

# MANHUNT

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APRIL, 1960

35 CENTS

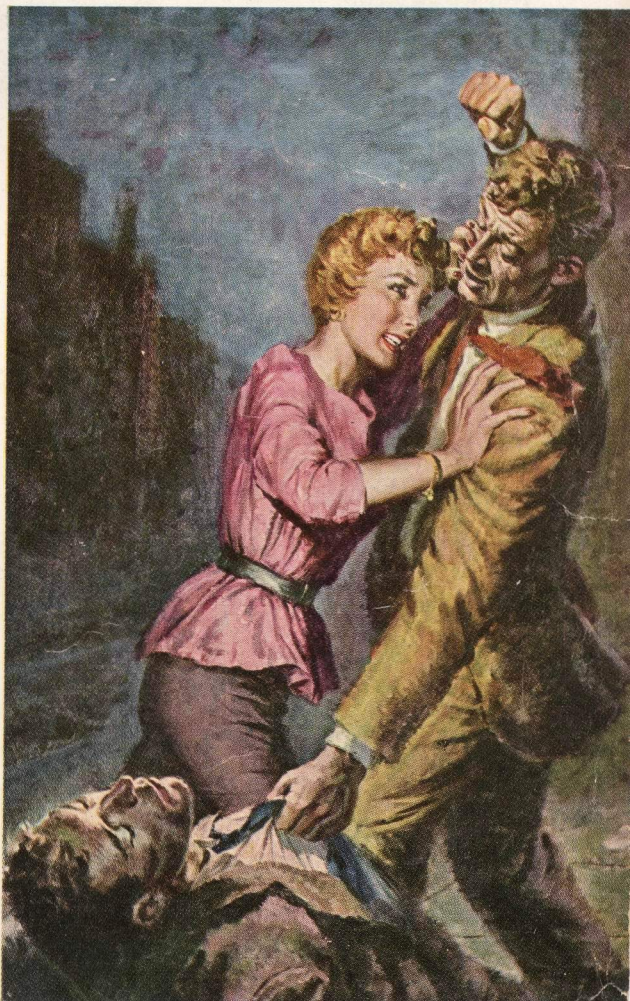
*"Pass  
The Word  
Along"*

**FRANK KANE**

*"Life  
Sentence"*

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## CONTENTS

## NOVELETTES

PASS THE WORD ALONG <i>by Frank Kane</i> . . . . .	25
WHARF RAT <i>by Robert Page Jones</i> . . . . .	98

## SHORT STORIES

SHAKEDOWN <i>by C. L. Sweeney, Jr.</i> . . . . .	1
PLEASE BELIEVE ME! <i>by Jess Shelton</i> . . . . .	7
TIME FOR REVENGE <i>by Dick Ellis</i> . . . . .	14
LOVERS QUARREL <i>by Kelly Reynolds</i> . . . . .	44
LIFE SENTENCE <i>by Talmage Powell</i> . . . . .	52
THE CHALLENGE <i>by John Carnegie</i> . . . . .	57
RUB OUT THE PAST <i>by Robert S. Aldrich</i> . . . . .	70
DON'T CLIP MY WINGS <i>by David W. Maurer</i> . . . . .	79
THE NUDE IN THE SUBWAY <i>by Arne Mann</i> . . . . .	94
MOTHER'S WAITING <i>by Murray Klater</i> . . . . .	118
THE SAFE KILL <i>by Kenneth Moore</i> . . . . .	124

MICHAEL ST. JOHN, Publisher

GERALD ADAMS, Art Director  
JOE SHORE, Advertising Rep.

JOHN UNDERWOOD, Editor  
J. PROSKE, Associate Editor

**MANHUNT** VOLUME 8, NUMBER 2, April, 1960. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for 12 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. Funds) for 12 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at Concord, N. H. and at additional mailing offices. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1959 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

*He wrote the girl's name in the little book. Now he had fourteen names. Fourteen times fifty bucks is seven hundred dollars a month. Not bad . . . and only the beginning.*

# SHAKEDOWN

BY C. L. SWEENEY, JR.

I SAW HER as soon as she turned the corner half a block away, picked her out of the crowd as surely and as easily as though she had been wearing a light—a red one. Not that I knew her, not that I'd ever seen her before. But I'd known a hundred others like her and after a while you develop a kind of instinct for it, the way a good bird dog develops a nose for quail.

She stopped at the corner and looked up at the clock on the bank building. Eight-thirty. She fluffed her blonde hair, unbuttoned the jacket of her trim tailored suit, pulled the sheer white blouse taut across her full breasts. Eight-thirty. About time for the early shows to be letting out, about time for the local sports and the tourists to be out looking for a night on the town. She hesitated for just a moment, then began to walk up the street toward me, toward the theatre district.



I leaned back against the building and watched her come, admiring with the eye of a connoisseur the way she walked, the way she poised her slender body, the way she carefully scanned and appraised each man who passed without seeming to turn her head. Smooth, practiced, polished—the professional, the career girl. My kind of girl.

She passed within a few feet of me without giving any indication that she even realized I was there. But I knew that she had seen me, knew that her mind was rapidly rating me as not too old, not too bad looking, knew that she had already evaluated my eight dollar shirt, my hundred dollar suit. And my brown shoes. She would have looked at those first. Cops always wore black shoes. A girl couldn't be too careful.

And a girl couldn't pass up the chance of an easy ten or maybe even twenty dollar trick, either. She slowed her walk until it was almost a mere swaying of the hips, offering the bait, giving me time to make up my mind.

I let her get halfway up to the end of the block and then I followed her. Without looking back she knew that I was there. It was her business to know. She stopped and looked in one of the darkened store windows, pretending to be interested in the merchandise. I stopped a few feet away, pretending, too, to be looking in the window. It was as though we were

playing a sort of game in which we both knew the moves that had to be made and both knew how it would all end . . . but we played it just the same.

She opened her handbag, took out a cigarette, put it in her mouth and fumbled for a match. I flicked the flame of my lighter and held it out to her. Her eyes were level, cool, over the flame. She lit her cigarette. "Thanks," she said.

She was young, in her early twenties, her beauty still fresh and clean. "Out looking for some excitement?" I asked her.

"I might be." Her voice was low, pleasantly husky. She lifted a faintly insinuating eyebrow, smiled. "You out looking for something?"

I grinned at her. "Could be. Any suggestions?"

She took a deep drag on the cigarette, threw it away, studied me for a moment. "I've got a place," she said matter-of-factly.

"How much?"

"Twenty." She had rated me high. I was flattered.

I hesitated. Never seem too eager.

"It's worth it," she said quickly.

"All right. Where?"

She gave me the name of a small hotel a couple of blocks over. "Room three-oh-four," she said. "Give me fifteen minutes."

"All right," I said.

I killed the time over two double-ryes in a tiny glass and chrome cocktail lounge around the corner, passing up an unspoken invitation

from a flashy redhead who sat alone at one end of the bar but noting the place for future reference. Living for the present is fine; but it doesn't do any harm to have a little something set aside for the future, either.

