbling to himself. Last I heard, he got real bad after awhile and they had to put him away.

Lillie LaMarr? That's a screwy thing, too. I'm in show business, now, publicity, and I often figured I'd bump into her sometime, especially since some of my accounts are strip joints, but I never have. She must have gotten out of the business right after that, or something.



What's Your Verdict?

No. 18 — The Complete Failure

BY SAM ROSS

GERALD HORACE DEEMS was an intelligent man, who'd almost finished college and had a scattered knowledge of a lot of things. The only reason Gerald wasn't making more than forty dollars a week was because he was lazy. He just didn't care — and, so long as he was single, it didn't much matter to him. But Gerald met Marcia Houston, fell in love with her and married her in a few months. After they'd settled down, he discovered that Marcia wanted him to get ahead in life, make something of himself — and, incidentally, bring home enough money to get Marcia Houston Deems a few nice minks and diamonds.

Gerald was a fairly weak man. He agreed with Marcia that he ought to show more ambition, and he tried to push ahead in his office. But he just couldn't make it — his innate laziness got in the way.

Marcia began to lecture him. Later on, she began to scream at him. Gerald took all this with perfect patience because, he thought, Marcia was right, after all. He was a complete failure. Marcia deserved the best, and he just wasn't capable of getting it for her.

"Dear," he suggested one eve-

ning, "maybe you'd be better off if you got a divorce."

"I love you," Marcia said. Marcia knew perfectly well that she wasn't getting any younger, and that a poor husband was better than no husband at all. "Besides, if you'd only show a little ambition, a little drive, you'd get ahead, Gerald. I know you could get ahead. Just a little drive . . ."

Finally, Gerald knew what he had to do. He took out a life-insurance policy on himself (with double indemnity for murder) and made Marcia the beneficiary. He just had to give Marcia the good things of life, and if the only way he could do it was to die, himself, it would be worth it.

But Gerald didn't have much courage, and the act of committing suicide was too much for him. Besides, he knew that life-insurance companies don't pay on a suicide claim for a year or two, and he didn't want poor Marcia to wait that long. Now that he'd made up his mind, he had to go through with it. So he decided to hire someone to kill him.

He picked an old friend of his, Alan Roeburt, a man who liked guns and got in a little target practice out in the nearby woods every week or

so. "I want you to kill me," he told Alan flatly.

Alan refused at first, but became convinced after several earnest sessions with Gerald. Only one thing remained to worry him: "Suppose the police catch me?" he asked.

"I've thought of that," Gerald said. "I'll write out a paper, nice and legal, which will state that I've hired you to murder me, and fully understand the consequences."

Gerald wrote the paper. He had himself certified sane, that same day, by a local psychoanalyst. That night he gave Alan the paper and said: "Now, go ahead and kill me."

It took Alan Roeburt three days to work up enough nerve to shoot a man in cold blood but, finally, he managed to do it. With Gerald lying dead on the floor, Alan called the police.

There was a trial, of course. Alan produced the paper and stated that he'd have to go scot-free. "It wasn't

murder," Alan said. "Gerald knew what he was doing. He agreed to it. He hired me to shoot him. Here's the proof."

The prosecutor examined the paper and the psychoanalyst's certification. "None of this matters," he said. "You killed a man in cold blood and you've got to pay the penalty."

"What penalty?" Alan asked. "Gerald wanted me to kill him. You can see that for yourself."

"But you killed him," the prosecutor said. "That's against the law."

Who was right?

What's *your* verdict?

ANSWER:

The prosecutor was right. Nobody can legally hire a man to do something illegal. Alan was sentenced to a long jail term — and the insurance company, pleading that Gerald had "connived to defraud" them, refused to pay off. Poor Marcia, eventually, went back to work for herself.



The High Trap



*There was only one escape — a
sheer drop of three thousand feet.*

BY FLOYD MAHANNAH

A Novelette

TOM and Kay Lander didn't talk as the pickup truck rattled along the washboarded desert road. Everything they could have said had already been said, and now they rode silently. The sun had set on the desert behind them; and shadows were gathering in the hills ahead like an omen of their lives from now on.

Tom Lander, tall and still young but leaner than a man with his heft of bone should be, stared straight ahead, his mind only partly occupied with what another automobile was doing stopped a quarter of a mile ahead on this road that led only to his ranch. The other part of his mind went on wearily retracing the things that had been said, and all the other things he hadn't been able to get into words.

He glanced at Kay's hands folded in her lap.

They were fine, strong-fingered hands; but the wedding ring, which had been snug when he put it there three years ago, was loose now. A small piece of tape was wrapped around it to keep it on her finger. It was like the blue tweed suit she was wearing, the suit she'd been married in — she didn't seem to

quite fill it any more. Tom didn't lift his eyes to her face. He knew it better than his own. It was a good face, with a sensitive mouth and level gray eyes that didn't lie to you. But three years had changed it too, erasing the eagerness and the softness it needed to make it lovely. Another three years, and she'd look like so many of the worked-out, hope-starved women you saw in this country.

No, you couldn't blame Kay for leaving.

They were nearer the parked car now. It was a dilapidated brown sedan; and what it was doing stopped beside this rutted desert road was more than he could figure.

This was almost the center of a wide valley with nothing in it but the two cars, the road, and the big runways. Years ago, during the war, there had been a big Air Force installation in the valley. There had been hundreds of wood and tarpaper buildings, and the valley had been criss-crossed by long runways where the heavy bombers landed and thundered off around the clock. But after the war the base had been abandoned, barracks hauled away, even the rubbish bulldozed into

holes and the land levelled off again. All that was left now was the angular traces of streets, and, of course, the long runways. The runways had been built to handle the heavy stuff; and, although sand had drifted across them in places and the sage brush and other windblown debris had done their part to mask them, the runways were still there, massive and comparatively uneroded.

The sedan was parked at the end of one runway, with a man sitting in it. And, since in this country you didn't pass a stopped car without asking if help was needed, Tom stopped the truck beside it.

He gave the driver a nod. "Need any help?"

"No thanks." The driver was red-haired and freckled, a thick shouldered man who looked Tom's age, thirty-two; and he smiled like the joke was on him. "I reckon I got lost."

"Where were you headed for?"

"Hanville."

"You turned off the highway too soon. This road only goes to my ranch."

"I was beginning to wonder if it went any place. I stopped to have a smoke, then I figured to turn around and head back."

"It's the only way out. The highway is about fifteen miles back."

"Yeah, I know."

And now Tom could hear a sound louder than the erratic idling of his pickup truck. It was a long droning sound like you used to hear during

the war — the sound of a big, multiple-engined aircraft. And it was getting stronger. Tom lifted his head to scan the sky.

The red-haired man said, "Don't let me keep you. I'll finish this cigarette before I start back. That way I won't have to eat your dust."

Tom nodded. By then he had spotted the plane, a big one low over the hills to the east. Up where it was the sun still shone, flashing a reflection off the silver wings. And, funny thing, the ship appeared to be heading directly for them, losing altitude as it came.

"Queer," Tom said.

The driver of the old sedan looked at him. "What is?"

"That big plane. Haven't seen one in this part of the state since the Air Force left."

The red haired man shrugged, but some of the warmth seemed to have left his smile.

Kay said in a low voice, "The bus leaves at six, Tom. We haven't much time."

"That's right." But Tom looked a moment longer. "He acts like he's going to land."

There was no question of it. As they watched, the four-engined ship circled north, still losing altitude, then at less than a hundred feet it made a north-south run the full length of the runway. It flashed overhead, a huge thundering shape against the sky. It was an airliner; and if anything was wrong Tom couldn't figure what it was — the

engines sounded fine, the ship appeared to be under full control.

The red-haired man wasn't smiling at all now. He held the cigarette between his lips, but he didn't draw on it. He watched Tom Lander, not the plane.

The airliner circled widely until it was again lined up with the runway, and now the wheels and flaps were down. The roar died to a drone, then the wheels were reaching for the runway, touching with grayish wisps of smoke and, seconds later, the small yelp of tires making contact with the runway. Then the motors roared again as the pilot reversed the propellers to brake the ship, and died to a ruffling sound as the plane taxied toward the end of the runway where they were. Dust and sand kicked up by the propeller wash trailed it.

Tom got out of the truck and walked to the end of the runway to watch, and presently Kay joined him. The huge airliner taxied to within a hundred feet of them, wheeled around until it was pointed back the way it had come, then the motors were cut back until they were idling quietly.

"My God, it's big," Tom said.

"I wonder what is wrong?"

"We'll soon know."

"Yes." The word was a harsh sound back of them, and both Tom and Kay wheeled around.

Kay made a soft, startled sound. That was the way Tom felt in that first second — just startled, with a

sudden impulse to laugh — then his eyes dropped to the carelessly held machine gun, and the impulse to laugh died as quickly as that.

The red-haired man had put on one of those outlandish masks that kids wear on Halloween. It was a caricature of Mickey Mouse, and it showed a droll expression that invited you to laugh with it. Back of the mask, a cloth helmet covered the red hair completely. He faced them, a smiling character at a masquerade, but there was nothing droll about the light machine gun.

"Walk ahead of me. To the plane."

"Hey, what is this —"

"It's not trick-or-treat, Mister."

His voice was harsh, pulled down in his throat as if he were disguising it too. "Now move!"

"If this is a holdup," Kay began, "we —"

"Shut up, lady. And get moving."

"Better do what he says." Tom took her arm to start her toward the plane; and she looked up at him, her face more bewildered than scared.

2.

Over at the plane a door had opened in the ship's side, and metal steps extended to the ground. A tall figure in a gray suit came down the steps, and there was something in his hand. It was a heavy automatic. The man in the gray suit walked toward them, and he wasn't masked. He was as tall as Tom,

heavier, hatless, and he had a big shock of blue-black hair. His features were heavily aquiline, his skin dark like an Indian's. He gave Tom and Kay a glance from black eyes, and spoke to the masked man, "Complications, huh?"

"Nothing we can't handle. How did it go?"

"Some trouble. We took care of it."

"What kind of trouble?"

"One of Persley's bodyguards is dead. Co-pilot is wounded."

Tom could hear the quick intake of Kay's breath. The mask didn't look at them. It grinned at the dark man, but the voice came out of it harshly: "I told you no rough stuff."

The dark man shrugged. "Not our fault there were a couple of heroes in the crowd."

"How about our guys?"

"Not a scratch."

"Did you get the stuff?"

A smile flickered and went away in the heavy features. "We got it."

"Good. Now get the tourists out of that ship. Gang them up over on the edge of the runway."

"Sure." The dark man started back toward the ship.

Kay looked up at Tom again, and some of the color had run out of her face. "One dead and one —"

"Take it easy." Tom's voice sounded queer in his ears.

"You two," the masked man said, "move back under the tail. And keep your mouths shut."

Kay started to say something, but

Tom cut her off: "Don't argue. He's got the gun."

"You just remember that," the masked man said.

He followed them until they were standing under the broad tail surface that looked bigger than the wing of most ships. Then he called to a slender man who had appeared in the doorway with another light machine gun: "All right. Send them out."

"Okay."

First down the steps was a girl in the uniform and jaunty cap of a stewardess. She was a pretty girl with soft, blonde hair like Kay's; and, scared as her face was, there was anger in it too. "What now?"

The dark man at the foot of the steps pointed. "Over there at the edge of the runway. Stand there and wait for the rest. And if any of you think you can outrun a slug, you're welcome to try."

"You murdering —"

The dark man slapped her, hard. "Go on. Move!"

She went then, holding her cheek and stumbling a little, and the rest of the passengers started coming out of the plane. One elderly woman was half in hysterics, and a couple of children were whimpering; but the rest came down the steps quietly, not talking, a stunned, this-can't-be-happening look on their faces. They collected around the stewardess at the edge of the runway; and Tom could hear her telling them they had nothing to worry about.

Nothing to worry about.

Tom looked over his shoulder at the mask with its frozen grin, and he wished he could believe there was nothing to worry about. That mask meant something. And keeping him and Kay separate from the others meant something too. And what they added up to gave him a cold premonition.

He looked around at the barren desert with no cover anywhere on it. A dry, cool breeze was moving up from the south, stirring Kay's hair; and he could feel perspiration drying on his face. No place to run to. And, as the dark man had said, you couldn't outrun a bullet.

The passengers kept coming from the ship until, counting the crew there must have been thirty of them huddled on the edge of the runway. The sun had set, but there was plenty of light left in the sky. Tom could plainly see the co-pilot with his arm in a bloodstained sling — and the blanket-wrapped figure on the ground where the last three men out of the plane had laid it. Tom looked at the shrouded shape of the dead man, and the cold premonition was on him more strongly than ever.

Behind him, the masked man said, "What are your names?"

"Tom Lander," Tom said. "My wife, Kay." From the corner of his eye he could see the masked man turn toward the crowd.

"Quiet, everybody!" The masked man yelled.

Except for the whimper of a child, the group was silent.

"That road over there will take you to a highway fifteen miles east of here. We can't leave you transportation, but some of you can walk it and bring help for the others."

"You murdering devils!" That was a lanky, white haired man, a passenger. "You listen to me —"

"Shut up, Persley!" The machine gun indicated Tom and Kay. "These two are a rancher and his wife who happened along at a damned unlucky time. We're taking them along as hostages. Be sure you tell the police that. Their names are Tom and Kay Lander; and if there's any pursuit and any shooting, they're likely to get hurt. Otherwise, they'll be released unharmed. Understand?"

"And you understand something!" The white haired Persley yelled back. "I'm posting a reward on you devils! Twenty thousand dollars a head! Dead or alive! And that's not all. I'll pay —"

The passengers around him shushed the rest of it. One man held a hand over his mouth. If Persley wasn't afraid of their captors, they were.

The droll grin on the mask was unchanged. "All right, you two. Into the ship."

Tom half turned, looked at him five feet away, at the finger on the trigger, at the muzzle pointed at his stomach.

"Don't be a fool," the harsh voice said.

"Tom," Kay said. "No."

What was the difference — now or later? The difference was a shade of uncertainty; maybe they were only hostages. The cold, reasoning part of your mind can see how a thing must be; but the other part, the instinctive part, always hopes.

Tom turned toward the plane.

3.

Over at the end of the runway the dark man had the hood of the truck open and was smashing at the motor with a hammer. The slender man, who looked no more than a skinny kid, was doing the same thing to the sedan. Putting the cars out of commission.

Inside the plane was a blonde, goodlooking man, who was smiling as if he felt fine. He winked at Kay, but his voice came out jittery:

"Sit some place up in the middle of the cabin. You too, chum. Just sit and be quiet."

They walked five seats up the aisle, and sat down, Tom next to the aisle. Through the window they could see the masked man raise the machine gun and suddenly fire a burst over the heads of the crowd.

"Now scatter! Beat it!"

The crowd ran, scattering like chickens — all except one man. He was shaking his fist at the plane and yelling, "Dead or alive, you murdering devils! Twenty —" Then the man who had come back for him cut him off, pulling him to safety.

The masked man came up the

steps and into the plane. "Here," he gave the machine gun to the blonde man. "Sit behind those two, and if they even wiggle a finger let them have it."

"Sure, Ru —"

"No names!"

"Sure." The blonde man sat two seats back of Tom and Kay, resting the machine gun across the back of the seat.

It sounded like he'd been about to call the masked man Rusty, which would fit with the color of his hair. And the way Rusty had shut him off raised a flicker of hope in Tom.

The masked man peeled off the mask and helmet, revealing the red hair and a small smile of his own. He shrugged out of the jacket, and peeled off four sweaters one after the other. Without the sweaters, he lost the stocky, heavy-shouldered look. Actually he was quite lean. His face was wide, freckled, good-natured, and the smile looked real; but his eyes showed the ice in him. They were a flat, colorless gray, and there was no smile in them.

"Like clockwork," the blonde man said, his nervous laugh almost a giggle. "Some haul, huh?"

Rusty grunted something, and went forward to the pilot's compartment.

Then the dark man came up the steps carrying two suitcases and an odd-looking metal bar with a Y-shaped piece welded to each end of it. He dropped them beside the door, sat down across the aisle a couple of

seats back of the prisoners, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He lit one and blew out smoke, watching the prisoners thoughtfully.

Beside Tom, Kay whispered, "Do you think he means it — about releasing us unharmed?"

"I don't know."

"His not wanting us to know their names means something, doesn't it?"

"Yes." But he wondered. Maybe it was just a device to keep them quiet for the time being. But if they intended to kill him and Kay, why hadn't it been done on the spot? He thought he knew the answer to that, but he wasn't ready to face it yet. You always hope.

"I keep thinking," Kay said in a small voice, "that I'll wake up and find it was all a nightmare."