The sleepy clerk at the desk hardly glanced up from his copy of the *Sporting News* when I walked through the small hotel lobby. An old hand at this, probably getting a fin slipped to him from time to time for keeping his head down when a stranger went upstairs. That kind of a guy. That kind of a hotel.

I walked up the two flights, down the faintly lit hall and found it. Three-oh-four. I knocked.

She opened the door, smiled. "Come on in." She turned the key in the lock behind me. She had changed to a powder blue negligee caught loosely by a clasp at the waist, nothing else. She looked even younger, prettier, than she had when I had seen her on the street—maybe because there was more of her that I could see now. "You want a drink first?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks."

She shrugged. "Some do, some don't." She motioned toward the closet. "Hang your things in there if you want to."

"All right." I turned my back to her, took off my coat, hung it on the hook on the closet door, hung my shirt and tie over it, began to loosen my belt.

"You can put it on the dresser first," she said.

"What?" I turned. She was lying on the bed, the negligee tossed over the foot. My lips were suddenly dry. I ran my tongue along them.

She laughed. "The money," she said. "You can put it on the dresser first."

"Oh." I took my billfold out of my hip pocket, found a twenty and put it on the dresser first."

She pushed her head back into the pillow. "Come on," she said.

I stood there looking at her.

"Come on," she said again, impatient. "You don't look like the bashful type."

The billfold was still in my hand. I took a deep breath, held it up, opened it, let her see the flash of the little silver badge pinned inside. "All right," I said, "get up. You're under arrest."

She raised herself on her elbows, breathing hard, staring at me, not quite believing what was happening to her. "Jesus," she said. "You a cop?"

"Sergeant Graves, Vice Squad," I told her. "Get dressed. We're going in."

She sat up on the edge of the bed, reached for the negligee, forced a smile. "Twenty bucks is a little high. How would it be for nothing?" She was fighting with everything that was left, giving it the old college try. Class. Guts.

"It's no use," I said, looking away from her. "Get dressed."

She stood up and walked across the room to me, still holding the negligee in her hand, still trying. She put her free hand behind my neck, caressing. I could feel the warmth of her body, scent the faint perfume she wore. She lifted her head until her lips were only a few inches from mine. "I could do a lot more for you here than I could in jail." Her breath was soft and sweet against my face.

I didn't move back, couldn't. She sensed it, knew she had won. I felt the gentle pressure of her hand on my arm as she led me back across the room. The negligee was a pool of smooth blue silk on the floor.

Much later I looked at the luminous dial of my watch. Almost one in the morning. I got up, turned on a light, dressed.

She lay on the bed and watched, "Don't forget your money, Sergeant."

I went to the dresser, picked up the twenty and put it back in my billfold.

"Anytime, Sergeant," she said. "On the house."

"All right," I said. I walked over and stood beside the bed. "One other thing."

She looked up, the amusement draining out of her eyes. "Yes?"

"Fifty bucks a month," I told her. "Payable in advance. Payable now."

She stared at me, slowly understanding, her eyes narrowing. "You bastard," she said and there was pure loathing in her voice.

I reached over, slapped her hard across the mouth. Her eyes opened wide with shock. A little thread of blood began to trickle down from one corner of her lip. I was sorry about that. A basic rule of business: Never mar the merchandise. "Fifty bucks," I said again. "Now."

Without speaking she got out of bed and went to the dresser. She opened the drawer, took some bills from behind the back of a jewelry box, walked over and handed them to me. Five crisp new tens. "Get out now," she said, the words choked.

I put the tens in my billfold. "Don't take it so hard," I said. "You'll get used to the idea. Look at it like social security, like an insurance payment. Insurance against ninety days in a cell."

"Get out," she said again.

"A month," I told her, "A month from today. Next payment due. Mark it down in your date book."

I went down onto the street. The air was fresh and good and I was suddenly hungry. Like they say, it makes an old man tired and a young man hungry. I'm not that old yet.

I walked down a couple blocks until I found an all-night beanery that was open. There were no other customers in the place. A little wizened old guy was washing dishes behind the counter. I took a stool. "Two, sunny side up," I told him. "Bacon, toast, coffee."

He nodded, wiped his hands, broke eggs on the griddle.

While I waited I took the little black book out of my coat pocket and copied her address and room number in it below the others. Then I went back and counted the addresses. I didn't have to, I knew how many there were, but it made me feel good to do it. Fourteen now. Fourteen times fifty bucks is seven hundred. Seven hundred a month. Times twelve is eighty-four hundred a year. Not bad. Eighty-four hundred and all you can take out in trade. Not bad, and like the fella says, it's only the beginning, only the beginning.

The old guy put the plate and a cup of coffee on the counter in front of me. "Ninety-five cents," he said wheezily.

I reached for change, didn't have enough, took out my billfold and handed him one of the crisp new tens. He took it back to the register, took a long time making change the way old guys will, finally brought the change over and laid it on the counter. Then he went into a back room.

I put the bills from the change into the billfold and the little badge pinned there grinned up at me. I grinned back. It was an old friend, a partner, had been ever since I'd picked it up in Woolworths' for two bits. "Junior G-Man" it said faintly if you looked real close, but it twinkled real pretty and that was enough. I closed

the billfold, shoved it back in my hip pocket.

I was almost through eating before the little guy came out of the back room. He watched me for a minute, then went over and dropped a coin in the juke box. A polka blared out, loud as hell.

I didn't hear them come in the door, didn't even know that they were there until I felt a hand on my shoulder. The old man pulled the plug on the machine. Everything stopped.

The hand on my shoulder tightened. "This the one?" a rough voice behind me wanted to know.

The little guy jerked his head up and down violently, saying nothing, his rheumy eyes frightened.

"What the hell—" I started to say.

"Keep your hands on the counter, Buster," the voice said. "Then stand up and turn around, real slow and easy."

I did. There were two of them, a big one and a little one, cop written all over them. The little one had a gun. The hands of the big one went over me quickly, expertly. "Clean," he said. He turned to the old guy. "Thanks for the tip, Pop. Let's see it."

The old guy skittered over to the register, took out my crisp new ten and handed it to him. The big guy rubbed it between his fingers, looked at both sides of it, handed it to the other cop. "It's one of them, all right," he said. "Queer as hell. Phoney as they come." He

turned to me. "You the punk that's been passing these?"

I tried to think, tried to slow the racing of my mind, tried to say something. All I could do was gulp, shake my head.

His lip curled. "I suppose you just happened to pick this one up."

I gulped again on the big lump in my throat, took the cue. "Sure, officer," I said. "Got it in change somewhere."

"I'll bet you did." He spun me quickly, pulled the billfold out, spun me back. He jerked it open and the little badge fell off and slid somewhere under a table. He tossed the bills on the counter, separated out the four crisp new tens. He grinned at me, a nasty grin. "All

right, Buster," he said, "let's go downtown."

"Wait a minute—" I started to say. Started to say what? Started to say wait a minute, officer, this is all a big mistake? I haven't been passing those. A girl gave them to me tonight. Why, officer? For sleeping with her, of course, for keeping her out of jail, for impersonating a cop. That story will go over big downtown, won't it officer? Like hell it will.

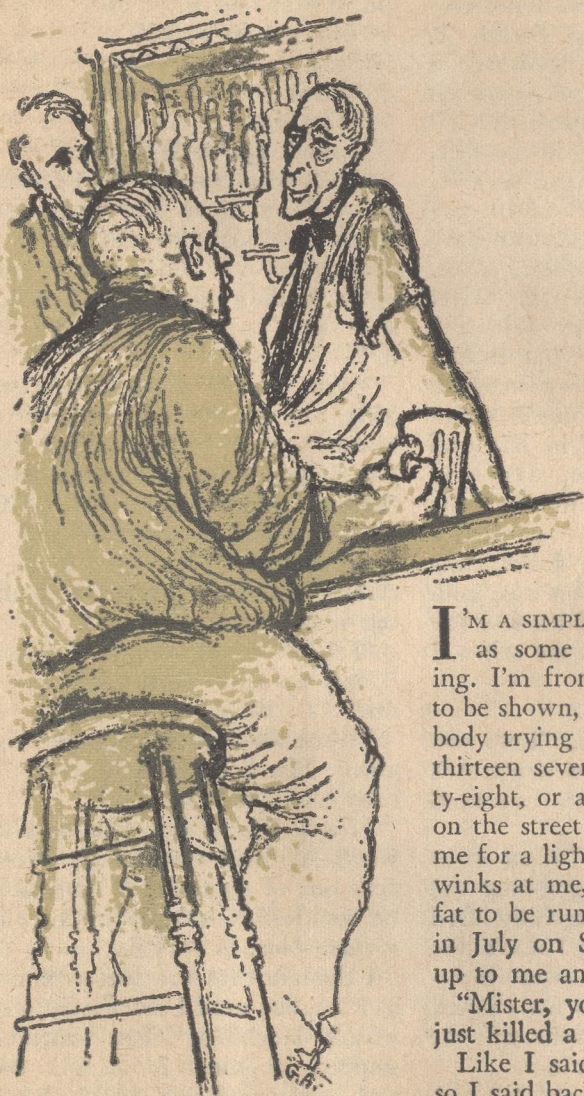
I thought of the girl then, thought of the way she had looked lying there waiting for me, what she had said, how it had been with us. I shook my head. Dam, it was getting so you couldn't trust anybody any more.



*So the fat guy thought he'd killed his wife. What the hell, it's hot in St. Louis in July, maybe a few beers would calm him down.*

# PLEASE BELIEVE ME!

BY  
JESS  
SHELTON



I'M A SIMPLE GUY. I'm simple and as some people say, unassuming. I'm from Missouri, so I have to be shown, no matter if it's somebody trying to prove he can add thirteen seven times and get twenty-eight, or a broad who stops me on the street or on a bus and asks me for a light for her cigarette and winks at me, or a man who is too fat to be running but in St. Louis in July on South Broadway runs up to me and grabs me and says, "Mister, you got to help me! I just killed a woman!"

Like I said, I got to be shown, so I said back to him, "I don't believe it. You only wish you just

killed a woman. And probably your wife." I put my hand on his shoulder to calm him down. He didn't calm so good. "Look," I said, "if I had a wife, there'd be times I'd want to strangle her, and maybe I'd want to so bad I'd think I did it."

"I did!" he squealed in my face. His breath was bad. That was OK, because he was excited, and a guy who just killed a woman can have bad breath once in a while, I guess.

"Call a cop, then," I said. "What do I look like—Father Divine?"

He was sweating what looked like light yellow sewing machine oil, little drops of it popped out all over his fat face. And he had eyes like a baby—baby-blue, even—and he didn't look no more like some guy who killed a woman than I did. Well, than a baby did, because I didn't look so good that way, with the heat and all, and I kind of felt like people stared at me when I walked past.

"Help me," he said.

"Mister," I told him. "Let's you and me walk down to Uncle Al's saloon and have a beer. You need it."

His eyes got round. "What about her?" he asked me, grabbing the front of my jacket. I carefully lifted his hands off, because I don't like fat guys in July who sweat three-in-one oil to smear up my clothes, even if I did just come off the morning shift at Titanium.

"Forget her. If you did kill her, which I ain't sure of yet, she's still

there. So before you go back to look, you can have a couple beers and it won't be so awful."

"Before I go back?"

"Sure. Ain't that what I said?"

"Won't you come along?"

"Why me?"

"I don't know. Will you?"

"Hell, who knows?" So we started walking down Broadway and when we were by the tracks I thought of how I'd flip him and prove he didn't do any such thing, so I said, "Say, pal, how'd you do it?"

"With a knife. I stuck it in her belly, and she looked at me for a minute and said: You stabbed me, you fat pig! Then she dumped over the end table and squawked." The fat guy wiped his oily face with a handkerchief. "You ever hear a chicken squawk when you was killing it for Sunday dinner?"

"Friend," I said, "Uncle Al's place is only up at the corner. Let us be off."

"What do you mean, *off*?" he asked. His baby blue eyes wasn't baby blue any more.

I said, "Come on. The boys at Uncle Al's will have a ball. There ain't one of them didn't ever wish he could stick a knife in his old woman once in a while."

I thought that was pretty funny, so I laughed until I saw the fat guy wasn't laughing. Then when I stopped laughing, he caught on, and he laughed, too. "Ain't that a fact?" he giggled.

We was both of us laughing when we went in Uncle Al's. Archie Crocker was there in his usual chair leaned against the wall by the cigarette machine, and so was Ollie Brumerhof and, of course, Uncle Al behind the bar. All three guys looked at us when we come in laughing like that, and Ollie said, "Hey, Uncle Al, you ever see guys in the middle of the afternoon act so goofy?"

"Hi, Ollie," I said. "Hi, Uncle Al. Hi, Archie."

"Go on," said Uncle Al, drawing two beers, one for me and one for the fat guy. "Who's your pal?"

I winked at the fat guy and said, "Slim here just killed his old woman, and we was laughing because there ain't many guys'd have the stomach for it. Hey!" I said to the fat guy, who was drinking his beer already and still wiping his oily face with his hanky. "How about that? *Stomach* for it?" He just kind of grinned at me, stopped drinking a minute, then he was drinking again.

"Hot dog!" Archie said, him and Ollie getting up and coming over by the bar with us. "Say, pal, how'd you do it?"

The fat guy finished the beer in his glass, wiped off his face again, and said, "Well, I stuck a knife in her belly. A fish knife, with a ivory handle. She squawked like a chicken. You ever hear a chicken squawk when you was killing it to have it for Sunday dinner?"

"Hot dog!" said Archie. "That's great!"

I said, "Hey, Uncle Al, give us all a brew, huh?"

"You flush?"

"Ain't today Friday, and don't I get paid Fridays?"

"Ah, you single guys!"

The fat guy had turned to Archie and Ollie. "I did it. Don't you guys believe me?"