"Nightmares pass. We'll be all right."

She looked at him, wanting to believe him. He gave her as much of a smile as he could make, but she didn't smile back. He looked away. It had been a long time since she'd smiled at him.

The slender man was coming aboard with two more suitcases and his machine gun.

Tom turned his head to watch, and the blonde man said, "Easy, brother."

The slender one looked very young, no more than a slight, narrow shouldered kid with a thin, sallow face, bluish lips, and eyes that had a muddy, dead quality to them. His

dark hair was cut so short you could see through it to his scalp. He dropped the suitcases, and closed the door.

Then the motors revved up, and the plane started to move. Through the windows Tom could see two of the passengers a good distance away. One of them turned and shook a fist at the plane.

"Persley." The kid's voice had a thin, dead quality like his face. "I should of cut him in half."

"You'd holler too," the blonde man said, "if you'd just lost a million bucks in diamonds."

"Stinking rich." The kid spat on the carpet. "I hate that kind."

The blonde man laughed at him. "When those diamonds are turned into cash, you'll be stinking rich yourself."

"You know, Hanlon —"

"No names. The boss said so."

The kid turned his dead eyes on Tom and Kay. "Who cares what my name is? You, chum?"

"No," Tom said.

"How about you, sister?"

"No," Kay said in a low voice. "I don't care."

"My-name's Coy Andrew Galwig. You like that name, mister?"

"It's a name."

"You like it or not?"

"Lay off, Kid," Hanlon said uneasily. "We're about to take off."

The Kid looked at Hanlon then back at Tom. "That guy's name is Hanlon. They call him Handsome. That red Indian over there is Carl

Dace. Those names were all on the ticket reservations. What's so secret about that? I reckon you're real pleased to meet us, huh?"

Tom didn't say anything.

"Well, are you?"

"Cut it out, Kid," Hanlon said. "Let's have a look at those diamonds."

"You think Mickey Mouse would like it?"

Hanlon laughed. He was good-looking, almost handsome, and laughing seemed to come easily to him. He had wavy, corn-colored hair, his eyes were brown and soft, and his teeth white. His brown suit made Tom's gray gabardine look shabby. Hanlon looked up, met the Kid's look, and something he saw there seemed to chill him, for he said, "Skip it."

The plane had reached the other end of the runway. It turned, then stood with its brakes locked while Rusty ran up the engines. Then the brakes were released, and the ship began to roll, slowly at first then picking up speed, faltering a little as they hit the patches of thinly drifted sand, but moving faster and faster until the ground was just a blur. Tom had never been in a plane before, and a detached part of his mind was interested in the sensation. Finally there was no ground feeling at all, and he realized the ship was airborne. It was a fine feeling. Any other time he might have enjoyed it.

But now leaving the ground was like losing touch with reality.

The end of the runway flashed under the wing, and he could see a few upturned white faces in the gathering dusk. In the west the hills were a familiar black silhouette against the fading light. His ranch was beyond those hills. His and Kay's ranch, and three years of their lives.

They'd both known it was going to be hard work — making anything out of that ranch. The place had been run down almost to nothing, otherwise they'd never have gotten it so cheaply; but they were young and strong, and they'd figured to do big things with that ranch.

What they hadn't figured on was three of the driest summers and three of the coldest winters in the last fifty years.

We didn't fail for lack of work, he thought. We worked ourselves thin. Looking at it one way, we were a howling success even to keep our heads above water while a lot of bigger outfits were going under.

He looked at Kay, her face composed and tight held.

She still loved him. He couldn't believe anything different. You couldn't say she'd run out on him. She'd just worked, every setback taking a little more out of her, until she didn't have anything left — until she couldn't go it any longer on hope alone. He looked at her now and he remembered her three years ago, laughing and so pretty it made

his throat tighten up just to look at her. She could be that way again. One good year would do it. But how could you ask her to stay, to live another year on nothing but hope?

Those were some of the things he hadn't been able to get into words.

It wasn't as if they'd quarrelled about anything. Oh, they'd had the little fusses like anybody, but the end hadn't been like that. All she'd said was she thought she'd go to visit her sister in Seattle. He said he thought that would be a good idea. There hadn't been any mention of a separation or a divorce; but there hadn't been any talk of when she was coming back either. And he'd known —

But what was the use of thinking about all that? He turned his eyes away from the outline of the hills. The plane had levelled out in flight now, was bearing almost due south; and as Tom looked away from the window, Rusty came out of the pilot's compartment. That startled Tom for a second, then he realized the plane must be on automatic pilot.

"Let's see those diamonds," Rusty said.

Mention of them gave Hanlon his smile back. "Wait'll you see that ice." He kissed the fingers of one hand and blew it at the ceiling.

"Where are they?"

The Indian called Dace pointed at a black leather case in the rack above the seat. Rusty got the case, and sat beside Dace, opening it.

Even from where Tom sat he could get some idea of the frozen fire in those velvet trays.

"How much you figure, Boss?" Hanlon said.

"Don't call me Boss."

"I got to call you something."

"Why?"

"All right." Hanlon's smile was not easily discouraged. Nor did his eyes waver from Tom and Kay. "How much you figure they're worth?"

"They're insured for more than a million dollars."

"Hot dog!"

"Million, hell," the Kid said. "We'll be lucky to clear fifty grand apiece."

"That ain't hay. Not in my book. Imagine that crazy old fruitcake carrying all that ice around with only a couple of guards."

Rusty was taking the glittering sparks of light from the trays and putting them into a chamois skin money belt, handling them in bunches like they were marbles. "You guys better get into your gear. We don't want any slip-ups on that."

Hanlon suddenly stopped smiling, looked worried. "For a second I almost forgot about that."

And an odd, still expression had come over the Kid's face too. It might almost have been fear. The Indian, Dace, smoked, watching them both, a small smile touching his meaty lips.

"You first," Rusty told the Kid.

"Then you relieve him with the gun." His eyes touched Dace. "Check them to be sure they get it on right."

Dace nodded, not taking the cigarette from his lips.

The Kid said, "What about taking care of those two right now?"

Tom's heart seemed to stop inside his chest. He could feel Kay tensing at his side.

"No," Rusty said flatly, and Tom breathed again.

"What good are hostages now?"

"If we get a bum break, and some of those supersonic Air Force jets are put on our tail, you'd find out what good hostages are."

"That's right," Hanlon said quickly. "They wouldn't shoot down a plane with live hostages in it. We could put them on the radio to prove they were alive, and that way—" He broke off as he met Rusty's irritable look.

Rusty looked at his watch. "You've got twenty-five minutes, so get at it." He sorted among the suitcases, got the one he wanted, and went back to the pilot's compartment. He passed close enough to brush against Tom's sleeve.

Tom said, "What are you going to do with us?"

Nobody answered him.

The Kid opened one of the suitcases, looked inside it, not happily, then pulled a pair of boots out of it. Tom couldn't see the rest of what was inside the suitcase, but he could see those boots; and it was as if his

heart had skipped a beat again. He had never been in a plane before, but he'd been in the war; and he'd spent several weeks in a hospital bed next to a wounded paratrooper. He knew a paratrooper's jump boot when he saw one.

And now, confirming his thought, Hanlon said, "I still don't see why we have to jump."

"You chicken?" the Kid said.

"Well, those things have been known to fail."

"Then you get your money back."

"Big joke," Hanlon scowled. "But that ground is a long ways down. And damned hard."

Dace smoked his cigarette, watching Tom and Kay. He hadn't said a word since boarding the plane. Tom met his gaze a moment, but there was nothing in the Indian's face. Not even curiosity. He seemed to be looking at them while he thought about something else.

"Hey, Dace," Hanlon said nervously, "you used to be a paratrooper. What's it like, jumping?"

"Nothing to it."

"Supposing the chute doesn't open?"

"You saw me pack them. They'll open."

"You didn't pack Rusty's. He had it done some place."

"Are you getting at something?" A chill had crept into Dace's voice.

"No. Of course not."

"Maybe," Dace said silkily, "you'd like to swap chutes with me?"

It was plain in Hanlon's hand-

some, worried face that that was exactly what he'd like to do, but he didn't speak.

"Go ahead." Dace's voice was relaxed again. "Take mine."

Hanlon hesitated, then shrugged. "You packed them all the same. I saw you. This one is good enough for me. I didn't mean anything, Dace."

"Forget it."

The Kid looked up from lacing his boots, and his dead eyes stayed a long moment on Dace before he went back to the boots.

5.

Kay whispered, "If they all jump what becomes of us?"

Tom didn't answer her. He knew what happened to them. By now he had pieced together most of what had happened. Rusty was a pilot for this airline. That explained his disguise — without it the plane's regular crew would have recognized him. Somehow he'd gotten wind of the wealthy eccentric and his diamonds; and Rusty and the others had worked out a daring plan to hijack them in midair.

The other three had taken over the plane and forced the pilot to land it on the abandoned runway. Emptying the plane of passengers and using it for the getaway was a bold stroke, but it made sense. In a short time they could put a lot of miles between them and the spot in the desert where they'd left the passengers. And, by jumping with

parachutes at a point where an automobile was waiting for them, they made it practically impossible for the police to pick up their trail. The plane, on automatic pilot, would drone on hour after hour until it ran out of gas, or into a mountain. If Rusty was smart — and there was no doubt of that — he'd show up for work tomorrow, and no one would be the wiser.

But not if Tom and Kay were alive to describe him to the police. Before they jumped, Tom and Kay would be killed.

That they hadn't been killed earlier was just Rusty's cool way of playing every card in his hand to full advantage. The Air Force jets and radar search planes weren't likely to be alerted this quickly, but it was a possibility; so he'd kept the prisoners alive this long. The robbery had been cleverly planned and ruthlessly carried out; and there was no slightest likelihood of them showing any mercy at this stage of the operation.

Kay said, with a little catch in her voice, "They're going to kill us, aren't they?"

"I don't know."

"We're the only ones who could identify him."

"Yes."

"And with one murder already to answer for, they've nothing to lose."

At least she was facing it. And she wasn't cracking. But when had she failed to face anything? In a way, leaving him and the ranch was just

facing the facts. There had been no future she could see in the ranch; and you have to have a future to look to or you can't go on. If they'd only gotten one good break in the whole three years, if they'd been able to give it one more try — but there he went again — worrying back over the past, when it was the future that counted. Future. His mouth made a bitter curve at the thought. What future did they have?

Kay said, "It's my fault, Tom."

"Nothing is your fault."

"If I hadn't quit — we wouldn't be here."

"You did what you thought best. Nobody can blame you for that."

"I was so tired, Tom."

"I know."

"If only —"

"Forget about that part of it. We've got to think of something."

"What can we do against four guns?"

Not four guns. Rusty was up front. The Kid was working his way into the parachute harness. Dace was sitting across the aisle, smoking, his automatic only a bulge under his coat at the armpit. Tom swivelled his head, and met Hanlon's brown eyes sighted squarely down the barrel of the machine gun.

Hanlon said, "Go ahead." And his smile was no smile at all.

Tom looked around the cabin. It was a mess. Magazines, pillows, a blanket, coats, a woman's hat, a small suitcase open with women's clothes in it. On the floor by Tom's

foot was a woman's cosmetic case, and beside it a child's rattle. There was a dark smear on the carpet in the aisle, and he could guess what had caused that.

He had to think of something.

Twenty-five minutes — no, nearer fifteen now — to think of something.

The obvious things weeded themselves out quickly. Throw the cosmetic case at Hanlon to distract his aim, then jump him? Not a chance. Just spin and jump him and hope for surprise to give him a break? Not a chance. Talk to Rusty, promising him secrecy? Not a chance. Stir up an argument between them, and play it for breaks? They didn't get along very well, and given enough time things might wind up in a fight — but not in the short time left. No, not a chance.

Not a chance.

The Kid said, "I'll take over, Hanlon."

Now! Was that a chance? In the instant of tensing his muscles, Tom saw Dace draw his automatic.

For a long moment nobody said a word. Dace's black eyes met Tom's blue ones, and not a thing changed in the Indian's face; but the automatic's muzzle pointed squarely at Tom.

"Let him try," the Kid said. "Now is as good as later."

Tom looked at the Kid, wearing the jump suit that looked like coveralls, the boots, the parachute, all bearing the Army insignia. He looked

at the machine gun. Not a chance.
"Get your stuff on," Dace told Hanlon. "Time's getting short."

6.

Dace had to help Hanlon with his gear, then he put on his own, transferring the gun to a pocket of the coveralls. And every time Tom turned his head, he met the Kid's dead eyes behind the machine gun. The Kid didn't seem to mind his turning around now and then. He seemed to enjoy the look he saw in Tom's face.

"Tom," Kay said.

"Yes?"

"I — nothing."

He didn't look at her. The ship droned on. The last light was going out of the sky now. The stars made brilliant specks in the velvet sky. Like diamonds. Like those diamonds a man had already died for. And a man and a woman were yet to die for. Unless he could think of something. Only minutes now. Tom could feel the perspiration on his face. There were a few scattered lights down there in the desert. Not the diamond light of stars — these were yellow lights that shone instead of twinkling, lights where people lived, people who were maybe eating supper and thinking of what they'd do tomorrow. Don't think about that.

"How long now?" Hanlon asked.

"Five minutes," Dace said.

"Oh, Jesus." Hanlon lit a ciga-

rette, took two drags and put it out again. "You say there's nothing to it, huh, Dace?"

"It's a piece of cake."

"I wish I had a drink."

"I wish you had lockjaw," the Kid said. There was a thin film of perspiration on his face, and he swallowed like his throat was dry.

Dace watched them all, his Indian face as unmoving as something carved from dark marble.

Then Rusty appeared from the pilot's compartment, and he was dressed like the rest. He said, "All set?"

Dace nodded, not speaking.

"This is the way it works. I'll make one pass to make sure Patterson is down there. Then I'll circle, put the ship on automatic, then we'll make the jump — one, two, three, four — a couple of seconds apart. That way we don't get all scattered out. Got it?"

"I guess so," Hanlon mumbled.

"No guesses," Rusty said sharply. "When the time comes, don't stall. Jump and jump fast."

Hanlon nodded.

"And get that door open," Rusty said.

"Sure," Dace said, a slight smile breaking the stolidity of his face.

For some reason, Rusty stood for several seconds looking at Dace, then he wheeled and went back to the pilot's compartment.

Dace said, "Give me a hand, Hanlon." He had the odd looking bar with the Y-shaped piece welded

to each end. "I'll hold open the door. You put this in place."

Dace opened the door, straining hard against the pressure of the slipstream, and a sudden swirl of air and the thunder of the motors came into the cabin. Then Hanlon had the bar in place to hold the door open, and they backed away.

They had thought of everything. Tom looked into the dead eyes back of the machine gun, and his throat was so dry he couldn't swallow. He felt a little sick at his stomach, and there was a metallic taste in his mouth like the foretaste of death.

Now or later — what was the difference? But you always hope.

The ship was circling now, so evidently Rusty had made his contact with the ground. There would be the wide circle, then he would lock the controls on automatic, and come back for the jump.

"How high are we jumping from?" Hanlon asked huskily.

"Three thousand," Dace said.

"Jesus, that's high."

"Higher is safer."

"I never want to go near a plane again. Not even to look."

"Will you shut your goddam mouth!" the Kid said. But his eyes never wavered from Tom's.

The faint smile touched Dace's face again, and went away. Tom felt as if he was suffocating. They had to give him a chance somewhere along the line. God, three years without a break, now this. The air swirling into the cabin was cold and clean. It

smelled good. It smelled of the wide spaces and clean distances of this country. Tom's eyes flickered to the land below, half seen in the big moon that had risen.

The ship had completed the circle and was straightened out again, headed south, the roar of the motors diminishing to the lowest safe speed that would keep the ship in the air. That made the jump easier.

Then Rusty came out of the cabin, moving quickly, watching for Tom to make a move.

The Kid said one word: "Now?"

"No!" That was Kay's stifled cry.

"No." And this time it was Rusty speaking.

The single word stopped Tom with his muscles coiled.

"We're leaving them on the ship," Rusty said, watching Tom; and in the second of amazement, Rusty had slipped past Tom in the aisle. "Give me the gun, Kid. I go out last."

The Kid gave him the gun, and only when Rusty had it did Tom realize it had been nothing but a trick to get past Tom's seat without trouble. Maybe Rusty enjoyed doing his own dirty work.

Rusty said, "You call the time, Dace. Hanlon goes first, then the Kid, then you, then me. *Don't move, Lander!*"

What did he have to lose now? It was either die charging the gun, or die standing here looking at it.

At the door, Dace said, "Now. Jump, Hanlon."

Hanlon made a strangled sound, backing involuntarily. Dace's big hands shoved him.

"You, Kid. Jump."

The Kid had moved into position quickly, but suddenly he grabbed the doorjamb harder than Hanlon had.

"Jump!" Dace roared. "Jump!"

"His chute didn't open!"

Dace's fist smashed him in the back of the neck, Dace's knee went into the small of his back, Dace's arm broke his hold on the doorjamb, and the Kid's scream of terror was swallowed as quickly as Hanlon's yell had been.

"Now you, Dace," Rusty called, and already Tom was spinning out of his seat, swinging the cosmetic case in the same instant, braced for the smash of slugs he knew he didn't have a chance of beating.

Miraculously the bullets didn't come, for at the same time Tom had made his move, Dace had whirled on Rusty, his hand dipping into his pocket and coming up with the automatic.

Rusty must have seen this from the corner of his eye, for he spun around, the machine gun spurting flame and lead long before it ever bore on Dace. And before the stitched line of holes in the ship's side reached Dace, the cosmetics case, flung in a full overhand swing

with all Tom's strength in it, had struck Rusty a glancing blow on the head and spun on.

Tom didn't know whether Dace's bullets had hit Rusty or it was the cosmetics case which had knocked him half onto a seat, the machine gun almost out of his hands. Tom dived along the aisle toward him, and it seemed to take an incredible length of time — everything seemed to be in slow motion. It was unbelievable that Dace hadn't recovered his balance yet, that his pistol hadn't fired the bullets that would be the end of Tom Lander. But none of these things had happened.

At last the machine gun was in Tom's grip. Rusty still clung to it clumsily, and there was a brief stutter from it as Tom wrenched it from Rusty's hands. Then it was free in Tom's hands, and he was frantically trying to get it squared around and pointing at Dace; and as he did so, Rusty seemed to come to his senses. He reared up convulsively in front of Tom, and that was all that saved Tom's life, for Dace's gun was barking now, but Rusty was taking the bullets in his back.

Tom stepped free of Rusty, squeezed the trigger, just held it down and watched the bullets stitch a short, diagonal path across the door, across Dace's chest, raising small puffs of dust from his coveralls. Dace took a step forward and fell, full length, his knees not bending.

Rusty hadn't fallen. He had

wheeled around and started for the door, walking in queer, jerky lurches. He stumbled over Dace's body and fell, clawing at something on the harness of his chute; and as quick as that, the white fabric began to tumble out of the parachute pack. The swirling wind from the door caught a fold of cloth, filled it, and sucked it toward the door; in a moment the slipstream would grab it like a big hand and pull the rest of the parachute out the door, and Rusty with it.

Grunting, using all the strength the hard years had packed into his lean frame, Lander picked Rusty up bodily and staggered back toward the front of the long cabin, until at last he had the billowing fabric out of the wind.

Kay was there now, helping him flatten the nylon. He had put Rusty's limp frame in a seat; and as they worked, Kay panted, "Are you all right?"

"I think so. You?"

"Yes. How about — him?"

Tom felt Rusty's pulse. There was none. He must have died in the short space of time Tom had carried him to the front of the cabin. Tom looked from him to the cloud of white nylon that half filled the fore part of the cabin. He looked back at Dace's body. Dace's chute was intact. It could be used. But not this one. Not this tangled mess of nylon and cordage that only moments ago had been a passport to safety.

He stood a moment looking at

Kay's white, strained face; then he turned and walked forward to the pilot's compartment.

8.

He looked into the radio compartment, and the radio had been smashed. That completed the picture. He stood a moment longer, not really debating anything, for the decision was already made in his mind.

Then he went back to the cabin, past Kay who was sitting down now, her face in her hands, and in the back of the cabin he turned Dace over. He was dead. Tom unfastened the harness and took the parachute off of him. He found the suitcase the woman passenger had abandoned, he rummaged through it and found a pair of slacks — several sizes too large, but they would do. He took them and picked up a couple of the sweaters Rusty had peeled off. He took all these things, pushed past the billowing nylon of Rusty's chute and dropped them on the seat beside Kay.

She lifted her head and looked at him, not speaking. Her face wasn't so white now.

Tom knelt and began to unlace Rusty's boots. And after a moment Kay said, "What are we going to do?"

"Jump."

"Jump?"

"Dace's chute will be in working order. I think he fixed the other two

so Hanlon and the Kid would be killed. Rusty hadn't let Dace pack his chute, so Dace had to get him another way — by shooting him after he'd got the ship over the rendezvous point. But Rusty was too quick — almost."

"But — Rusty's chute — it's not usable, is it?"

Tom didn't answer. He finished unlacing Rusty's boots, and pulled them off. "Put these on."

"Why?"

"You can't jump in those high heels. Put those other things on too. No telling what you'll land in."

Kay didn't move to take the boots. "What about you?"

"I'll try to land this ship some place."

"You think you can?"

"I can try."

"Then I'll stay with you."

"Look," Tom said reasonably, not quite meeting her eyes. "We have to figure the percentage on this thing. Say I've got a fairly good chance of making some kind of a safe landing. It's still a chance. Whereas the chute is a sure thing. There's no use both of us taking the chance with the ship."

"You can't land this ship, and you know it."

"I can try," Tom said doggedly.

"Tom," Kay said in a strange voice, "I won't jump."

"You'll jump."

"I won't."

"Baby," he said gently, "you're going over the side even if I have to

strap that chute on you and throw you out. So stop arguing."

Kay sat looking at him, and suddenly her eyes were brimful of tears.

"Listen," Tom said, "I don't know if that guy Persley will stand back of that reward he posted; but if he does, it's ours. And if anything happens to me, it's all yours."

"Tom —" she began, and her voice was strange.

"Don't interrupt. There isn't much time. Now if Persley doesn't pay off, there's still another angle. The press. This is the biggest news story in years — airliner hijacked in midair. Make the papers pay for it, and pay plenty —"

"Tom," she said in the same strange voice, "please stop talking."

"I'm about done. The best place to sell the ranch —"

"Tom, I won't jump."

"I told you —"

"You can throw me out, but you can't make me pull the ripcord."

"Don't be silly."

"I swear I won't."

"Look," he flared, "you —"

"Tom, I love you."

"Kay —"

"No, let me finish. I'd have come back. I couldn't live without you. I wouldn't want to. That's why I can't jump. Whatever happens to you — happens to me."

He reached for her then, and the happiness welled up like a tide inside him. But even as he kissed her, his mind was thinking ahead. There had to be some way to make her jump.

Wait a minute! That paratrooper — the one he'd been hospitalized with during those long weeks of convalescence. What was that story he'd told? Something about a stunt one of the guys in his outfit had pulled to win a bet. That's right — he had it now. Question was: had it been a true story, or just a tall tale? He'd been a kind of a loudmouth, that paratrooper. But he'd told the story with a straight face. Truth or fiction — what did it matter? If he could sell it to Kay, maybe she'd jump.

He pushed her away suddenly. "Here, help me with this thing."

"Help you with what?"

"Help me get the parachute off of Rusty — no, first let's get Dace's chute onto you."

"I told you I won't leave —"

"Who's talking about leaving me? Come on get into these clothes."

"But —"

"Come on."

Tom had watched the others put on their chutes, so he knew how it was done. There were straps to shorten before the harness would fit her, but it took only minutes to do the job.

"This dingus here is the ripcord handle. You jump, wait until you're clear of the ship, then yank it. That's all there is to it."

"Tom, will you tell me —"

"Sure." He picked up Rusty's chute. "Hold this little pilot chute —" and as he worked he told her about the paratrooper, telling it

seriously like there was no doubt in his mind of it being gospel truth. She held the pilot chute at the fore end of the cabin, and he walked toward the back, straightening the parachute cords in the aisle as he went. The nylon canopy was all over the fore end of the cabin, but first you got the lines straight. That was important. Feverishly he searched his memory — why hadn't he listened more carefully? The paratrooper had told the yarn at least three times.

The lines were straight. Now for the canopy.

9.

The big ship droned on through the night. Any time now the mountains might come marching over that southern horizon for the ship to smash herself against. Tom wiped his sweating face on his sleeve, and they straightened the lines for another try.

This time it looked right — almost right, anyway. It would have to do, for Tom had a strong feeling that time was running out on them. He had the lines in a row of accordion loops under one arm, and the canopy like a big bundle of accordion pleated laundry in the other.

Kay looked at it, and she couldn't hide the doubt in her voice: "Do you think it will work?"

"All I know is what the guy told me."

"Do we — jump now?"

"Look for some lights that might be a town or a highway. If we land in too isolated a spot, it'll be a long hike."

"That makes sense."

If they landed. If he landed swinging from an umbrella, instead of smashing to earth like a stone. If . . .

All he knew was what the guy had told him. And the guy had been something of a loudmouth. Chutes are designed to open, he had said. You give any chute half a chance and it'll open, no matter how it's packed. He'd lost a twenty-buck bet on that once, the guy said. This sergeant bet him he could take an opened chute in his arms like a bundle of laundry and jump with it. He'd done it and the chute had opened sweet as a new umbrella. The guy said. But the sergeant had been a paratrooper, he knew all about parachutes, how to pack one, how to hold it so it would open right. Besides the sergeant had had a spare chute on his back in case the one in his arms failed. Maybe none of it ever happened.

"Tom," Kay said.

"Yes?"

"Money or no money, when — if we get down —"

"We'll get down." One way or another, he thought grimly.

"When we get down, let's — let's give that darned ranch one more try."

He looked at her.

"Baby, we'll —" And that's when he saw them — the lights. There was a cluster of them and a line running out from the cluster that might be automobiles on a highway. "Lights!"

"Where?"

"Ahead, way over on the left. We're about as close as we're going to get, so get ready to bail out."

She shook her head, and her face had turned a little gray under the tan. "You first."

"Listen there's nothing to it. You —"

"It isn't that. I have to know you really mean to jump — that it isn't just a trick to get me to —"

10.

Suddenly he laughed at her. "Count three and come after me. Be seeing you." And he went out.

The slipstream grabbed him like a big fist; he'd jumped with his back to it, but he was flipping over as he opened the arm with the chute in it — not all at once, because he figured it ought to get strung out, let the wind pull it out, so it'd go out straight. Maybe that was wrong.

It was a spinning, whirling nightmare, the wind all around him, the chute pulling away in a crazy tangle — at least that's the way it looked to him — the seconds ticking by with awful swiftness in his mind. *It wasn't opening!* The shroud lines seemed to be tangled somehow in his arms, he was thrashing them to free the lines,

the canopy was billowing out like a monstrous sheet fluttering in the wind, and nothing was stopping his fall.

Queer, it didn't feel like a fall. Except for the wind, he might have been floating, twisting, suspended in empty space. But he was falling. If his body didn't know it, his mind did. It felt the awful weight of the earth coming up to meet him.

My God! Why didn't it open?

The shock was so great that he believed he had smashed to earth, and this was the last infinitesimal moment of thought between life and death.

But the thought didn't die. Daz-

edly he realized he was swinging in space, straps cutting into his flesh; and when he looked up there was the canopy, white in the moonlight — as wide and as beautiful as the arch of Heaven itself. The chute had opened.

Seconds later he landed, a hard, bone-jarring shock that left him badly shaken, without affecting the singing happiness inside him. The light breeze failed to carry the canopy free of him: it enveloped him, and he had to fight his way clear of it before he could look up to see the white circle of Kay's chute, small and far above in the moonlight.

He waited, looking up, smiling.



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YOU, detective

10.—The Many Motives

BY WILSON HARMAN

SERGEANT Phil Hammond lit a cigarette, puffed smoke and asked: "Miss Lake, when did you arrive here?"

"At ten-thirty, exactly, Sergeant," the tall blonde said. "I remember the time because I was supposed to meet Anthony here at ten, and my cab got stuck in this terrible New York traffic. I was looking at my watch the whole way."

"Is that right, Mrs. Farrell?" Hammond asked the older woman.

"Yes, Sergeant," the woman answered. "Anthony had gone to his study a little after ten. He was upstairs in his study when Gloria Lake arrived." Mrs. Farrell's eyes

glittered with tears and anger.

Before she could continue Gloria Lake broke in: "Sergeant, whatever she says, don't believe her. She's trying to frame me because Anthony and I were in love. Anthony was going to get a divorce from her. I couldn't have killed him, Sergeant — what motive would I have?"

"Is that true, Mrs. Farrell?" Hammond asked.

She turned slowly to face him. "Yes, Sergeant. Anthony was going to divorce me. And now he's dead. Perhaps — perhaps it's better, Sergeant."

Hammond didn't reply. He turned to the third person standing in the little upstairs study. "Mr. Tyrell. You arrived at eleven."

"Right. I had some business with Tony. Matter of borrowing some money. He'd left it to me in his will anyhow, so I didn't see the harm of getting a little of it in advance.

"Now you'll get it all, Mr. Ty-

rell," Hammond said calmly. "Never mind. You went right to the study."

"That's right. I parked my car and came right in. Just tossed greetings at Mrs. Farrell here — I didn't see Gloria around, Sergeant — and went upstairs. I opened the study door and saw him sitting there, at his desk, with that knife in his back. Naturally, I made the devil of a racket. Got Mrs. Farrell and Gloria up here, and then we called you."

Hammond moved to the desk at the far end of the room and picked up a bunch of keys. "Mrs. Farrell, were these your husband's?"

She craned her neck, staring at them. "No, of course not," she said. "We've never owned a car. Silly in New York traffic. And you can see the car key from here. It even

has one of those labels on it. *Pontiac*. It must be the killer's. It wasn't here this morning."

"Sergeant, she's trying to frame me. Somebody's trying to frame me. Why would I kill Anthony?" The blonde Gloria Lake pushed herself forward. "I loved him. We were going to get married."

"Nobody's said anything to put suspicion on you," Hammond said. "What's making you nervous? Maybe Anthony Farrell changed his mind at the last minute? Maybe nobody knew about the change of heart but you . . ."

"No, I swear, we were going to get married . . ."

"All right," Hammond said. "All right. Thanks. I've got the killer now."



Contest Winner: YOU, detective

No. 4 — THE MIXED DRINK

*Mr. Thomas Beebe
1202 Marshall Lane
Apartment F
Austin, Texas*

"All three of you drank your cocktails after the glasses had been switched," Hammond continued. "Suicide is out — a woman like Myra Grant wouldn't have taken the risk of poisoning one of her friends. She would have stopped everyone from drinking after the glasses had been switched."

Hammond leaned over the coffee-table, his hands making quick motions on the wood. "It's like the old shell game."

"Shell game?" Piel asked.

"That's right. The only one who knew which was the poisoned cocktail was the person who switched the glasses."

The room was perfectly silent. "I had no motive to kill her," Mrs. Harrow whispered.

"No?" Hammond asked. "Miss Grant was very careful — yet she lost a pair of earrings recently, and later, a necklace. Maybe she was too careful, Mrs. Harrow. Maybe she caught you stealing them. You killed her to cover your thefts."

"I didn't —"

"I'm sorry," Hammond said. "Let's go, Mrs. Harrow."

The maid looked around her. No one moved. Hammond took her arm and, together, they walked to the door.



Kill Me Tomorrow

It was the perfect setup. Peter and Etta could grab off a fortune — if they could only find a good, dependable dentist.

A Complete Novel

BY FLETCHER FLORA

PETER ROCHE first saw her the afternoon of the day before Christmas. When he got home, she was sitting in front of the fire in the library with Scotch in one hand and

a cigarette in the other. She drew on the cigarette, drank from the glass, and exhaled a thin blue cloud of smoke. He learned that it was a characteristic trick of hers, that sequence — drag, drink, blow. She nodded a headful of mahogany curls and looked at him with eyes that seemed black in the room but turned out later in the light to match almost perfectly the color of her hair.

"You must be Peter," she said.

Her voice was throaty, was warm and mellow as the Scotch that lubricated it, as soft and lazy as the blue smoke it rode on.

He gave her a twisted grin and said, "Why must I be Peter? Why can't I be Paul?"

She shook her head, the mahogany curls dancing and shimmering. Firelight and shadows flickered across her face.

"I know you're Peter because your father told me all about you. Only son, he said. Slim and handsome and clever as the devil and no damn good, he said. You're twenty-eight. You flunked out of medical school four years ago, and you haven't done anything constructive since. Last year it cost five grand to buy you out of an affair with a predatory blonde. To coin an expression, you're a cad, sir. I think I'm going to like you very much."

"Do you? That's nice. I'm a guy who likes being liked by beautiful women. I also like to know their names. You see, the possibility of being sued or blackmailed by a woman whose name I don't know is rather embarrassing. It's a weakness in my social adjustment."