Ollie put his arm around the fat guy's shoulder. "Listen, pal, we're with you. Right, boys?"

"Right!" said Archie. "We ought to all make our wives squawk like they was getting fixed for Sunday dinner."

"What kind of knife you say that was?" said Uncle Al as he shoved the drinks out at us.

The fat guy blinked, drank half his glass, and said, "A fish knife. You know, the kind with the scaler on one side and the blade on the other. She squawked, too. Yes, sir!" He drank the rest of his beer and nodded. I noticed that the sweat he was sweating now wasn't so oily. Maybe it was the beer, because them sixteen ounce steins Uncle Al sells holds a heck of a lot of the stuff. Ollie and Archie were getting refills, too, but I still had half a stein left.

Archie giggled. He was already getting splotchy red. "Hot dog!" he said. "Hey, Slim, maybe you ought to had used a chicken knife, huh?"

Ollie and Uncle Al and I laughed,

but like before it took the fat guy a while to catch on before he giggled and started to drink his next one. Ollie said, "Maybe your old lady was a dead fish instead of a cute chick, huh?"

While we was laughing, Uncle Al said, "I don't know about a chicken knife. Maybe he'd chicken out."

"Right," said Archie. "A guy can't *fish* out, can he?"

The fat guy took out his wallet and pulled a snapshot from it to show us. "This is her," he said. She wasn't too bad looking a broad, with kind of dark hair and a kind of full shape. "Her name is Emma. Crab, crab, crab, all the time: George, do this! George, do that! George, you're too damn fat! But I made her squawk, all right. Yes, sir!"

"Hot dog!" said Archie. "Hey, Slim, tell us how they squawk! Last time me and my old lady got in it, I was the one squawking, not her!"

"Like hell," said Ollie.

Archie threw up his hand. "I swear."

"Well," said the fat guy, finishing another glass of beer and pushing the glass to Uncle Al. "Like I said: Like a chicken. Just like a chicken you was going to kill for Sunday dinner."

Ollie was leaning over the bar and giggling at his glass of beer. "Ain't we got dreams?" he said. Still giggling, beery-looking, he turned and looked at all of us.

"Joey, here," he said, pointing his wobbly finger at me, "he's the only one ain't a chicken yet, but he ain't got no old woman waiting for him at home. Give him time, boys. Yes, sir, give him time."

"Oh, I don't know," said Uncle Al. "I run things in my house."

Archie and Ollie laughed. I couldn't not laugh, because it was funny, him saying that. Sometimes his wife, Bertie, came down to the saloon to help him run the bar, and then everything got smooth. She'd say: Archie Crocker, you been sitting here for three hours. Ain't you got a wife and home? And she'd say: Ollie Brumerhof, do you got to live in a saloon and leave your poor wife waiting for you all the time? And she'd say to me: No wonder you ain't married to some girl, you're always hanging around here. Then Uncle Al'd say to her: Come on, Bertie, these guys is customers. And she'd say: You just get busy, Albert, and don't interrupt me! And Uncle Al'd get busy. And he wouldn't interrupt her. "All right, all right," said Uncle Al. "So maybe not."

Archie looked sober, the way a guy half stoned looks sober. He said, "Well, I love my wife. Maybe we do fight sometimes. Don't everybody?"

"Emma had it coming," said the fat guy. "I ain't one to chicken out."

"Ah, come on," I said. "You and her had a fight, and we all of us had us a laugh on it."

He laughed then. It was the first time he really laughed. He got red in the face, and his baby-blue eyes kind of hid in the fatty folds of his face, and he was wheezing like a nut. "Don't you guys wish you could, too?" he finally asked us.

"Count me out," I said. "When I go out with broads, I don't fight."

Uncle Al was looking out at South Broadway, which was getting busier as guys was coming home from work. Before he walked along the bar to draw some beer for a couple more guys just come in, he said, "Ah, Bertie's all right. I ain't kicking."

"Me, neither," said Archie.

The fat guy looked serious. "Don't you guys believe me?"

"Believe you?" Ollie repeated. "Believe you wish you stuck a frogger in your old lady?" He giggled.

"Sure," he said.

"Sure," said Archie.

Even Uncle Al had got over the fun we was having. The fat guy sighed and leaned close to me. "Hey," he said. "Let's go."

"Go where?"

"Go take a look at her."

"No, Slim. You go on back by yourself. I don't want to get mixed up in no family argument, and she'll be raising hell with you once you walk in that door."

His eyes looked bleak. "I sure hope she don't," he said.

"Take my word for it, Slim. She will. That right, boys?"

Archie nodded his head. His

head was kind of loose on his skinny neck. "If I know women," he said. "She will."

"Come on," Ollie suggested. "Have another beer, then go back home and face the music. Let me tell you, many's the time I did the same. Had to. Come over here to Uncle Al's and blow off and drink for a while, but there's a time we just got to stand on our hind legs and face the old lady again."

"Yeah," Uncle Al agreed sadly. "A guy's got to."

The fat guy said, "Joey here said maybe he'd go back with me."

"Now, look," I argued. "I don't want to get mixed up in something between you and Emma. Go on, pal. You got to face her yourself."

"OK, OK," said the fat guy. "All by myself." He gulped down his beer and pushed himself away from the bar. "I guess I'll get going."

Ollie giggled a little bit. "Good luck. Give Emma our regards."

Uncle Al was grinning. "And duck when you go in the door."

"I might not go straight home," said the fat guy. "I don't know."

"Well," said Archie, "maybe it's a good idea to think up a story first. It worked for me lots of times."

"So long," said the fat guy. He walked out the door. We watched him cross Broadway and stand over there waiting for a street car going north. Just before he got on the car, he saw us watching, so he waved

his hand at us, and we waved back.

Uncle Al was giving us another beer. "Slim's all right," he said.

"Yeah, sure," Ollie agreed. "Sure, he's all right."

"He's all right," said Archie. "It sure ain't no fun going back home after you had a fight and stomped out of the house."

"He's sure got a big imagination," I said. "I'll just bet his wife's the kind who stomps down on him every time he turns around."

"Yes, sir," said Uncle Al. "He's a real nice guy, that Slim."

Ollie put a dollar and a half on the bar, waved his hand, and said, "I got to do the same. The missus'll raise cain if I don't show up for supper." Archie went along with him. When the two guys were gone, the place seemed lonely and deserted, even if a crowd was starting to build up for the usual Friday evening drinking.

"Bertie coming around tonight?" I said to Uncle Al.

He nodded. "She gets off work at four-thirty." He glanced at the clock. "It's five now. She'll be here soon. You hungry?"

My stomach was rumbling like a summer storm cloud. "I ain't ate nothing since breakfast, the middle of my shift," I said. Bertie fixed sandwiches and stuff like that every Friday and Saturday evening, and I always ate there. But I usually didn't drink so much first.

She came in the door a few minutes later, walked real businesslike

to the grill at the end of the bar, and started to set things up. Uncle Al said, "Hi, honey. Will you fix Joey a roast beef and some coffee?"