She went through the smoke and Scotch sequence, her moist lips curling in a sly kind of smile. Beyond the drifting veil of smoke, her dark eyes glittered with malicious humor.

"My name is Harriet, and I'm usually called Etta, but you may call me Mother."

He stood watching her, giving his

adrenals time to slow down and resume normal production. She lay back in the rich brocade embrace of the big fireside chair with all the audacious presumption of a cowbird in the nest of a warbler. Although she didn't move, she somehow gave the impression of stretching, of luxuriating sensuously in the flexing of flat muscles. A sheath of black wool was tailored to the contours of her body. His eyes descended nylon to wriggling toes. Her discarded shoes, a pair of thin soles with essential straps and incredible spikes, were half buried in shaggy white pile.

"I'm an extremely regressed adult," he said. "I need a lot of mothering."

"Maybe we can make a game of it."

"Good. It ought to be more fun than canasta."

She laughed. It was a soft and gauzy scrap of sound that seemed to ascend and fade and thin to nothing. It was as if she had blown out more smoke through the vapors of Scotch.

"I'm beginning to think I may get my kicks out of having a son. Such a convenient method, too. Ready made and ready for love. I'm really quite relieved. I though you might hate me."

"So I might. I'll let you know the exact state of my feelings when I learn what this is all about. Are you trying to tell me that you and Senator Big are married?"

"Senator Big? Is that what you

call him? It has a disrespectful sound. Perhaps you're not such an affectionate son, after all."

"Affectionate with the Senator? You'd just as well try being affectionate with a party caucus."

"Oh, I don't know. I haven't found him so unresponsive. Generally tender, I'd say, with brief interims of passion. Just enough to make things interesting."

"With you, I admit, it would be easier. The Senator always had a fine eye."

"Thank you."

"Where is he now, by the way?"

"Upstairs lying down."

He started where he'd stopped on his other tour of inspection, with her wriggling toes, and reversed his way back up nylon and black wool to her mahogany eyes. They were still glittering with malice, but he had a feeling that the malice was not integral, was only assumed as a temporary attitude until his own was determined.

"So you really *are* married," he said softly. "You really hooked the old boy."

"That's a rather crude way to put it, but essentially correct."

"Pardon my crudity. You married him, of course, because you love him as a noble servant of the people. All you want is to share the life of a great man."

She laughed again, and this time it was a freer and fuller laugh, filled with the solid stuff of genuine amusement. "Well, let's not go to the

other extreme. After all, he's only a State senator, not national, and I understand he's served certain vested interests a hell of a lot better than he has the people. I'd say my position is somewhere around the middle."

"What's in the middle? The neat little fortune the Senator's acquired quite incidentally from his long years of service?"

She lifted her glass and looked into it. "Do you find that thought disturbing? Well, no wonder. It must be quite a shock to find yourself no longer sole heir. My glass seems to be empty. Would you mind filling it? Scotch and soda."

"Certainly, Mother. Ice?"

"No ice. Just a dash of soda."

He walked over and got her glass and carried it to a portable bar that had been wheeled in. He made hers heavy and one straight for himself and carried them back to her. She reached up and took the one that was hers, and her fingers in the small action trailed lightly across the back of his hand. They were long and slender, and their touch suggested exceptional talents.

"I'm curious," he said.

She looked up at him at a sharp angle through thick lashes. "About what?"

"You and the Senator. How you managed it."

"It was voluntary on his part, I assure you. As a matter of fact, he was quite urgent about it. It's true that he placed himself in a vulner-

able position, but I was not compelled to take advantage of it."

"Maybe that's lucky for you. Others have tried from an advantage and failed. When he bought off my blonde last year, he showed remarkable skill in the details of the transaction. He knocked her down from ten grand to five and boxed her in so she can't ever come back for more. Experience, I suspect."

"Poor girl. Obviously out of her class." She smiled lazily and tilted Scotch and soda through the smile. "Do you have a cigarette?"

He gave her one and lit it and watched her swallow smoke. She sat there wriggling her toes and alternating Scotch and smoke, and he used the time to empty his own glass. When it was empty, he carried it back to the bar.

"If you'll excuse me now," he said. "I think I'll go upstairs."

Depositing her glass and crushing her cigarette in a tray, she stood on stocking feet and reached slowly for the ceiling, stretching with a supple twisting of her body.

"Of course. But you haven't kissed me. Isn't it proper for a son to kiss his mother? I know so little about such things. I'm afraid you'll just have to take the initiative until I learn."

Now there was something in her eyes besides the glitter of malice, a smoky haze that looked as if it might have risen behind them from her cigarette. Her smile was still lazy, but also provocative, and he

went over and covered it. At first her lips were very still, yielding to pressure, and then they opened and responded with a soft expulsion of smoked Scotch and a queer little mean, and before it was finished it was such a motherly kiss as even Freud had never dreamed of. After a minute, she broke away and walked across the room to windows covered by heavy green drapes. She parted the drapes with one hand and stood looking out through the cold glass into the sudden winter's dusk, and he stood and watched her against the glass, and as he watched, a light came on beyond the lawn, and between the light and the glass the snow slanted down in large, wet flakes.

Turning, he walked to the door.

"Peter," she said.

He stopped and looked back over his shoulder, and she had turned away from the windows, letting the drapes fall together across the glass behind her to shut out the night and the falling snow. Her lips were parted in a little smile that possessed a quality of deadliness, and her eyes were shining.

"About my position in the middle," she said. "I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you. I'm sure we'll be able to work something out."

2.

The sun was white and hot, just past the zenith. The trees on the lawn stood still in the breathless

day. From his room in the east wing of the house, Peter could look down upon the stone terrace that covered part of the ground area between the east wing and the west. From its high place in the sky, the sun shot a sharp angle between the wings. White light rebounded from the colored, glittering flags. Down there on a bright red chaise longue on wheels, Etta lay stretched on her stomach with her head cradled on her arms. She was wearing a pair of white twill shorts that looked from a distance like a small part of Etta that hadn't been previously exposed to the sun. Her body above and below the brief break was the color of cocoa. On a round wrought-iron table beside the lounge was a tall glass. The glass had parallel red, blue, and yellow stripes painted around its circumference from top to bottom. It was empty.

Carrying a tennis racket, Peter went downstairs. He stopped inside long enough to mix Tom Collinse in glasses to match the one on the table on the terrace and then went on out onto the terrace with the racket under his arm and a glass in each hand. Etta didn't look up. Her body was covered with a thin film of clear oil. The oil gave her skin a soft, shiny look like satin. He set the full glasses on the table beside the empty, and Etta raised her head slowly and looked at him over a shoulder. Her eyes had a glazed, unfocused look, as if she had

wakened from some very deep sleep.

"Hello, darling," she said.

"I brought you a cold drink. Tom Collins."

"Thanks. You're a very thoughtful son."

"Don't call me that."

"Is this the boy who called me Mother? What's the matter, Peter? Feeling sensitive?"

Sitting beside her on the edge of the lounge, he leaned down and touched her lightly with his lips just below the short hair on her neck. A tiny shiver moved through her skin peripherally from the point of contact, and she rolled over and swung her legs off the opposite side.

"I think you'd better hand me my Collins, darling."

He handed it to her, and she took a swallow and looked at him across the red interval with a little smile twisting her lips.

"Playing tennis?"

"If you'll play with me."

"In this heat?"

"You play better when it's hot."

"All right. I'll get my shoes and racket."

She went inside, carrying her drink. He waited on the lounge and sipped his own. The sunlight bounced and hung shimmering above the flags, and he could feel the heat through the soles of his shoes. He drained his glass, letting the last fragment of ice slip down into his mouth. It melted immediately on his tongue. Time was white and hot and utterly silent, and it did not

move. In eternal, unmoving Time only the things moved that were not eternal — the earth and the sun and Etta on the terrace behind him.

"Are there balls at the court?" she said.

"Yes. I left some there yesterday."

"Okay. I'll bet you ten on a set."

"You're on."

They went down across the back lawn to the court and began volleying for service, and she won after a couple of minutes, and he knew he was in for a time because her service was very good. She reached high for the ball, rising on her toes and arching back for power, and her racket came up and over in a strong, clean sweep that met the ball at just the right instant of its descent to send it like a bullet over the net at a shallow angle that was mean. The ball skittered off the packed clay with practically no bounce. In all the games they played, he never broke her service.

It was so hot. Sweat kept running down into his eyes to impair his vision, and between the sweat and ascending heat waves, the proximate earth was a blurred distortion. Across the net, Etta's cocoa body moved and altered and took a thousand shimmering shapes. He could see, even at a distance through the bright haze, how perspiration quickly dampened and darkened her white shorts where they stretched tight over her hips. It was hot as hell, and hell was too hot for tennis. They traded games on services to deuce

and then decided to call it quits.

Beside the court was a shed in which were kept a roller and a marker and odds and ends of equipment. They went over and dropped onto the grass in the parallelogram of shade that the shed cast, and Etta lay back with her arms folded up under her head.

"A man could die in heat like this," he said.

"Die?" Her voice had a soft, crooning quality. "Not you, Peter. Not you and not me. Not for a long, long time. Not until we've done all the things I want us to do."

He looked down at her, and her eyes were wide open and staring up into the sky with shining intensity, as if, by sheer mental effort, she were projecting herself into the hard, blue brilliance. A trickle of perspiration moved slowly downward from the hollow of her throat. He leaned over her, blocking her vision of the sky, and the strangely provocative scent of oil and sweat came up from her into his nostrils.

"I've been wondering about something," she said.

"About what?"

"I've been wondering how many men have died because they carried too much insurance."

"You'd better quit wondering. Lots of women had wished they had — after it was too late. It's usually pretty obvious, you know. They hardly ever get away with it."

"I know. So I've been wondering about something else, too. I've been

wondering how many men have died because their *wives* carried too much insurance."

"Is that supposed to make sense?"

"It could. Would you like to hear how? It's just a hypothetical case, of course. A kind of game."

"I like games."

"Well, suppose, for instance, that I had a policy for fifty thousand, double indemnity. Suppose I were to die in an automobile accident. The Senator's the beneficiary, so he gets paid off. One hundred grand."

"Very sacrificial of you. Rather wasted, though, I'd say. The Senator doesn't really need it."

"Wrong, Peter. He needs it, all right. His affairs aren't in as good shape as you think they are. That's why the policy is essential. For you, Peter. Because I'd be dead, naturally, and you'd be sole heir again."

"Just wait for the old man to die?"

"That might be a long time. By that time, he might have spent the hundred grand or found another heir. On the other hand, a man loses a beautiful young wife that way, it might crack him up. He might commit suicide."

"And I'd be sole heir. I'd be something else, too. I'd be a natural for the rap. Remember what I said about wives hardly ever getting away with it? That goes for sons, too."

"You have no imagination, darling. You're a charmer, and I love you, but you have absolutely no

imagination. When the Senator died, you'd be somewhere else, of course. Somewhere with people. There's nothing like an alibi to keep you clear."

"Sure. I can see that. So I do it by sticking pins in his image. I do it by black magic."

"Wrong. You do nothing at all. You know, there's a certain advantage to being dead, Peter. No one suspects you of anything but being dead."

Her eyes were slightly averted, staring past him into the brilliant sky. They were lash-shadowed and sleepy and filled with the soft stuff of dreams.

"That's quite a hypothetical case," he said. "You must have spent a lot of time on it."

She smiled faintly at the sky. "I like to dream. It amuses me."

"Has it amused you to locate a body to leave for yours when you die in this accident?"

"That should be no problem. In the right kind of accident, almost any body would do. I'd only need a dentist."

"A dentist?"

"Yes. Because of teeth, you see. That's the way they identify bodies that can't be recognized."

"He'd have to be an accessory. How do you go about picking up a dentist to act as accessory to murder? Just canvass the prospects? Insert an ad in the help-wanted column, maybe?"

"He'd have to be picked carefully.

It would take time, because he'd have to be developed. Persuaded."

"I can imagine the persuasion, and I don't like it."

"Don't be childish, darling."

"What about afterward? Just send him about his business? Just say thanks and good-by?"

"Something like that. With reasonable compensation for his services, of course. An accessory to murder doesn't make trouble, darling. He can't afford to."

He leaned back and stared off down the slope of earth beyond the tennis court to where it dropped away above the river. The drop was almost perpendicular, and the river was hidden at the foot of the bluff, but he could see on the other side the wide fields of the bottoms stretching eastward to a chain of low hills. The fields and the foliage on the hills looked parched and faded in the hot, white light.

He was thinking of the suburban road that ran in front of the house. He was remembering that the road and the bluff converged downstream. The road came downgrade to the bluff and turned sharply to parallel it for a short distance. An inadequate rail fence had been erected along the bluff, but a car coming down the grade and failing to make the sharp turn would surely crash right through.

It was a good place for a bad accident, he thought.

The street door of the bar closed behind him with a whisper. He stood

in beige pile, his pupils adjusting to shadows, and listened to the sounds of brittle glass in contact, the rise and fall of small talk over cocktails, a subdued blue voice against a background of strings. Then he saw Etta looking at him from a booth across the room. She lifted her glass by its slender stem in a brief salute, and he went over and sat down in the booth across from her.

3.

"You're late, darling," she said.

"Sorry. I've been having my teeth cleaned."

She had lifted her glass to drink again, but the action was suspended suddenly with the edge of crystal just touching her lips. Her breath stirred slightly the gin and vermouth, and her eyes, wide and still and black in the contrived dusk, stared at him across the golden surface. After a moment, with an odd little sigh, she tipped the glass and set it down again.

"Poor dear. It's always such an ordeal going to the dentist. You'd better have a drink at once."

"I could use one, all right."

He signaled a waiter and asked for bourbon and water. When it arrived, he drank half of it quickly and sat looking down into the remainder, turning the glass with fingertips around suspended cubes.

"I've been looking for a good dentist myself," she said. "Would you recommend yours?"

"I think he'd do. I'm very particular about dentists, and I had this one investigated thoroughly."

"What's his name?"

"Foresman. Norton Foresman. He's in the Clinical Center Building."

"Perhaps I should arrange an appointment with him."

"It might be a good idea. I'm sure he'd appreciate it. He needs the money."

"Yes? I thought dentists were generally prosperous."

"Oh, his income's good enough, but his expenditures are out of proportion. Unfortunately, he has expensive tastes."

"Such as?"

"Such as women and horses and the Riverview Casino."

"Has he been losing?"

"He and the horses. The women and the casino are way ahead. You know Jeb Shannon? He owns Riverview, and he's holding a bundle of Foresman's paper. About eight grand's worth. I've dropped some to Shannon myself, and I know how he operates. He's a tough guy with connections, and he doesn't like to wait too long. With Foresman, it's getting to be almost too long."

"I see. It means the doctor would probably be susceptible." She drained her glass and sat smiling quietly at the exposed olive. "What does he look like, Peter? Tell me some more about Dr. Norton Foresman."

"He's tall. About two inches taller than me. He's vain and arrogant,

and I have a feeling that he could be dangerous. Ladies' man, as I said. Wavy blond hair and rather florid complexion. He has good shoulders, and he carries himself as if he might have done some amateur boxing, but he'd run to fat if he ever let himself go. Handsome, if you like the type. Too handsome, maybe. Maybe handsome enough to make persuasion fun."

Moving her smile from the olive to him, she reached past her glass and his and touched his hand with long fingers, and under the table below the intimacy of fingers, he was aware of the simultaneous intimacy of knees. He felt again, as he had felt a thousand times, the dark hunger for her that was often fed but never satisfied, and he knew, as he had known from the first, that there was nothing at all that she wouldn't do for whatever she wanted, but he knew also that he would never care so long as one of the things she wanted was Peter Roche.

"Don't worry, Peter," she said. "Don't worry for a minute. Persuasion may be fun for Dr. Foresman, but not for me, because the only fun for me is you, and anyhow it can't be helped. Tell me, darling, how much do you think he'd charge to look at my molars?"

"Offhand," he said, "I'd guess about ten thousand dollars."

4.

Same bar, same booth, but the

year in a quarter turn had changed its season. The sun had lost its warmth and was a pale wash in the street outside, cut by a chill wind.

Peter sat over a bourbon and watched the door. A bright scrap of paper danced across the concrete walk and was trapped for an instant against glass.

A man opened the door and went out.

Another man opened the door and came in.

A man and a woman came in together.

The woman was dressed in a navy blue suit and wore a silver fox around her shoulders. She had short mahogany hair under a chip of a blue hat with a tiny red feather on it, and she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and very shortly she would order a very dry martini. The man was tall and blond in expensive tweed, and there was arrogance in the carriage of his head and elastic in his walk. He looked like he would order Scotch.

He did. Peter could see it all from his position. He gave the martini and the Scotch time to diminish by half, and then he went over to the table where the man and the beautiful woman sat.

"Hello, Etta," he said.

She looked up and smiled and said, "Oh, hello, Peter," and Dr. Norton Foresman stood up politely and permitted his face to express a nominal amount of interest when Etta introduced them.

"Oh, yes," he said. "The step-son."

Peter nodded. "It's very funny, isn't it? My being Etta's step-son, I mean. People always get a laugh out of it."

"I'd say that it's more fortunate than funny. For you, that is. Will you sit down and have a drink with us?"

Peter smiled and thought, *If you only knew how fortunate it is for me, you God-damn molar mechanic. If you only knew!*

He said, "No, thanks. I just had one. See you at home, Etta."

He went out into the sun that had no warmth and turned down the street two blocks to the slot where he'd left his car. Behind the wheel, he lit a cigarette and looked at his watch. Five-thirty, she'd said. It was five now. He finished the cigarette and lit another from the butt and was acutely conscious of the drag of time.

The wind was stronger in the street. Pedestrians leaned into it, or scurried before it, and made what breaks they could of one another.

Autumn, he thought. Another little tag of time. The tags change, but time stays fixed forever. In the meanwhile, you sit in the static forever and suck cigarettes. In the meanwhile, you sit over endless bourbons and wonder endlessly how persuasion is going, and what forms persuasion takes, and you curse with stale impotence the louse that persuasion profits.

At five-twenty-five he started the car and swung out into traffic. Driving slowly, killing five minutes, making three right turns that brought him back to the street above the bar, he saw then with the inevitable visceral disturbance that she was already waiting for him at the curb, her skirt whipped by the wind around her long legs. He stopped in the traffic lane in defiance of angry horns while she came off the curb and got in beside him. Sliding over against him, she let her head fall back against the upholstery and laughed softly.

"Darling," she said, "what a relief! You've no idea what a bore our dentist is."

"You didn't look so bored to me."

She rolled her head and looked up at his face. "Darling, are you going to be difficult again?"

"I'm sick of Dr. Norton Foreman, that's all."

"So am I. Believe me, I was never so sick of anyone in my life before. It's only because he's essential. You know that. We've got to have him."

"It's taking a long time. I never thought it would take so long."

"We have to be sure. It would be fatal to make a mistake."

"How much longer?"

"Not long. Not much longer now."

"Sure. Not much longer. Well, I don't mind waiting. It'll be easy. I'll just drink bourbon and think about the pair of you."

"You said you wouldn't brood,

darling. You promised you wouldn't talk about it."

"Tell me the truth, Etta. Aren't you rather enjoying yourself?"

"Stop it, Peter."

"A big, handsome guy like him ought to be very amusing."

"Damn it, Peter, cut it out! You go on brooding like this, you'll end up wrecking everything. You're going pretty sour, you know. Next thing, you'll be getting violent."

"Pardon me for going sour. I know it's unreasonable of me."

"All right, Peter, all right. Just quit thinking about it. Just think about how it will be when it's all over. Think about you and me and all the places we'll go and all the things we'll do and all the time we'll have to spend together."

"And all the money."

"Yes. And all the money. It wouldn't be fun without money, Peter. Not for me and not for you. We don't have to kid ourselves about that."

His right hand dropped from the wheel to her knee, and he felt her instant response, heard the soft whisper of breath sucked suddenly into her throat. It was always like that. It never failed. His ability to make her respond at once and with intensity was the last remnant of whatever dominance he may once have felt. It sustained him in his sour waiting, in the concession that no man can make and not be sick.

Passing into the suburban area of the city, they began the gradual

ascent to the bluff above the river. Crossing the crest of the rise, they dropped down the brief descent to the lip of the bluff and the frail fence along it. The good place for an accident.

Abruptly, he stopped the car beside the fence and looked out and down to the shrunken gray stream in the valley, lean from the long dry months.

"I think I'll get away for a while," he said.

Her eyes were briefly startled. "Away? Where?"

"Up to the lodge, I think. Maybe I'll do some hunting."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Until you're ready. Until Dr. Norton Foresman has been persuaded."

"I see." She picked a cigarette from her purse and lit it with the dash lighter. The smoke piled up on the windshield and spread out in a small, billowing cloud. "I think that might be a good idea. You're in a dangerous mood, darling. You need to get some of the tension out of you."

"When you want me, write General Delivery at King's Center. It's a little junction development about six miles from the lodge. I'll drive down every day or so to check." Twisting suddenly in the seat, he seized her by the hair and jerked her head back. "Say it won't be long, Etta. Say it again."

She reacted to his violence with a pleasure that was almost masochistic.

Her mouth shaped against his the pattern of her assurance.

"Soon, darling. Just as soon as I can."

5.

The lodge was a rustic, single-story structure of unpeeled logs. It was built into the side of a hill and had acquired with time an appearance of being almost part of the hill. Below the lodge, in the hollow at the foot of the hill, was a clear stream, spring-fed, in which game fish could be taken in season. The surrounding hills were the remnants of an ancient orogeny, their thin top-soil broken by countless outcroppings of rock and nourishing a sparse growth of brush and scrub timber. In the hills were quail and plenty of small game.

Peter hunted sometimes during the day, tramping the hills with a 12-gauge shotgun, and there was something in the country that renewed assurance, an atmosphere of incredible age that reduced passion and violence and all human aberrations whatever to the status of petty absurdity. But the nights were bad. The nights were times of distorted imagery, and he brooded with a growing hatred over the morbid details of Dr. Norton Foresman's planned corruption.

Every second afternoon he drove down to King's Center and inquired for mail in the tiny postoffice. There was no letter the first week, nor the

second, but the fourth day of the third week the letter was there. With the current phase of the waiting finished, all the malignancy seemed to drain from him like a poisonous fluid released by incision, leaving him strangely quiet, almost apathetic, and he drove all the way back to the lodge with the letter unopened in his pocket.

He read it in the living room of the lodge in front of the natural stone fireplace:

Darling,

Persuasion complete. Now I must die as quickly as possible. Do you remember the highway restaurant at the junction of 14 and 56 near the Kaw City? Meet me there at nine o'clock the morning of the 15th. I'll go there from here on the bus. You can drive me on into the city.

It was unsigned. He dropped the envelope and the single sheet of crisp paper on the fire and watched them burn. Her written words were as real as her voice, as if she had whispered them with her lips brushing his ear, and now his brief apathy was gone as quickly as it had come. He felt, sitting there while the papers curled in ash, the first faint lift of excitement, the rhythmic acceleration of his pulse.

The fifteenth. What was today? His stay at the lodge had stretched interminably in a kind of deadly hiatus, and he had to return to the day of his arrival and repeat in his mind the succession of subsequent

days to the present in order to locate himself in time. It was the fourteenth, he discovered. Tomorrow was the day.

He packed his few things, killed a bottle he'd been working on, and went to bed. He slept poorly, disturbed by random imagery, and awoke early. It was exactly seven o'clock when he steered his car off the narrow hill road onto Highway 56.

An hour and a half later he pulled into the wide gravel parking area in front of the junction restaurant. The building was long and low, covered with red shingles, sitting diagonally in its location to face the right angle formed by the meeting of highways. One wing was obviously a dance hall. The Venetian blinds at the windows of this wing were closed, and it had the drab, depleted look that seems to come by day to all places that live by night. The central part of the building and the other wing were the restaurant and the kitchen. In the corner of the window beside the entrance was a large sign with crude black letters that said: *Open.*

He got out of the car and went inside and climbed onto a stool at a long counter. Behind the counter, a waitress in a starched white uniform filled a thick tumbler with water and set it in front of him. She had hair the color of rust and as dry as hay. The flesh below her eyes was dark and sagging, and her face must have been put on in the dark. She

stared wearily over his head, waiting for him to speak.

"Just coffee," he said.

She filled a cup from a glass pot and set it on the counter, slopping a little of the black brew over into the saucer. Beside it, she put a miniature milk bottle filled with cream. He pushed the cream aside and lifted the cup, twisting on the stool in order to look out through the plate glass window to the gravel parking area in front.

"What time's the next bus to Kaw City due?" he said.

"Eight-fifty-five. Five minutes now."

He looked at his watch and verified it. "Thanks," he said.

He lit a cigarette and sat alternating swallows of black coffee with inhalations of smoke, and suddenly he remembered that this was Etta's habit, and he wondered with a trace of bitterness that was far too weak to signify incipient rebellion if his unconscious adoption of it was a measure of his seduction. He had just finished the cigarette and the coffee when the bus pulled up beyond the window and stopped with a series of pneumatic gasps.

At first he thought she hadn't come. The single passenger to alight, a woman, stood for a moment beside the bus and then picked up a cheap yellow suitcase and crossed to the entrance of the restaurant and inside. Her short hair was the color of platinum, in startling contrast with her dark eyes. Her vivid scarlet

mouth was like a soft, wet wound. She was wearing a cheap fur coat that hung open from the shoulders to expose a green knit dress that clung to her body as if it were charged with static electricity. She walked with a practiced swaying of hips on spike-heeled green sandals fastened to her ankles by narrow straps. She was crude and vulgar and beautiful. The impression she made was like a physical impact. With dye and paint and the emphasis of natural assets, she frankly elicited a primitive reaction.

Standing by Peter's stool in a cloud of heavy scent, she said, "That your car outside, Mister?"

"That's right."

"Going to Kaw City?"

"Yes."

"How about giving a girl a lift?"

"What was the matter with the bus?"

She shrugged. "So times are tough. So my ticket ran out. You want a character reference for a lousy lift?"

Her voice was coarse, a voice he had never heard before, a product of gin and a million cigarettes. He laughed and dropped a dime on the counter and stood up.

"When I give a girl a lift, I prefer her not to have any character. You ready to go, or do you want coffee?"

"I'm ready."

They went outside to the car, and he wheeled it onto the highway and across the junction. She laughed softly, stretching her body in the seat beside him, and he thought he

could hear in the laughter a kind of restrained exultation, and it occurred to him suddenly that she was feeling an intense sense of release, of freedom, as if her changed appearance were not so much disguise as the abandonment of one, the assumption at last of the overt expression of herself.

"My God," she said, "I feel awful. How do you like me, Peter?"

"Just asking?"

She laughed again and pressed against him. "Was it bad, darling? The waiting? Was it very bad?"

"It was bad."

"It won't go on forever. Remember that."

"This time will be longer."

"It can't be helped. This is the way it has to be done. You know it is."

"I know. Is our dentist definitely in?"

"He's in. For ten grand plus."

"What does the plus mean?"

"He thinks it means me. I'm supposed to contact him after you've been disposed of."

"What happens when you don't?"

"Nothing happens. He'll be an accessory to murder, and there won't be anything at all that he can do about it."

"I almost wish he'd try. This is the first time I've ever felt like killing someone just for fun."

"Don't think crazy, Peter. He's an arrogant fool. We'll use him and drop him off with his stinking ten grand and that's all of it."

"When do you want to die?"

"The sooner the better. Tomorrow night, if possible."

"What if they don't go to Foreman about the teeth?"

"They will. He's my dentist, and the teeth will be all they'll have to identify me with. That's your job, Peter. You've got to be sure there's nothing else left."

"I'll make sure."

"Who will you use?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? Someone."

Someone. Nobody. An indefinite pronoun waking at this moment, perhaps, in some drab room to the gray light of another drab day, remembering with sickness or indifference, but certainly not pleasure, the traffic of the spent night. He wondered for the first time who she was and where she had come from and whether, in the end, she would mind so much dying for a reason she would never know. Dying violently, a small and essential technicality, because she happened to be available and had a set of teeth.

Then he was struck by a wild thought. *What if she had plates?* What if they were to find in the charred wreckage of the car at the foot of the bluff beside the river a set of dentures? It would be a wonderful example of the biter-bit, the kind of ending you found in the little one page stories. The thought adhered to his mind, swelling with enormous significance and grim comedy, and he began to laugh softly on

the verge of hysteria, his body shaking with the effort to contain the laughter.

Etta drew away and looked at him sharply. "What's the matter, Peter?"

"Nothing. I just thought of something."

"Of what?"

"I was wondering what would happen if she had false teeth."

"For God's sake, Peter, cut it out! You're not breaking up on me, are you?"

"I thought it was very funny."

"I don't like it when you think and talk crazy."

"Don't worry about it."

"All right. Just take it easy. And you'd better let up on the bourbon, too. You'll never make it through this in a fog."

"Don't worry about it, I said. I'll be all right."

"Sure, darling. You'll be all right. You'll be fine."

She relaxed against him again, and he drove on into the city in silence. The highway fed them through suburban and urban residential districts into the congestion of the downtown area, and at last she said, "Let me off at the bus station, Peter."

"Where are you going from there?"

"I don't know. I'll find a room."

"How shall I contact you?"

"I'll rent a box at the postoffice. I'll let you know the number as soon as I get it. I'll tell you what

name to use, too." Reaching into her purse, she handed him a piece of cardboard stamped with black and red numbers. "Here's the claim check for my Olds. It's parked in the garage across from the Envoy Hotel. You can pick it up there when you're ready. The Senator's at the Capitol and will be there for at least another week. I left home yesterday and told the servants I'd probably be returning tomorrow night. Do it then if you can. They'll think it happened when I was coming back."

"All right."

He pulled into the unloading zone in front of the bus station, and she got out quickly and removed her suitcase from the rear. Leaning through the open window, she said, "You take it from here, darling. You know what to do, so do it well, and do it fast. Later, when you think it's right for the finish, send me the word and I'll come back."

"I'll let you know."

He leaned toward her across the seat, and their lips met in brief, hot adherence, and then she turned and walked swiftly away, her hips swaying in the exaggerated rhythm of her new character, the cheap yellow case swinging at her side.

He watched her until she turned the corner and disappeared.

It was a mean and narrow street on the lower side of the city where

the earth declined from its suburban heights to the level of the river. The black water lapped in the night at its low embankment. Along the street at wide intervals, street lamps cast light like yellow grease in stagnant puddles on old brick, exposing here and there the ugly debris of the life that passed and shed its odds and ends in passing — paper and cans, the shards of broken bottles.

At the curb near the corner, Peter parked Etta's Olds, a gleaming incongruity of bright chrome and enamel. Walking down the sidewalk along the faces of crumbling buildings to a dim and solitary rectangle of weak light in the mass of surrounding darkness, he turned and stepped up into a short hall. From beyond a closed door at the end of the hall came the pulsing, wanton rhythms that marijuana makes. On a straight chair beside the door, tilted back against the wall with heels hooked over the chair rungs, was a fat man with bleary, colorless eyes and a slack mouth half open in an expression of witless decadence. The bleary eyes moved over Peter indifferently as he went past and through the door.

The torrid music was like a blast of hot wind. Smoke drifted horizontally in wavering strata. The small dance area was congested with writhing anatomy. At tables and in booths, inhibitions had largely ceased to function. Peter found an empty stool at the bar and crawled on. No one paid any attention to him, and

he sat waiting, watching in the mirror behind the bar the action on the dance floor. After a while, as he had anticipated, there was a voice at his shoulder.

"Drinking alone, honey?"

He shifted his eyes in the mirror to the reflection of a thin and gutted face that achieved by device and the kindness of shadows a suggestion of the prettiness it had once had. The skin was dry and sallow, sunken between sharp bones. It was, he thought, a face that might have been ravished and dehydrated by a high fever.

"I'm not drinking at all," he said. "How do you get service?"

"You have to know the technique. Shall I try?"

"Why not?"

The technique was simple. She turned and gestured, and a squat bartender came down on the other side of the bar. His round, oily face was bland. His tiny, pinched mouth, tucked under a swollen nose, twitched back over shrunken gums. Peter specified bourbon and water, and the woman said, assuming his acceptance of the weary routine, that she'd have hers in gingerale. When the drinks were in their hands, she said, "There's a booth empty," and he said, "That's convenient," and they went over and sat down on the same side of the table.

She sipped her pale, professional drink. "My name's Roxy," she said. "It's a nice name. Mine's Peter."

A waiter materialized periodically

with full glasses. Peter drank what he had to and spilled what he could. Roxy, pressing against him, played her weary part with automatic fidelity. The whole place was hot and panting, and after so much time and bad whisky, there was a churning rebellion in his stomach, a growing turbulent sickness.

"Let's get out of here," he said suddenly.

"Why?"

"It's too crowded."

"Don't let it bother you. No one pays any attention."

"It's my Puritan background, baby. I like privacy, and I'm willing to pay for it."

She arched her thin eyebrows and formed a red circle with her lips. "I work here. You know that. I'm not supposed to run out with the customers."

"Who'd notice?"

She hesitated for a moment, then said, "All right. You go out alone. I'll meet you at the alley entrance in a few minutes."