"Hi, Joe," she said to me. But she scowled at Uncle Al and said, "All right, all right! Don't rush me, you! I had a hard enough day without you rushing me!"

Uncle Al leaned across the bar and whispered to me, "Maybe Slim had the idea, all right."

I laughed at that. Bertie wasn't so bad, just crabby, that's all. Everybody's crabby sometimes, the way I see it. The fat guy's wife, Emma, was probably crabbing at him all morning, so he left the house and his imagination took over; then he saw me, and when he talked to me he really thought he did something bad to her, because he had let it stew in his mind. It ain't a good idea to let things stew in your mind, I always say.

Then Crockerhead Moynihan came in. He was a scout car cop with the Carondelet precinct, and he lived a block from Uncle Al's. I guessed he wasn't on duty now, because he looked around the place and then sat down next to me at the bar. "Hi, you bum," he said. "You still crocking up all the time?"

"Hi, Pat," I said, because nobody called him "Crockerhead" to his face. Anyhow, right then I surely didn't feeling like calling him that, not with him looking so sour and mean-tempered. I said, "Uncle Al, give this beat cop a beer, will you,

before he starts coming unglued."

Crockerhead reached thankfully for the beer, downed a third of it in a couple big gulps, and said, "Thanks, Joey."

Uncle Al said "How's things, Pat?"

He shouldn't have said that. Crockerhead screwed up his face. "Worst lousy dirty day I had in a long time. Ugh! Don't ask me about it."

"What do you go *ugh* for?" I said.

"I come in here to relax, not think about things. Don't ask me no more."

"You're chicken," I laughed. "And a crabby cop, as usual."

Crockerhead turned his lumpy Irish face at me with a growl. "Some fat guy killed his old lady today," he said. "You bunch of barflies wouldn't know about it, though, even if it was only down past the tracks there."

Uncle Al and me looked at each other. "Slim done it after all," he said.

"And we never believed him." I asked Crockerhead, "Was he a fat guy? A big-fat guy in a kind of light suit?"

"How'd you know?" Crockerhead said suspiciously, like a cop.

"You tell him, Uncle Al," I said. I couldn't finish my beer.

Uncle Al said, "He was here all afternoon, telling us how he done it. We just hung around and laughed."

Crockerhead smacked his lips over the rest of his beer. "Tell Bertie to fix me a sandwich, huh?" he said. He waited until Uncle Al served some other guys at the bar and came back, then said, "He was here after the fight, then, if he was the same guy."

"Golly," said Uncle Al. "We was having fun all afternoon with a murderer."

When I saw Crockerhead's puzzled look, I said, "What fight?"

"Him and his old lady had a brawl, the neighbors said. About noon today, and he left the house, and his old lady went complaining over to her neighbor's house raising hell about husbands. Then he showed up about five-fifteen. Just a couple hours ago. The neighbor lady seen him coming, and she was worried, the way he looked, like he was drinking, and he looked mean. When she heard his wife scream, she called the police. Hermann and Gomez got there and caught him, then I hauled the lieutenant down there. Ugh! Stuck her right in the belly with a damn fish knife."

"All right," said Uncle Al. "Drink up and forget it, Pat." He threw a warning look at me so I wouldn't ask anything to carry it on.

I wasn't about to let it pass, so I said, "Did he kill her?"

"Hell, yes!" said Crockerhead. "The neighbor lady said she squawked like a chicken."

# TIME FOR REVENGE

*"My God! How much time? An hour . . . two at the most." On an impulse he smashed the barrel of the pistol across his knuckles. There was no pain. He pocketed the gun and staggered out into the night.*

BY  
DICK  
ELLIS

HALLORAN had a load aboard, all right. The way he was staggering down the street proves that. Only trouble was, he couldn't remember where he'd been, much less where he was going.

Halloran vaguely recalled a bar near the pier where his ship had docked at noon that day. After that—nothing. Now, in quick panic, he fumbled for his wallet. His money was still there. And his merchant-marine seaman's papers. He

gave a sigh of relief. He rubbed cold, clammy fingers across his aching forehead. Some bastard must have slipped him a mickey.

But for what? Again he checked his wallet. Nothing missing.

A frowsy woman tap-tapped toward him along the dark street. "Hello, honey," she called softly. "Looking for me?"

"Not now, sister," Halloran said. As he staggered on, the street-walker turned as if to follow him.

Then she gave a bubbling yell. By the time Halloran got squared around to see what was wrong, the woman was half a block away, and picking up speed.

"Well, for—" He whooped with laughter. A sudden splintering pain danced behind his eyes. He stopped laughing.

Maybe a cup of joe would help. There was an all-night diner on the next corner. He walked to it, his footsteps loud and hollow in the midnight silence. He went into the diner and took a stool. The place was empty except for the counter-  
man.

"Coffee," Halloran said. "Lots of it."

The counterman poured black acid in a chipped mug, rung up Halloran's dime, and went back to his radio. Halloran swung around on the stool to look out at the deserted street. He felt lousy.

And somewhere he'd lost a good nine, or ten, hours.

But he had something he had to do. Something important. He scrubbed a big-knuckled fist over his mouth, trying to remember what it was—

"Oh God almighty!"

Black eyebrows lifting. Halloran turned to stare at the counter-  
man. "What's the matter with you?"

The man looked sick. "Listen—don't move around," he whinnied. "I'll call an ambulance." Gagging, he fumbled at the pay-phone beside him.

Had everybody gone nuts? Halloran wondered. He squinted at his reflection in the mirror back of the counter. His black hair was a tangled mess, and his eyes were blood-shot, and he was pale around the gills. But nothing to scare anyone.

The counterman was speaking into the phone. Halloran eased off his stool, eased toward the door. He plunged out and along the street. He heard a voice behind him: "Wait—wait!"

"To hell with you, buddy," Halloran muttered. He had no time to fool with screwballs. As he jogged along, he discovered a strange thing: his head was an inflated balloon, threatening to tear loose from the insecure mooring of his neck, and go sailing into the stratosphere.

It reminded him of the time he and some shipmates got on a marijuana binge in Tampico.

He stopped, glanced back, the ducked into the mouth of an alley to light a cigarette and catch his breath. But he couldn't stand still—had to keep moving.

What was it he had to do? Wait—Helen! That was it. Of course. He was supposed to go to Helen's apartment. Deliver his merchandise to Frank and Al, pick up his pay, and then take Helen out on the town as he always did.

A memory flitted through his brain. A bright light, and under it a bed, and on the bed lay Helen, a strange twisted smile on her face. And then—what?

Blackness. Nothingness.

Halloran cursed as he ranged the street, trying to find a taxi. Get to Helen's place. Take it from there. Finally a cab slid into the curb at his hail. At Helen's address, he tossed money at the driver, took the brownstone front steps of the apartment building two at a time. The lobby was deserted.

Halloran went to the self-service elevator. He punched the button for the sixth floor. And fell flat on his face as the elevator lurched upward. He'd never felt so damned lousy in his life. Drunk or sober. He swore at himself, groping his way to his feet. A man should take care of business before he started drinking. Frank and Al would be madder than hell.