He got out of the booth and went out through the hall past the fat man in the chair to the street. The air was astringent in his throat and lungs. His head cleared a little, and the revolution in his stomach subsided to a turgid unrest. Walking swiftly, he went down to the corner and back on the side street to the alley entrance. Three or four steps down the alley, he stopped and stood quietly, pressed against the damp brick of an old building.

Down the alley, a door opened and closed, projecting and extinguishing a weak swath of light. For a second, his ears caught faintly a wave of crazy reefer rhythms. High heels rapped briskly on brick, coming abreast, and pushing away from the wall, he hooked an arm. She spun around with a startled curse, the curse cutting off abruptly when she recognized him.

"You scared hell out of me, honey," she said.

"Sorry. The car's right down the street."

They went down to the Olds and got in. Lowering the window beside her, she sat strangely upright in the seat, lifting her face with a kind of pathetic greediness into the rush of cold air, and as he drove, he thought he could see from the corners of his eyes a faint flush of color in her sallow cheeks. The Olds moved cautiously through narrow streets of predominate darkness, emerging finally into a brighter section where incandescents and neons repelled the shadows, passing after a short while into the avenues and broad boulevards tilted upward toward the high ground above the river.

On the suburban road at the crest of the rise, where the earth descended again to the lip of the bluff, he stopped the Olds. Twin shafts from the headlights sliced down through the darkness past the rail fence into emptiness. Then he leaned forward and extinguished the lights suddenly, and in the instant after

extinction, before his eyes could adjust, the night was complete and impenetrable, a soft and tangible pressure that filled him with a momentary terror, as if it were he who was about to die.

She twisted toward him on the seat. "Why are we stopping here? I'm getting cold."

There was no fear in her voice, no rising awareness of danger, but only a slight nasality, the hint of a petulant whine.

"Have you ever been up here before?" he said.

"No. I don't think so."

"I thought maybe you'd like the view. Look behind you."

She twisted away in the opposite direction, looking back through the rear window. Behind and below them, the lights of the city were spread in wide display. She sat that way a long time, twisted in the seat to look back at the lights, and then she said, "It's pretty. It's been a long time since anyone bothered to show me anything pretty."

"I thought you might like it," he said.

And then, because it had to be then, because he could never bring himself to the point again, he reached out and took her by the throat from behind. She tried to twist around to face him, clawing at his hands and threshing her legs in a desperate diffusion of energy, but she was not strong, even in a struggle for life, and it was only a little while until she was dead.

Afterward, he proceeded quickly, according to plan. He removed a can of gasoline from the rear and soaked the interior of the car. He started the engine and pressed the accelerator down, wedging it with a piece of wood. With the high singing of many horses in his ears, he pulled the body over under the wheel, switched on the headlights, and dropped a lighted match on the upholstery. Finally, he pulled the automatic transmission lever into drive position and simultaneously released the hand brake, and the big car leaped away, careening. He stood and watched it crash through the fence at the edge of the bluff and catapult blazing into space. After a moment that seemed forever, he heard from below the crashing of steel and a detonation that was like a giant expulsion of air.

Slipping off the side of the road, he ran. Carrying the empty gasoline can, he ran at a tangent and downward through the dark toward the street below where his own car waited.

7.

The colored flags of the terrace were littered with dead leaves that had blown in on the wind. A pile of them had gathered in a corner against the adjacent walls of the house. There was no wrought-iron table there now, no gayly striped glass. The chaise longue was gone, and Etta was gone, because Etta was

dead and buried in Kaw City, and there were more things gone and going than it paid to think about.

Someone knocked softly, and Peter turned away from the window and went over and opened the door. A man stood in the hall with his hat in his hands. He was short and fat, his belly lapping the waist band of his trousers. He had a round face splattered with freckles and a tiny, sucked-in mouth that looked like a deep dent in a batch of bread dough. He turned his hat around and around by the brim in stubby fingers. His name was Smalley, and he was a detective.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Roche," he said. "May I see you for a minute?"

"Certainly." Peter stepped back into the room. "Come in."

Smalley came into the room and stood waiting, turning and turning his hat, while Peter closed the door and came back past him.

"Won't you sit down?" Peter said.

Smalley shook his head. "Thanks. I'll only be a minute." He looked past Peter and out the window to the opposite wing of the house. His eyes were small and pale, red-rimmed and watery, and every once in a while he knuckled them as if they pained him. "I've been talking with your father," he said.

"Has he finally accepted the fact that it was really Etta?"

"I think so." Smalley knuckled his eyes, and let them drop to the floor. "I think I convinced him," he said.

"You're certain, then?"

"Yes. No possibility of a mistake now. The identification is complete."

"How's that?"

"We had her dentist check the teeth. Dr. Norton Foresman. You know him?"

Peter was aware suddenly that he'd drawn his breath and held it. He released it slowly on a long, fading whisper, and the room blurred and faded and slowly returned in a diminishing spiral of dizziness. "Yes," he said. "I know him. Professionally, that is. I've been to him myself once or twice."

"I see. Well, as I said, he made the identification positive. The insurance will be paid promptly now. I've just told your father, the senator, as much."

"Then there's no hope at all? That it might not have been Etta?"

"None whatever. I'm sorry."

"Well, it's not too great a shock to me. I've felt from the beginning that it couldn't have been anyone else. I'm afraid the old man was holding out pretty grimly, though. How did he take it?"

Smalley turned and turned his hat and scuffed a toe against the rug. "That's really what I stopped to speak to you about. On the surface, he took it calmly enough. And that's the trouble. He took it too calmly. Not a normal kind of control, if you know what I mean. He's withdrawn, drifting out of contact, and that's a danger sign."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't like to mention this, to frighten you needlessly, perhaps, but I think under the circumstances that I'd better. I've seen this sort of thing before, Mr. Roche. I've watched it happen." Smalley lifted his eyes to the light. Behind a thin film, they had a bright, blind look. "I'm thinking of suicide, Mr. Roche."

"Suicidel!"

"Yes. I know it must seem incredible to you. It always does, and maybe in this case it really is, but if you're wise you'll watch him for a while. Just keep him under observation."

"I think you must be mistaken. The old man never struck me as the type who would go off the deep end. Not even over something like this."

"There's a breaking point, Mr. Roche. A time when a man feels he's simply had enough. It comes to all of us, and most of us get past it all right, but a few of us don't. Well, it's your affair, of course. I just thought I'd mention it for what it's worth."

"I know you mean well. Thanks very much. Will you have a drink before you go?"

"No, thanks." Smalley put his hat on his head, took it off again, blinked into the light, and turned back to the door. He looked over his shoulder and nodded several times and let himself out into the hall.

Peter stood quietly in the room and listened to an exultant, interior singing of joy and triumph.

How cooperative of the old man, he thought.

How very cooperative of him to make his death and the means of his death predictable.

And time, at last, moved swiftly. The time was now.

8.

He waited for her to come. He sat alone in the library where he had first met her, and it seemed a long time ago. For a moment he could see her in the chair by the fire, a soft and sinuous cat with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, smiling at him lazily through a transparent veil of smoke. The vision was so vivid that he had the feeling that it would survive all tests, that if he arose and approached her she would set the glass aside and lift her arms to accept whatever he had to give. He took a swallow of his own drink and looked away toward the draped windows, but she had moved from the chair in the instant of his shifted view and was there ahead of it, poised and provocative against dark green.

Behind him in the hall, rasping across his raw nerves, the front door bell rang. He was on his feet at once, as if he had been propelled physically by the sound, his pulses pounding in his temples. Carefully and slowly, exercising deliberate control, he lifted his glass and drained it. Then he set the glass on a table by the bottle that had supplied it and

walked with measured, unhurried steps into the hall and down to the door. His sensation was one of gaseous lightness, as if he were moving under a soft, external force that was in no way his own toward an end that was inevitable, and the door floated open in his hand without weight or resistance.

She stood in the spill of light in a posture of breathless waiting that seemed cataleptic in its strange rigidity, and the intensity of her excitement was something tangible that reached him and touched him and stirred within him an identical emotion. For a long moment they stared at each other across the narrow space that was all that was presently left of the separation, and then her breasts rose and descended, and he could hear the extended whisper of her breath.

"I got your message," she said softly.

"I see. Come in."

She came swiftly into the hall and turned as he closed the door.

"Is it all right?"

"Yes."

"The servants?"

"Gone for the night. I saw to that."

"Where's the old man?"

"Upstairs in his room. In bed. Your death knocked him out, darling. I didn't really anticipate his taking it quite so hard. Even the detective on the case noticed it. And was disturbed by it. He warned me to be on the watch for suicide."

"That's good. That's very good."

"I know. That's why I sent you word to come. Right now everything's favorable. It's the psychological time. If we do it now, we've got everyone thinking the way we want them to think. You'll just have to make it look like suicide, that's all. You'll have to be sure."

"I'll be sure, darling. I'll be very sure."

Then, as if they had been pressing all this time against invisible barriers that collapsed suddenly, they moved together and locked with an almost brutal impact of bodies, and it was a long time before she let her head fall back away from him, her bright dyed hair hanging.

She said dreamily, "And now it's almost over, darling. After so long."

"Almost. The big risk, one more time of waiting, and then nothing left."

"No, darling. You and me left. You and me and what all the money will buy. How am I for a dead woman?"

"As good as you ever were alive. Lucky for us, since you have to stay dead. Have you seen anyone you know?"

"No. No one."

"How did you come?"

"By bus. I took a taxi from the depot to an address about a mile away. I walked from there."

"No one saw you approach the house?"

"No one at all. I'm sure of that."

"All right." He stepped back, her

hands trailing off his shoulders and down his arms to hang quietly at her sides. "I'd better go now. I'm meeting a party at a club in half an hour. That's my alibi in case I need one. I don't think I will. You'd better allow me at least an hour."

"Yes, darling. I'll wait."

"I've arranged everything so you won't be disturbed. You don't have to worry about that."

"I won't worry."

He turned and walked to a hall closet, from which he took hat and coat. He put them on and returned most of the distance to Etta, stopping a couple of feet away, the interval that would widen into the final separation that must still be endured.

"Good-by, darling. Last good-by."

"Yes. The very last."

He wanted to touch her, to feel again the assurance he gained from the touch of her flesh, but he didn't. Turning away, he opened the door and paused, looking back for an instant before shutting himself out. She returned his look with dreamy eyes. On her bright lips was the small smile of a child who anticipates a pleasure assured and at hand.

9.

It was strange, very strange, and he couldn't understand it. It was all done, all over, the risks taken and survived, and now the tensions should have been relaxed, a sense of tri-

umph and power dominant in his mood. But it wasn't that way at all. He was depressed, afflicted with a deep anxiety that was much like fear.

In his room in the empty house, the night held back by stone and wood and glass, he turned in his mind to the beginning, which was Etta, and worked back in detail through the events that followed, and he could see again, for the thousandth time, that nothing had gone wrong, that everything had worked almost miraculously to plan, and that it was now, in the time of triumph, wholly irrational to submit to despondency.

Even the last most precarious detail of all had gone with incredible ease, the intended interpretation accepted without a shadow of suspicion that could be detected. He could see again the commonplace figure of the detective named Smalley, could hear as if they were actually repeated at the moment of his recollection the detective's exact words and the monotonous inflections, or lack of them, with which they were spoken.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Roche. You'll recall that I suggested this possibility."

"Yes. I'm afraid I discounted the possibility too much. I never really felt that the old man would do it. I suppose there's no chance of its having been anything else?"

"What else could it be?"

"I see what you mean. The only

alternative is even more shocking. Even more incredible."

"Well, I don't think we need to concern ourselves with alternatives. It was suicide, all right. Open and shut, as I see it. The position of the wound, the presence of the gun, the motivation—all these make a convincing case."

"All right. I guess I must simply accept it. Thank you for your consideration."

"Not at all, Mr. Roche. I only wish I could have convinced you in time that this might happen."

That easy. That fantastically simple. All things in order and moving smoothly toward the projected end—the funeral, the payment of the insurance, the business of the will. And now Etta. Due and past due, Etta and the far places.

In the hall, the upstairs extension began to ring, and he listened to it without moving, wondering if he should let it ring or go out to answer it, and when it continued to ring imperiously in long bursts, he submitted and went out into the hall.

"Peter Roche speaking," he said, and a masculine voice responded that he didn't immediately recognize.

"Good-evening, Mr. Roche. Dr. Norton Foresman here."

He waited, aware that his breath was caught painfully in his suddenly constricted throat, but after a while he spoke quite calmly, somewhat surprised that he could manage it.

"Yes?"

"I dislike bringing this to your attention," Dr. Foresman said, "but I'm quite sure you'll understand. It's your dental bill, Mr. Roche. For professional services. It's now delinquent, and I'm afraid I must insist upon immediate payment."

"You mean Etta's bill? The one she made before her accident?"

"Yes. Surely you'll want to assume her obligations."

"Certainly. Legitimate ones. That particular bill, however, has been paid in full."

"Oh, no, Mr. Roche. Far from it. A small initial payment was made. No more."

"Ten thousand dollars, I believe."

"Exactly."

"That's a small payment?"

"Under the circumstances, yes. For the type and quality of the work, I mean. A *very* small payment, I should say."

His voice was bland, a smooth, smooth voice, and Peter wondered if this was the sound of destruction, a sound as soft and smooth as a dentist's dun, and he felt the return in force of the cold hatred that had begun and grown with persuasion, and he was all at once no longer depressed, no longer anxious on the dark edge of terror, and he felt, instead, nothing but the cold, complete hatred and a kind of excitement that was collateral to the realization that twice was not enough and that there would have to be, after all, one more a third time.

"What's the balance of the bill?" he said quietly.

Foresman's voice took on a tone of expansion, of subtle patronage. "You understand, of course, that we dentists are rather like doctors in that we try to keep our fees flexible. In this way, they can be made commensurate with the patient's ability to pay. I hear that you have come into quite a considerable amount recently, Mr. Roche. The balance of the bill is fifty thousand dollars."

"Don't you think that's rather exorbitant?"

"Not at all. In the beginning, you'll recall, the actual fee was reduced in consideration of a bonus of sorts. It is now apparent even to an optimist like me, Mr. Roche, that the bonus will never be paid. In lieu of the bonus, the fee itself has been raised."

"I see. I think we'd better meet to discuss this."

"I thought you might want to do that, and I'm perfectly agreeable."

"When?"

"No time like the present. I think we should get this settled as quickly as possible."

"Where?"

"My apartment should be a congenial place. I'm calling from there now. It's in the Bellmar Arms on Northeast Boulevard. The corner of 76th. The apartment is first floor rear on the left as you enter. Just walk straight down the hall from the entrance. I'll have a cocktail waiting for you." His voice was friendly.

"Thanks very much."

Cradling the phone, he went back into his room. He looked at his watch and saw that it was close to nine o'clock. Moving with certainty under the impulsion of the cold hatred and intense excitement that left him strangely assured and decisive, he put on coat and hat and removed a .38 calibre revolver from the top drawer of a chest. With the .38 a kind of definitive weight in his pocket, as if it were the final answer to everything, he went downstairs and outside to the garage. Driving with a light foot on the accelerator, he followed the bluff road to the corner where Etta had died, not long ago, by proxy, and turned up the short grade to the crest and down toward town.

On the lower level of the town, he hit Northeast Boulevard at 52nd and turned right toward higher numbers. At 76th, he passed in front of the Bellmar Arms and made a left turn, parking at the curb in comparative darkness near the alley. Getting out, he walked back along the side of the building and around to the front entrance. Through the glass of the doors, he could see the first floor hall running from front to rear directly ahead of him. He went inside and up three shallow steps and down the hall to the last door on the left. He rang a buzzer, and the door opened, and Dr. Foresman was very polite and gracious with a smile on his face.

"You're very prompt, Mr. Roche.

Won't you come in, please?"

Peter went past him into the room and turned. Dr. Foresman followed and stopped, his deteriorated athlete's body poised with a kind of vestigial grace, the ceiling light glittering on the hard waves of his hair. He gestured toward a table on which sat a cocktail shaker and glasses.

"I promised you a drink. Martinis. May I pour you one?"

"No, thanks. I'm only staying a minute."

"Oh? In that case, I assume you want to get right down to the matter of the fee."

"The blackmail, you mean."

Dr. Foresman smiled and shook his head. "Not at all. You will agree, I'm sure, that I was led to anticipate a bonus. I won't say that I was actually double-crossed, but at least I was permitted to believe something that was never really intended. However, I'm prepared to be agreeable and accept the additional fifty thousand instead. You, of all people, will surely not consider that amount excessive for such a bonus."

"How much will the next fee amount to? And the next, and the next?"

"No. I thought you might be afraid of something like that. This closes our association. I give you my word."

"What makes you think you can get away with this? You're in this yourself, you know. Suppose I simply refuse to pay."

"That would be unfortunate. It's true that I'm involved, but not so deeply as you, I think you'll admit. I've thought it through very carefully, and I'm sure I could manage to escape any very serious consequences for my part in this business. At any rate, Mr. Roche, don't make the mistake of thinking I won't go through with this. To put it rather crudely, you'll pay or else."

The fury and the hate were very exhilarating. Actually, Peter felt better than he'd felt for many long months. There was in him a kind of perverted happiness that was wholly unreasonable. He took the .38 from his pocket and pointed it at Foresman.

"Oh, I'll pay," he said. "I'll pay in full."

He shot him twice in the chest and watched the succession of fear and shock in the dentist's face, watched with pleasure the collapse and terminal twitching of the big body that would go no further to fat. Then, swiftly, before blood could stain the carpet, he heaved the body into his arms and carried it the length of the living room and into a bedroom and across the bedroom to a window overlooking the alley. Depositing the body on the floor with its back against the wall in a sitting position, he raised the window and unfastened the screen and saw that there was a narrow strip of grass between the building and the alley. Some low-growing foundation shrubs had been planted close to the

building. Pushing the body through the window, he lowered it to the ground behind the shrubs. Then he refastened the screen and closed the window and went back through the bedroom and living room into the hall and outside. He saw no one. So far as he knew, no one had seen him. Or heard him. He had gambled on sound-proofing and apparently won.

On the side street, he turned his car into the alley and stopped behind the Bellmar. Still moving swiftly and with the blind assurance that precluded in his mind the possibility of detection, he dragged Foreman's body from behind the shrubbery and onto the rear floor of the car. Behind the wheel, he drove on down the alley, emerging on the side street at the far end and turning back onto Northeast Boulevard.

Behind the lodge, he stopped beside a weathered plank shed and went inside. Fumbling in almost total darkness, he found a spade and a pick-ax and carried them out to the car. He leaned the tools against the car and turned his attention to the rear seat. Under persuasion, the beginning of the last that he would be subjected to, Dr. Norton Foreman slipped out.

The body was cumbersome and elusive, a monstrous burden that bore down upon him with terrible weight and threatened with every step to slip from his shoulder. Climbing the slope against which the lodge was built was gruelling labor, but after that, beyond the crest,

it was easier going, downgrade a short distance into a dry gulch. In the gulch he dropped the body with a dull, sodden thud and stood for a minute with his chest heaving, gulping the cold night air. Then he returned to the car for the tools.

10.

He went into the lounge of the hotel that had been designated and looked around for an empty booth or table, but there wasn't any, so he sat instead at the bar on a stool with a vacancy on the left. He could see the entrance from the lobby reflected in the bar mirror, and after about ten minutes spent with a bourbon and water he could see Etta in the entrance. The vacancy still existed on the left, and she came across and filled it.

"Darling," she said, "I thought it would take forever."

"There was a lot to do. Assets to liquidate, debts to pay. The old man had a lot of debts. I didn't dream he owed so much."

"I told you that. Remember? I said we'd need the insurance."

"Well, we've got it. A hundred grand."

"I considered getting in touch with you, but I didn't think it would be wise."

"It's just as well you didn't."

"Will they ever find him?"

"I don't think so. I'm sure of it."

"You did it well, darling. I'm proud of you."

He drained his glass and waited again for the bartender's bit. Then he said, "Well, it's over now. All over and done."

"The bad part. The good part just beginning. Are you free to go away?"

"Yes. Everything's been taken care of."

"Good. I'll take a plane south tomorrow. You follow in a couple of weeks. You know where to meet me."

"I know."

Then he lifted his fresh drink and looked up into the reflected, red-rimmed eyes of the fat little man named Smalley.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Roche," Smalley said. "I don't believe I've met your step-mother."

Peter looked at Etta and felt for a second a thrill that could not be sustained and died almost instantly. She was sitting very upright on the stool with her chin lifted and her cheeks burning with color. Her eyes, focused unwaveringly on Smalley's reflection, were shining with a bright, hot light. Unable to bear the sight of her terrible excitement, he turned his own eyes down to the untasted drink before him and said dully, "So you've known all along."

Smalley looked startled and shook his head. "On the contrary. I haven't been very smart in this business, Mr. Roche. I didn't suspect a thing until after Dr. Foresman disap-

peared." He sighed and drew the fingers of one hand across his eyes. "It's no credit to me that I know anything now. It was really Dr. Foresman himself who put me straight. You see, we went through his office files when he disappeared, and we found a certain dental chart there. A kind of map of a person's teeth, you know. It was clearly labeled as being Mrs. Roche's, and it was not identical with that of the woman who died in the accident at all. Not even similar. That tore it, of course, and a child could have reconstructed what had actually happened. That was lucky, I guess, because otherwise I'd probably never have been able to do it. Naturally, we kept quiet until you got around to leading us to your collaborator. Which you have. And now if you could see your way clear to leading us to Dr. Foresman's body, it would wrap things up nicely, and we'd appreciate it greatly."

Again Peter looked at Etta, and she hadn't moved, and he realized with a kind of incredulous, weary wonder that she was already thinking beyond the moment of ruin and planning the moves and counter-moves of the final deadly game still to be played with the gathering forces of retribution, and his submission was completed by the evidence of her strength.

"He's buried in the hills," Peter said dully. "I'll take you there."

Surprise! Surprise!

Everybody knew about Gladys — everybody but the dumb guy who married her.



BY DAVID ALEXANDER

AUGUST is the craziest month in the year, especially in Greenwich Village. In August, the dogs in Washington Square Park get rabies. In August, the girls on West

Third Street pull out hair in cat fights. In August, the queens on West Eighth Street dress up in peekaboo shirtwaists and camp like mad because the fleet is in. Even the usually stolid neighborhood Italians seem to flip their wigs in

August and chase their wives with kitchen cutlery.

If you work out of the Eighth Precinct on Mercer, which covers the east side of the Village, you don't look forward to August. I don't, anyway.

It was in August just a year ago that Joe Bacci got married. And it was in August this year that the handcuffs started disappearing from the station house. Anything at all can happen in August, and in Greenwich Village it usually does.

I guess there's nothing really crazy about a guy getting himself married, even if he's forty-seven, like Joe was, and has been a bachelor all his life. But it's crazy for anybody at all to marry a woman like Gladys. Gladys was a tramp. Everybody knew Gladys was a tramp. Everybody but Joe Bacci, the guy who married her.

Joe was a big, beefy, stupid guy with bushy eyebrows and a brown mole on his cheek. He wasn't right-cous-stupid, like some cops are. He was just dumb-stupid. I mean, he had his hand out for the gravy like everybody else. He took his ten bucks a week off the corner book and he cadged his free drinks in the corner saloon and he got his Christmas turkey free from the corner butcher. He looked the other way when the swishes who perch like sparrows on the Washington Square Park fence made eyes at sailors, because it was a lot of trouble to haul 'em in and not worth it.

Joe had gotten to be a first-grade detective by just staying around for twenty-five years. He'd never won a medal or a commendation or many kind words from his superiors, and he never would. He was just a big, dumb, plodding cop who made an arrest when he had to and killed somebody with a gun when he had to and went to mass on Sunday and marched in the Columbus Day parade. He'd lived in the same railroad flat on Thompson Street with his mother ever since he was born. His mother was an invalid with some sort of heart disease and Joe took care of her until the day she died. I heard he even had to do the cooking the last few years when the old lady was practically paralyzed.

If Joe had himself a woman regularly like any other normal man, nobody ever heard of it. He never even had a date with a woman, so far as any of us at the precinct knew. When he wasn't on duty, he was home with his mother.

Then his mother died and Joe gave her a nice funeral with a solemn high mass and a fancy coffin lined with white satin and after that he started stepping out with Gladys. Man, that was some combo, Joe and Gladys.

Gladys was one of those hefty, broad-beamed, heavy-breasted dyed blondes with a baby face and the morals of an uninhibited female mink. She'd been a hash-slinger in a one-armed dirty spoon where the

cops from the precinct house got their hamburgs and coffee. Before that she was a lady bartender in a queer joint on Third Street. She'd never gone for the dikes, though. She was strictly man-bait.

I guess I was partly responsible for Joe Bacci meeting Gladys in the first place. There'd been a riot call one night from the dike trap on Third where she was working as a lady bartender. A couple of the girls had started a fight over some skinny little redhead from the Bronx and one of the girls had shoved a broken bottle in the other's face. The joint got its license jerked and Gladys was out of a job. I persuaded the Greek who ran the dirty spoon to take Gladys on. He owed me favors. I'd not only been a customer for ten years but I'd protected him from the Board of Health. His place had more violations than the city dump.

I owed Gladys a favor myself, I guess. I'd been spending a lot of my days off in her cold water flat on Cornelia Street.

After Gladys started working behind the counter at the Greek's, she got to be a kind of a dirty joke in the upstairs detective squad room of the precinct. She was the kind of tramp men talk about and joke about after they've gone with her. Maybe it's because they're ashamed of going with her and joking about it kind of takes the edge off the guilt. Anyway, nearly all of us had been up to her cold water flat fairly

regularly. All of us but Joe Bacci, that is. I don't know how Joe could have been around the squad room without hearing the things we said about Gladys. I guess he just never listened to them or didn't know who we were talking about, or it's a cinch he'd never have started going out with her. Or even if he had started to sow a few wild oats in his middle age he sure as hell would never have married her if he'd known the score.

I guess the ones who saw Gladys most in those days were myself and Phil Lynch, but at least three other boys in the squad room were going up to Gladys' flat fairly regularly. I don't know about the harness bulls downstairs. Some of them might have gone for Gladys, too, but it's not too likely because there are only so many days in a week, even for a tramp like Gladys.

Rios, the Spaniard, wasn't with us then. He was working a special squad assignment up on San Juan Hill. He didn't meet Gladys until after Joe had married her.

One day that summer a year ago, right around the first of August, Phil Lynch came in and he was laughing his head off. He said to me, "Guess what I saw last night?"

I told him I wasn't any good at guessing or I'd quit the cops and make my living on those T.V. quiz shows.

"I dropped into that fish house on MacDougal," Phil said, "and who do you think I saw? Joe Bacci,

all dressed up in a clean white shirt. And who do you think he had with him? Gladys! Our Gladys, the hash-house Marilyn Monroe, that's who!"

Well, when Joe Bacci came in, we started kidding, but we shut up pretty quickly. Usually Joe Bacci just looked stupid, but when we started ribbing him about Gladys, he looked mad. He just glared at us and his swarthy face turned dark red. So we quit needling him. And when we found out the way he felt about this Gladys, we quit dropping up to see her too. Gladys was one of those dames who's all right if nothing better is around, but you'd never send her Valentines and it wouldn't break your heart if you had to forget she was alive.

You'd never pick old Joe as the type to stage a whirlwind courtship, but that's what it must have been. He met Gladys around the first of August and he was getting blood tests for his marriage license around the middle of the month and he was married to her before September. He hadn't given up the flat he was born in, the place he'd lived in with his mother all his life. He set up housekeeping there with Gladys, among the Crucifixes and the plaster saints and religious chromos that his mother had collected. I'd been up to Joe Bacci's place a few times when his mother was alive. He was the only cop in the Eighth who lived in the neighborhood and once in a while he'd ask me up for some spaghetti and

wine. I couldn't help thinking what a funny place it was for Gladys. Gladys' own dump had been a good deal different. She had a recorder that was always blaring hot jazz and her slips and panties and girdles were piled on the chairs and the floor and the only pictures on her walls were photos of male movie stars and boxers she'd cut out of magazines.

Well, things started happening right away after Joe had married Gladys. In the first place he wanted to have a social life and he didn't know anybody except the boys in the squad room. He started asking Phil Lynch and me and the others to bring our wives down for dinner and a party. If we'd been bachelors it would have been bad enough. But all of us were married and that made it impossible, because we'd all been up to Gladys' room. We stalled him, of course. Imagine me taking my wife up to a dinner party at Gladys', for instance. My wife is a good sport. She'll take a cocktail before dinner, but she's real proper. I mean she subscribes to the Book of the Month Club and teaches a class in Sunday school and grows flowers in the back yard of our house in Levittown. You could tell it hurt Joe because we wouldn't accept his invitations, wouldn't bring our wives to meet Gladys. But what the hell could we do? After a while, Joe quit asking, but then something else happened.

A month or two after she was

married, Gladys started calling me and Phil Lynch and the others at the station house. Sometimes she'd call when her husband was right there in the squad room. She'd want to know why we didn't drop by and see her while Joe was on duty and we'd have to stall her the way we'd stalled Joe. Then she got to lushing it up quite a bit. She'd hang around Village bars and when she got half a load on, she'd call and want me or Phil or one of the others to come down and have a drink with her. When we hung up, she'd call right back if she was drunk enough, and sometimes old Joe would be standing right there within two feet of us while we were trying to tell her we wanted no part of her and, at the same time, trying to keep Joe from knowing who it was on the other end of the phone.

Then something else happened that was bad for me personally. I'd been partnered up for years with Phil Lynch and we'd always got along fine. We knew the neighborhood and we knew what to overlook and what we had to get tough about and how much we were allowed to take from where without getting into trouble. But the new commissioner was full of ideas. He wanted to break up the old teams in the department because he thought it would increase general efficiency. He sent an order out about it and the lieutenant couldn't do anything but break up me and Phil, and I got paired off with Joe Bacci. While

we were cruising around together Joe started bringing up the subject of me bringing my wife into town for dinner again. I made all kinds of explanations, but it got embarrassing. I told him we lived a long way out on the Island and I told him my wife had asthma and that the carbon monoxide in the city made it worse. But I couldn't avoid visiting his apartment myself when he insisted. It was only a few blocks from the precinct house and we passed it every day while we were cruising around.

Every time I went to Joe's place Gladys had on a housecoat that was about two sizes too small for her and it wasn't hard to tell she didn't have a damn thing under it. She'd always manage to sit right in front of me while I was sipping a glass of cheap wine and she always curled her long legs up so that the tight house dress would slip up high on her thighs. If Joe noticed, he never let on. Once when Joe was out of the room, she'd been drinking a lot and she threw her arms around me and kissed me on the mouth and I almost had to cold-caulk her to make her let me loose before Joe came back. And then, when Joe would turn his back, she'd scribble little notes on scraps of paper and slip them to me. She'd ask me to meet her in some gin mill later on. I never went, of course, but that didn't stop her writing the notes.

Also, she used to write to us through the mails, to Phil Lynch

and me, I mean. Sometimes we'd get the letters in the squad room when her husband was standing right alongside us. She had a childish scrawl and if Joe saw the envelopes he must have known it was her writing. It was like something was ready to explode and she was setting the match to it. Because of Gladys everybody in the squad room got jumpy and irritable. Everybody but Joe, that is. He didn't seem to suspect a thing. He was just as dumb-stupid as he'd ever been.

Then the worst thing of all happened.

We had a Dutchman named Burger on the squad. He never should have been assigned to Greenwich Village, because he hated queens and queens grow in the Village like ragweed grows in a vacant lot. One day this Burger picked up a queen who was making improper advances to some young soldier in the park. He got him in a back room and he damned near killed him. He didn't use any sense, even. He not only left marks — big black bruises — but he smashed this queen's nose till it looked like a ripe tomato a horse had stepped on and he broke one of his arms and he kicked him in the groin and almost ruptured him. Most of the time you can get away with being rough with queens and I've known cops who got their kicks that way. Queens don't holler, usually. But this queen had a rich mama and his mama knew a lot of important people and the important

people knew the commissioner and they hollered bloody murder. So Burger got put back in harness, walking a beat in Canarsie.

And they took this Spaniard, Rios, off the special detail on San Juan Hill and they sent him down to the Eighth to take Burger's place.

This Rios had a rep for special detail work, especially narcotics and vice squad stuff. He was the meanest-looking bastard I've ever laid my eyes on and the mug shots in the picture books we look at aren't pretty. He was tall and lean and dark-skinned. He had a couple of gold teeth in front and a sharp nose. He slicked his hair back with some kind of goose grease that smelt as loud as the deodorizer in a pay can. He had a little gigolo black mustache and he wore bright blue suits with pinstripes and pearl gray hats with a feather in the band. He was just the kind of character that a tramp like Gladys might go for, and she did.

I wasn't in the squad room that day that Rios met her, but Phil Lynch was because he'd been paired off with the Spaniard after they'd put the harness back on Burger. Phil told me later that Gladys came storming in all wined up, looking for her husband. She'd drunk up all her money and she wanted more. Joe Bacci wasn't around. Phil and Rios were working the eight to four and they were about to go off duty. Phil said that Rios stood there giving her a gold-toothed grin and un-

dress her with his eyes. Then he asked her to go out and have a drink with him.