And when they found out he didn't have the merchandise—but how did he know that? Because he did know. That's why he hadn't bothered to take out his phoney dental plate and check. He knew the diamonds he'd brought from Amsterdam were gone.

He spit the plate into his hand, pried the over-size, hollow teeth out of the pink plastic half-moon. The teeth were empty.

At the sixth floor he left the elevator and went slowly along the hall to Helen's apartment. He was beginning to remember. He *had* come here, this afternoon, right on schedule.

He had rung the bell—just as he was doing now. And when there

was no answer he'd tried the knob and found the door unlocked—just as now. He palmed the door open and squinted into the dark apartment. Sudden panic hit him.

He didn't want to go into the damn place. He knew what he was going to find. He remembered, alright.

This afternoon. He'd come inside. And Frank and Al were in the livingroom, grinning nervously at him. Halloran had asked, "Why didn't you answer the door?"

Frank told him, "We weren't sure it was you. Might have been some neighbor. We figured if it was you, you'd come on in."

Halloran shrugged. "Where's Helen?"

Al, the younger of the two men, said, "She's in the bedroom primping. You know dames."

"I'll let her know I'm here." Halloran started across the room toward the closed door on the far side. And all at once Frank and Al were in front of him, blocking his way.

"Listen, we in a hurry," Frank said. "Let's get our business over, and me and Al will blow. Okay?"

So Halloran took the dental plate from his mouth and got out the half-dozen diamonds. The two men watched him with eyes that reflected the white blaze of the rocks.

Halloran handed over the stones, and Frank handed him five fifties. "See you, kid," Frank said.

"Yeah," Halloran said impatiently. He wanted to find Helen. As he went to the bedroom door, the two men headed for the front door. "So long," Al called.

Halloran knocked on the bedroom door. "Hey, a broke-down sailor's come to visit. Shake it up, ah?"

No answer. He opened the door, saw the bedroom was dark—the shades were pulled down at the windows. He flicked on the light. Helen lay on the rumpled bed, under the yellow flood of light from the ceiling fixture. Her blonde hair fanned out on the pillow, and her face was toward him, eyes half-closed, a strange smile on her red lips.

Halloran caught his breath sharply. Then he wisecracked, "Kind of eager, ain't you, babe?"

Then the laugh died in his throat. Because Helen wasn't waiting for him. She wasn't waiting for anything, in this world.

Halloran remembered yelling, running to the bed. He remembered a sound behind him. And starting to turn his head—

And nothing. Just nothing at all. Until he found himself, hours later, on a street several blocks away, with the thought in his aching head that he must be drunk. But he wasn't.

Now, the light still burned in the bedroom. A yellow oblong spilled out through the open door. Slowly he went toward it. Maybe

this was just a drunken nightmare. He'd had them before. Yes, and Helen in there, waiting for him, mad because he was late.

"Baby?" he said. He stopped in the doorway. It was no dream. Clenching his fists, he forced himself over to the bed. Forced himself to touch the cold, rigid body that lay there. No marks on her, that he could see. Until he turned her over.

Then he found the neat black hole between her shoulderblades. There wasn't much blood—she'd died too quickly.

Halloran stumbled away, retching. His foot hit a hard object on the floor. Looking down through a haze of sick pain, he saw the gun. A snub-nose thirty-eight. He bent to pick it up. And saw something else. A wide, sticky pool of red on the brownish carpet. Helen's blood? No, not likely.

Automatically he snapped out the cylinder of the gun, checked the chambers. Two shells fired, four left. Two shells. One for Helen. And one for—

Not feeling anything at all, he went into the small bathroom and turned on the light. He stared into the mirror above the lavatory. His lips were a pale blue line across his dead-white face. Slowly he turned his head to the side, watching his reflection. There was nothing much left behind his ears. A pulpy, caved-in mass of blood-stiffened black hair, with splinters of white bone poking through.

No wonder that street-walker and the guy at the diner had—

Halloran screamed once, a short bitter scream, like a hurt animal. He reeled out of the bathroom, stood on wobbly legs in the center of the bedroom, his breath coming in short gasps. His eyes focused on the wide patch of blood on the rug. His blood. His glance moved on around the walls.

He saw it almost at once: a raw, splintered hole in the wall opposite the door. He walked to it. Peered at the minute shreds of bloody flesh and hair caught around the edges of the bullet hole. It was easy to reconstruct what had happened.

Frank or Al had followed him to the bedroom door, that afternoon. One or the other had put a thirty-eight slug into him. Only the slug had hit at an angle, and torn through the back of his head. Sometime later, Halloran had come to, and wandered out of the apartment and down the street.

With a wound like that, he should be on fire with pain. But there was no pain—only a dull, far-away throbbing in his head. Doctor—call a doctor!

Even as the thought came, he knew there wasn't any point to it. A doctor couldn't help him. He was as dead as Helen. Only he was still walking around. But not for long.

Somewhere inside him a clock was ticking. He knew he didn't have much time. Two hours, maybe.

He stepped to the side of the bed and pulled a sheet over Helen's cold marble body. She hadn't had any brains, and no morals to speak of. But she was a good kid.

As he went to the closet to get some of the clothes he kept there, he thought: They had to kill her. They wanted me, but they had to put Helen out of the way, too. She'd have gone to the cops when I turned up dead.

So good old Frank and Al arranged a "murder and suicide." Crude, yes. But the cops would likely have let it go at that. Because nobody in New York—in the world—gave a damn what happened to a sailor and his floozie.

But why? Why did they want him dead? Hell, there hadn't been any trouble: their deal had worked out fine. So why?

All that mattered was finding them, paying them back. Not so much for what they'd done to him. But for Helen.

He found a wide-brim felt hat in the closet, carefully adjusted it on his head. And that was that. He wondered why he felt no pain.

He checked the gun again. On impulse, he lifted the gun and smashed the barrel across the knuckles of his left hand. No sensation at all. He felt like he was off somewhere, far away, manipulating his body like a ventriloquist manipulates a wooden dummy. And the clock was ticking: less than two hours now.

"So long, babe," he said to Helen. "I'll come back."

He left. On the street he flagged a late-cruising cab. "Take off," he told the driver. "I'll tell you where I want to go in a few minutes."

The guy turned irritably. "Listen, fella—"

Halloran put a twenty in the driver's hand. "Okay?"

"Okay. I'm with you."

The cab moved away from the curb. Halloran settled back, tried to remember all he could about Frank and Al. And where he might find them. He'd first met the pair at a joint in the East River dock area. That would be as good a place to start as any. He leaned forward, gave the driver the address.

"Kind of late to start pub crawling, ain't it?"

Halloran smiled wryly. "Kind of late." His fingers traced the outline of the gun in his pants pocket. "But I got a real important message to deliver to some—friends."

He'd met Frank and Al through Helen. At the time, she'd been working as a barmaid at this joint. Halloran had stopped in for a drink, and got to shooting the bull with her. And, after she found out he was a sailor, on a regular freighter run, Helen had steered him to Frank and Al.

That first night—it had been a year now, almost—they got him drunk, and he woke up next morning in bed with Helen, at her place. He didn't mind a bit.

She didn't seem to mind, either. They had breakfast and a couple drinks, and Halloran started to shove off. But Helen asked him to stay, and pretty soon Frank and Al showed up, grinning and wise-cracking—they were fast guys with a joke.

So the four of them horsed around the joints in the waterfront district until Helen had to go to work.

Frank and Al had plenty of loot. The sharp way they were dressed, and the fat bankrolls they flashed proved that. They were both about the same age as Halloran, in their late twenties. Both were dark and wiry, with big brown calf's eyes, and lots of white teeth. They were brothers, and Frank—the oldest—was the brains. It was Frank who put the deal up to Halloran.

They were in a booth at a combination bar and pool-hall. As they talked, Halloran could hear the click-click of balls from the tables in the rear of the joint.

Of course, he'd been expecting a proposition of some kind. Halloran had been shipping out for ten years. During that time he'd been conned by experts. So he was ready when Frank opened with: "Your ship hits Amsterdam, ah?"

"Regular port of call. Why?"

"What they got the most of, there?"

Halloran laughed. "Two-hundred pound Dutch whores."

Frank smiled impatiently. "Fine.

But let's get serious for a minute, okay? How'd you like to pick up a few c-notes on the side? You plan to make time with a doll like Helen when you're in New York you'll need a bundle."

From the corner of his eye, Halloran noticed that Frank's brother didn't seem to like that. For just a moment the mask of good humor slipped from Al's swarthy face.

Frank was saying, "All you got to do is stop by a drop in Amsterdam and pick up some merchandise. Bring it to us and we slip you cold cash—two, three hundred at a clip. Maybe more, sometimes. Every trip."

"Diamonds?"

Frank turned to Al. "See? I told you he was smart."

"Sure he is," Al said. Again, for just a second, the mask slipped. And Halloran suddenly realized that Al hated his guts. Because of Helen? That was crazy. The night before Al had practically shoved Helen into his arms.

Sure, it was all part of the set-up, to get Halloran in the mood to listen to the deal. But if Al cared anything about the girl he wouldn't have let her go that far. Of course not.

Halloran forgot about it. He was too busy considering. If you played it cool, there wasn't much danger in smuggling in stuff. The customs boys gave the ship and crew a routine going-over when they hit port. Now and again they'd pick a

few crew members at random and give them a real shake-down.

But, if you were careful, watched your step. . . .

"Okay," Halloran said. "I'll give it a whirl. Once, anyway."

Halloran had had most of his upper teeth kicked out in a barroom brawl with some U.S. Marines in Panama, years ago. So Frank slipped a few bucks to a crooked dentist technician, and he made up the special plate for Halloran to wear when he brought the rocks into New York. And it had worked.

They always met for the delivery and pay-off at Helen's apartment. Halloran had no idea where Frank and Al lived. He'd never given a damn. He got his money, regular as clockwork, and they went their way, and Halloran—and Helen—went their's.

As time passed, seeing Helen got to be a steady thing when he was in port. They hit it off together. And they had a lot of fun. What she did while Halloran was at sea—well, that was her business.

He did know, from things Helen said, that she and Al had been pretty close, but that it was over now. Not that Halloran cared. What had happened yesterday, or what was coming up tomorrow, didn't mean a damn thing to him.

Though a couple times, late at night, the two of them had half-seriously talked about getting married. Halloran knew he wasn't

likely to do any better—and could sure do a lot worse—than hitch up with Helen. She seemed to feel the same way. . . .

"Here we are," the cabby said.

Halloran started. "Huh? Oh. Yeah." He looked out the window at a flickering neon sign over the entrance of a typical waterfront joint: *Happy Hour*.

For a few minutes he'd almost forgotten that Helen was dead. And that he was running out of time. The clock was ticking away inside the wooden dummy of his body. The neon sign winked at him: *Happy Hour—Happy Hour*.

His mind pulled the proper strings, and his body responded by opening the cab door, stepping out to the sidewalk. He had to place his feet carefully. Because he couldn't feel the concrete under them. He was afloat in a thick, cottony cloud, and he was tired. So damn tired . . .

He swayed. He braced his hands against the cab door to keep from falling. The driver asked, "Hey, you alright?"

Halloran forced himself to stand straight. "Hell yes. Listen, you stick around. I might want to move on." He fumbled in his pocket, brought out a wad of bills. He peeled off a fifty and tossed the bill on the seat beside the driver.

The driver looked at the fifty, looked at Halloran. He slid across the seat and got out. He was a squat, fat man, with tiny eyes.

"You give me a twenty when we started. I'll let you know when it's used up. Here." He stuffed the fifty-dollar bill into Halloran's shirt pocket.

Halloran stated. "What's your name?"

"Goldberg. What else?"

"Wait for me, Goldy."

Halloran carefully turned and walked into the bar. He knew the bartender's name. Calling the man over, he asked, "Frank and Al here?"

The bartender shrugged. "Nah. They was in earlier, but they left. You might try Jeffty's, on the next block down." Then he added, "Cheezus, you look like a corpse. Better let me lay a double-shot on you."

"No time," Halloran said. He went back out to the cab. During the short ride to Jeffty's, the driver kept glancing at Halloran in the rear-view mirror. Halloran grinned. Geez, an honest cab driver in New York. Helen would get a charge out of that, when he told her. Only, he wouldn't be telling her.

He took a tighter grip on the invisible strings holding him together. He couldn't goof it off now.

Frank and Al weren't at Jeffty's. Or the next place, or the next. Halloran's two hours dwindled to less than one. And the clock kept ticking, ticking. And every minute that went by made it that much harder to hold on.

A thought drifted through the hazy twilight of his mind. Pool hall. They liked to shoot pool. Al was a real shark—he took Halloran for a sawbuck once at . . . where was it?

In this neighborhood, and it stayed open practically all night. Hell, it was the same place where he had agreed to smuggle in rocks for them that day. He should have thought of it before. They hung out there quite a bit.

Halloran cursed. What was the name? Finally he asked Goldberg. The cab was parked in front of the last joint Halloran had tried. Goldberg turned and squinted back at him.

"I don't know," the cabby said. He hesitated, then blurted. "Look, Mac. It don't take no genius to see you're sick and in some kind of bind. If I can help—"

"Thanks, Goldy." Halloran couldn't get enough air into his lungs. He was panting like he'd just run a mile. "Just cruise the streets. Maybe I'll spot this place."

"Listen, why don't I take you to the nearest hospital?"

"No," Halloran snapped. "I got to find some guys."

"Allright. It's your problems."

As the cab moved slowly up one street and down the next, Halloran tried to remember. He took off his hat and rubbed his hand over his hair. Then, quickly, he put the hat back on, and rubbed his wet, sticky palm dry on his shirt-front.

Lucky . . . natural, that was it. Hell, it was just a block over and another block up on . . .

He told Goldy, and the cab sped through the dying night, and swerved into a curb, and there it was. The 711 Club. It was open. And Halloran knew they would be here. Because they had to be. "This won't take long," he said.