From that time on, things really got rough.

This Rios was spending all his days off in Joe's apartment with Joe's wife and he wasn't making any bones about it. You're a cop, you run up against all kinds of queers and, in his own way, this Spaniard was a queer, I guess. He couldn't get a kick out of his affair with Joe Bacci's wife unless he bragged about it good and loud. He never came right out and told Joe what was happening, but he hinted at it in a way that anybody who wasn't as stupid as Joe Bacci would have caught on. It seemed as if he was getting his kicks needling Bacci. Gladys would call Rios up and he'd talk to her on the phone right there in front of Joe and he'd say things sometimes that men don't say to women, even women who are tramps. And he'd drop hints about who he was talking to that were so broad you'd think Joe would be sure to know his wife was calling. But he never seemed to tumble.

The rest of us used to squirm, though. We figured even Joe Bacci couldn't be quite that stupid-dumb.

Gladys used a cheap, strong perfume that would knock you over a block away. It had some silly name like "Passion Flower" and the smell was so loud and distinctive you couldn't miss it unless your nose was stuffed full of cotton batting. One

day this Rios came into the squad room and had one of Gladys' handkerchiefs that was soaked with the stuff. He dangled it in front of Joe Bacci's nose and he asked him how he liked his sweetheart's perfume. Joe just kind of wrinkled up his nose and mumbled something and didn't seem the least suspicious.

Another time Gladys must have dropped her compact in Rios' pocket when they were out. The Spaniard put his hand on it when he was looking for a cigarette and he dropped it on a table right in front of Joe and complained about his girl friend stuffing his pocket full of junk. Joe Bacci didn't say a thing.

Rios had a way of describing people vividly that was an asset to a cop. On the mornings after his days off he'd come into the squad room and tell us what had happened between him and his girl friend, and he didn't spare the details. He'd describe his girl friend and anybody who'd ever laid his eyes on Gladys would know who he was talking about. Anybody but Joe Bacci, I guess.

All of a sudden it got to be August again and Greenwich Village was even crazier than usual.

A bunch of young hoods from the Santa Maria Social Club on Sullivan caught themselves a queen in Washington Square Park and stomped him to death on the cement just outside the men's can. When we picked the kids up we found out each of them owned a pair of hob-

nailed shoes they used especially for stomping.

A harmless old silky-bearded character called The Apostle had been wandering around the Village gin mills for years peddling hand-written copies of his poems. All of a sudden he blew his stack and went down on the platform of a Sixth Avenue subway station and took all his clothes off in front of a couple of dozen people, including a bunch of high school girls. Maybe he was just hot. We had to send him to the locked ward at Bellevue.

A couple of lovers on West Third made a suicide pact and turned the gas on and they were lying in each other's arms deader than the mackerel in the Fulton Fish Market when we found them. That wasn't all. They hadn't stuffed the cracks in the doors too well and the gas had seeped through to the next flat and asphyxiated a three-months-old baby that was sleeping in its crib.

An Italian chef in a pizzeria on Bleecker Street went berserk and cut the waitress' throat from ear to ear with a big butcher knife because she slapped him after he'd playfully pinched her.

The full moon was out a good part of that month and cops always have plenty of headaches when a full moon is out. You can laugh it off all you want to, but full moons do something to the citizens and the police blotter will bear me out. Also it was the worst heat wave in the

history of the weather bureau. The thermometer climbed up over 90 every day and the humidity was just as high. We sat around the squad room in our undershirts with a big electric fan blowing steam-bath air at us, smelling each other's sweat.

It was in August that crazy things started happening in the station house, too. In the first place, Joe Bacci started asking Phil Lynch and me to bring our wives down to meet his Gladys again. He said they'd be celebrating their first anniversary on the twenty-seventh and he was throwing a surprise party for Gladys. It seemed to mean an awful lot to him. He was so insistent that he practically was begging like a dog on its hind legs. We stalled him because of course we couldn't take our wives to meet a drunken tramp like Gladys. But he kept begging. Phil beat me to an obvious excuse. He told Joe his wife would be leaving on her vacation on the twenty-sixth. Then I told him my wife's asthma had got a lot worse and that the doc was sending her to the Thousand Islands for a month. Joe looked like somebody had kicked him in the belly. Then he came up with another idea. He said that since our wives were out of town and we were on the loose, Phil and I might as well attend his party. He had even figured out that he and I were working the day shift from eight to four on his anniversary and that it was a day off for Phil and Rios. There wasn't much answer to that so we agreed to attend.

When I thought about it being Rios' day off, I figured that Gladys would probably have another party before we even got there. Only it wouldn't be much of a surprise to her.

August kept getting worse and worse. Around the middle of the month we found an old doll named Bessie who peddled wilted flowers in night spots hanging by her scrawny neck from the rear fire escape of an old-law tenement. Her hands and feet were tied so it wasn't suicide.

There was a rash of gang-rapes breaking out in the neighborhood around West Broadway. A jumper on Tenth Street landed smack on the head of the father of six kids who happened to be passing by. The jumper got a bruise or two. The father of six was killed. A drunk in a sucker trap on Fourth Street put a match to a cellophane skirt that a strip-tease entertainer was wearing and set her on fire. Gunsels stuck up a bar on MacDougal and when the bartender tried to make like a hero they shot him dead. One of the gunsels was full of H. and once he tasted blood he went crazy and started spraying the customers. Six got wounded, but none of them died. An old screwball who had long white hair and wore a ten-gallon hat and a buckskin shirt suddenly appeared in Washington Square. He climbed up on park benches and made speeches about how everybody should repent because the

world was coming to an end in the next ten days. I wished it would, almost.

If you're ever a cop in Greenwich Village, take August for your vacation if you can.

It must have been right around the twentieth when the handcuffs started disappearing.

One day Joe Bacci walked into the squad room and said somebody had stolen his bracelets. When a cop loses property, it's serious. In the first place he has to buy it himself. But the worst part is it goes down as a black mark on his record.

Usually if a cop gets something stolen from him, it's his gun. When a gun gets stolen it can turn up in the mitt of a hood who's shooting some poor jerk and the cop's in plenty of trouble. So cops watch their guns. When they don't wear them, they keep them locked up. But cops are pretty careless about handcuffs. They're heavy in the pocket and the first thing a cop does when he's relaxing is toss the bracelets on some nearby piece of furniture. Who the hell would have any use for handcuffs, except maybe some guy who has an itch he shouldn't scratch.

We all said it would take a cop as dumb as Joe to get handcuffs stolen from him. Rios ribbed poor Joe and needled him all day.

But Rios wasn't laughing the next day, because his own handcuffs had disappeared. And that same damn day my own set went.

The lieutenant was really burning. He snarled at everybody. He was getting laughed at by the precinct captain and the desk sergeant downstairs and he swore he was going to give the whole squad a vacation without pay if it happened again and bring us up on charges. So Phil Lynch lost his handcuffs.

Then it started downstairs. On the same day three sets of handcuffs disappeared from lockers the harness bulls used. By that time a deputy inspector from downtown had come around to investigate. A newspaper had got hold of the story of the disappearing handcuffs and had played it up on page one, kidding the hell out of us. The deputy inspector was raving. He ate the precinct captain out and he ate the lieutenant in the squad room out and he banged his fists on desks and threatened a big shakeup.

The deputy inspector hadn't been gone half an hour when the lieutenant's handcuffs were missing.

That made eight sets altogether that were lost, strayed or stolen.

You can't tell me that August isn't a real gone, crazy month.

All the time these things were happening Rios and Gladys were having their fun practically in public. They seemed to be completely contemptuous of poor old Joe. They were doing their necking on bar stools in gin mills that were only a few blocks from the station house. Phil and I ran into them almost every time we dropped into a joint

to cadge a shot. Fortunately, Joe Bacci liked to drink his wine at home and didn't do much bar-crawling.

But it was a cinch he was bound to run into them sometime. It was like they were asking for it.

On the twenty-sixth, Joe reminded Phil and me that tomorrow was the big day and that he was expecting us for his anniversary surprise party. He told us he'd bought some real good bonded bourbon especially for us. He said he'd meet us at a bar on MacDougal at seven-thirty so we could all go in together and shout "Surprise!" at Gladys. He seemed real excited about the party he was giving. It was right pathetic in a way, I guess, the poor chump getting so worked up about a party for the tramp he'd married.

Then he told us something that floored us both.

He told us that the Spaniard, Rios, was going to be there too.

Just in case something else was needed, the twenty-seventh turned out to be the hottest day of the whole damned year. The thermometer climbed over 90 by ten in the morning and it hit a hundred and went up higher a little after noon. The humidity was 96, to make things more comfortable. You could see the heat. It wreathed the streets like smoke. And you could smell it frying the garbage in the hot tin pails.

Joe and I started cruising a little after we reported in at eight. We

had a few routine things to do. We had to warn Mickey, the bookie, that he should supply us with a boy to pick up in the next day or two. We had to pick up one of his runners every month or two to keep the brass downtown happy. Mickey always arranged to have one of the boys caught with betting slips and scratchsheets and other evidence on him. He was real obliging that way. All that happened usually was that Mickey sent somebody down to pay the guy's fine. Once in a while a tough magistrate might slap thirty days on the runner. When that happened, the guy got a nice bonus from Mickey for taking the rap.

A little after nine Joe told me he was going to fade for awhile because he had some arrangements to make for the party that night. He said I should cover him up. He got out of the car and walked away and I went into a bar and cadged a beer. It was too damned hot for liquor.

I didn't see Joe again till I met him for lunch at the Greek's. He looked kind of pale and peaked but I didn't think anything about it. On a day like that even guys whose wives weren't cheating on them had a right to look pale and peaked.

I never was so glad to go off duty.

I went to the bar on MacDougal where we were going to meet Joe and I started drinking beer. It was an air-conditioned place and I decided I wouldn't move until Joe came around to pick us up. I drank beer till six and then I took time out

to eat a plate of spaghetti with clam sauce and then I started drinking beer again and I had about half a load on by the time Phil Lynch came into the place at a quarter after seven. It was Phil's day off and he had come all the way from the Bronx on the subway just to attend this damn fool party because he didn't want to hurt Joe Bacci's feelings.

Joe Bacci came in at seven-thirty on the dot. He bought us a beer and then he said we might as well go on over to his house and start the party. Phil asked him if Rios wasn't coming.

"We're not meeting him here," Joe said. "We'll see him at the house."

We walked out of the air-conditioned bar and the heat hit us in the face like a gust of air from a blast furnace. We were sweating like the winner of the fifth at Belmont by the time we walked the few blocks to Thompson Street.

We went into the old sandstone building and climbed a couple of flights of uncarpeted stairs. Joe Bacci's flat was one of those old-fashioned railroads with one room right after the other, most of them the size of cubicles. There was only one entrance — through the kitchen.

Joe let himself in with a key. The place didn't look as if he was planning a party. The kitchen was a mess. There were dirty dishes in the sink and some of Gladys' clothes were thrown on chairs. There were a

lot of empties on the floor. They were wine bottles. Gladys was a sherry-head. On the kitchen table was a half-gallon jug of the cheap wine that Joe drank and an unopened bottle of bonded bourbon.

Joe said, "You might as well have a drink first. Then we'll go in and surprise Gladys."

He got the cork out and poured us two stiff shots and handed us a couple of glasses of ice water for a chaser. We swallowed the shots.

Joe led us through a couple of rooms that weren't any neater than the kitchen. Then he came to a folding door that was closed and locked.

"Gladys is in here," he said. And he took out a key and unlocked the door. It was still daylight but a ceiling bulb was burning in the room beyond the door.

There was a big brass bed in the room.

On the bed were two figures, only partly dressed.

They weren't moving because they couldn't. They were chained to the headboard and the footboard of the bed by handcuffs. Joe had used the eight sets of handcuffs that had disappeared from the station. There was a set of handcuffs attached to each arm and each leg of the figures on the bed. The figures were stretched out stiff, especially the figure of the woman, who wasn't as tall as the man. It looked almost as

if they were stretched on a rack in some old dungeon.

The figures were placed on their sides, facing each other. They were only a few inches apart.

Rios had a big hole in the middle of his head and his face looked as if somebody had poured a bucket of bright red paint over it.

But that wasn't the horrible part.

The horrible part was that Gladys was alive.

Her eyes were staring at the big hole in Rios' head.

The horrible thing was the expression in Gladys' eyes. You knew she'd always have that expression in her eyes, no matter how long they kept her in the State Hospital for the Insane.

When we touched Rios' body we could tell he'd been dead a long time, maybe since early morning.

And Gladys had been chained there, staring at the hole in Rios' head, the whole time, I guess.

We didn't take Joe Bacci in. Most cops don't take that business about a policeman being on duty twenty-four hours a day too seriously. Phil and I called the precinct and told them to send around for Joe.

When we were out in the hot night again, Phil Lynch said, "Well, it was a surprise party all right, I guess."

"Yeah," I said. "Only I'm glad he didn't serve refreshments. I haven't got much appetite."

MUGGED AND PRINTED

EVAN HUNTER, author of *The Blackboard Jungle*, which is a best-seller both in its Simon and Schuster and in its Pocket Books, Inc., editions, and which is breaking records daily in movie theaters all over the country, returns to *Manhunt* this month with *First Offense*, a new study of juvenile delinquency. Hunter's sharply realistic style and subject matter are shown to their best effect in this latest story, and if you've seen both the movie of *Blackboard Jungle* and the book, I'm sure you'll agree. Hunter is now at work on a new novel, and on a play.



RICHARD DEMING's *Custody* is one of the most unusual stories we've ever published by the creator of Manville Moon (who appears in the Rinehart novels *The Gallows In My Garden*, *Tweak The Devil's Nose* and *Whistle Past The Graveyard*, as well as in numerous short stories). Deming, who lives and works in upstate New York, is now working on another story about his brand-new detective character, Clancy Ross, who appeared for the first time in *The War* (*Manhunt*, September 1955). We'll be bringing it to you soon.



STEPHEN MARLOWE'S first short story about Chester Drum, *My Son And Heir*, appears in this issue of *Manhunt*. Drum has appeared in only one novel thus far — *The Second Longest Night*, recently published by Gold Medal — but a second book about him will appear soon, and popular response to Drum, a hard-bitten, knowledgeable and realistic private eye, has been overwhelming. We'll be bringing you further records of Drum's cases in future issues.

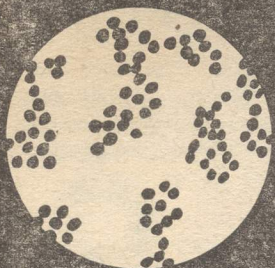
FLOYD MAHANNAH, author of many best-selling novels including *The Golden Goose* and *The Yellow Hearse*, presents one of his most suspenseful and novel ideas in *The High Trap*. Mahannah lives in California and is presently at work on another book, as well as some more stories for *Manhunt* readers. His new book,



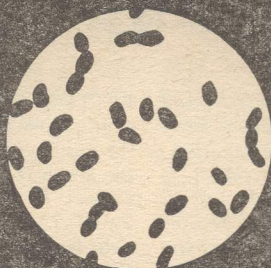
though, won't be a mystery — Mahannah is writing a historical novel about California. He's been doing research on the book for several years, and now feels he's ready to go ahead. As a matter of fact, he's recently moved from South California to North California — possibly as a means of getting a new perspective on the book.

JACK WEBB returns to *Manhunt* this month with a novelette which has a unique background — all the characters work for a city zoo! ♦ DAVID ALEXANDER, whose many fine *Manhunt* stories still draw large amounts of fan mail, is back with another top-grade yarn in *Surprise! Surprise!* We think it's one of his best to date. ♦ FLETCHER FLORA comes up with another unusual idea — a murder plot that hinges on a good dentist — in his first novel for *Manhunt*, *Kill Me Tomorrow*.

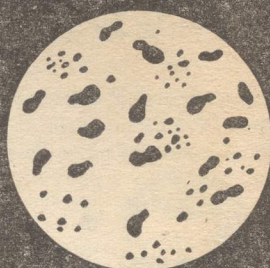
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Perry's client doesn't remember what happened the night her husband was murdered. She can't recognize her own .38 — the murder weapon. Only two people can clear her. One is missing — the other is dead!

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Mason's client is accused of stealing \$40,000 in jewels. Then they accuse her of MURDER! Perry must save her — though he suspects she may be guilty!

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Perry sneaks into an apartment; finds an empty safe. Then a blonde slams the safe shut. Not sinister... except that the tenant had been MURDERED!

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