He went into the dingy joint and looked around. On one side there was a long bar, held up by a couple of drunks nursing beers and on the other side; a row of empty booths. The pool tables were in a separate room at the rear. Halloran walked past the bar, pulling the invisible strings that lifted one wooden foot and set it down in front of the other.

Left, right, left, right.

Past the toilets and through a wide, arched doorway. The long lines of pool and snooker tables, dark now, except one at the back. Two men were hovered over the table in a cone of smoky yellow light that broke the darkness.

They didn't hear Halloran as he moved toward them. Frank and Al, just as he'd known it would be. Al bent to make a shot, his sleek hair glistening. The balls clicked on the green baize and Al laughed triumphantly as a ball thumped into a side pocket.

And Halloran came on, silently. Left, right. Left, right. He took the snub-nose pistol from his pocket. He didn't feel rage, or hate, or

much of anything beyond a weary relief.

"Hiya, boys," he said. They glanced up, but they couldn't see him in the shadows outside the cone of light. Al shaded his eyes with his hand and said. "Who's that?"

Halloran stepped into the light. "Just me."

Neither of them moved. Then Frank's cue-stick clattered to the floor. Al gave a low moan, "No . . . no."

"Yes, yes," Halloran said. He raised the gun.

"Wait, now . . . wait," Frank gasped shrilly, backing away. "You don't understand. We didn't want to hurt you. We got nothing against you, honest."

"That's good to hear."

"No, wait. It was Helen. See? Al killed Helen. She used to be his girl, till you come along and cut him out. This afternoon he tried to get her, and she wouldn't do it, and he lost his temper."

"He lost his temper," Halloran repeated wonderingly.

"That's it. He didn't mean to. Then you come in, and Al was scared, so he shot you. I tried to stop him, honest."

"You son of a bitch," Al screamed at his brother.

"He lost his temper," Halloran repeated again. He couldn't get over it. His glance moved to Al's pale, sweating face.

Suddenly Al swung the heavy

cue-stick in his fist. Halloran dodged, and pulled the trigger twice. Both slugs caught Al in the chest. He bounced off the pool table and was dead before he hit the floor.

Halloran fired again, putting a bullet between Franks bulging eyes. Frank went over backward. His legs kicked once. That was all. Halloran leaned down and poked the smoking muzzle of the gun into Al's ear, and fired the last shot.

He figured Al had earned three slugs to Frank's one.

Then he dropped the empty gun, turned, and walked out of the place. He didn't look back. The people at the bar stared at him, open-mouthed. But they didn't try to stop him. Outside, he told Goldberg, "Take me back where you picked me up."

The driver shook his head, started to speak.

Halloran said, "Please, Goldy. Do like I say."

Then they were in front of the apartment building, and Halloran was getting out of the cab. He paused. He took his bankroll out, handed it to Goldy. "You're a good guy," he whispered. "Buy yourself a drink. That money won't buy a damn thing, where I'm going. Have a ball."

"Listen—" Goldberg started.

But Halloran didn't hear. He'd already forgotten Goldy. Forgotten everything except a promise he'd made to Helen.

He couldn't see much now, but inside the building he managed to punch the right button in the elevator. At the sixth floor he went along the hall, into the apartment, across to the bedroom.

"I come back, babe," he said. Blindly he stumbled to the bed. The clock that was his heart had stopped ticking. His time was all gone.

"I come back," he said, and died.

The cab driver had followed. Now he stood in the doorway looking at the two bodies. Groaning deep in his chest, he hunted for a phone, and when he found it called the cops. They came soon.

At first they didn't buy Goldberg's story. A cop snarled, "You

trying to tell me this guy was up horsing around, with the back of his head blown off?"

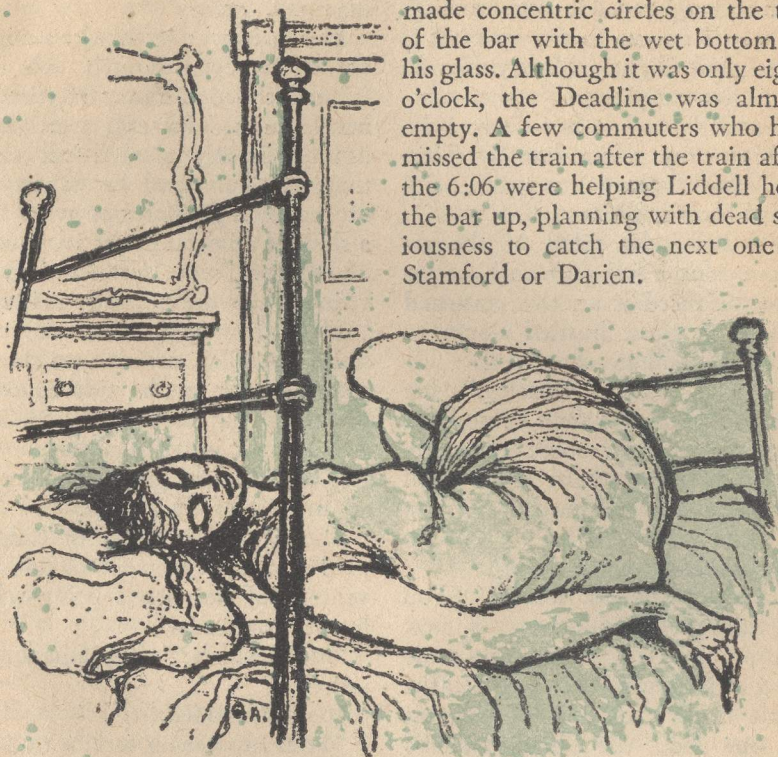
"That's how it was," Goldberg insisted.

The young ambulance doctor broke in before the cop could say anything more. "It happens—very rare, of course. But it happens," the doctor said. "Maybe once in a hundred times. Head-wounds are damn funny things, you know. With that hundredth man . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

They stood around the bedroom, looking at each other and quickly looking away. The young doctor said softly, "You just never know what that hundredth man will do—if he wants to, bad enough."



JOHNNY LIDDELL leaned against the bar in Mike's Deadline, made concentric circles on the top of the bar with the wet bottom of his glass. Although it was only eight o'clock, the Deadline was almost empty. A few commuters who had missed the train after the train after the 6:06 were helping Liddell hold the bar up, planning with dead seriousness to catch the next one to Stamford or Darien.



## PASS THE WORD ALONG

*A Johnny Liddell Novelette*

**BY FRANK KANE**

*Liddell looked down at the body of the girl sprawled on the bed and he knew, one way or another, he'd get the man or men who'd done it.*

The bartender stood at the far end of the bar, polishing glasses with a damp rag. He was listening with half an ear to the woes of a faded and slightly blowsy blonde who alternately sipped at her martini and dabbed at her damp nose with a gray white handkerchief.

Liddell drained his glass, signalled for a refill.

The bartender, glad of the reprieve, took a last puff on his cigarette, balanced it on the upturned end of a glass, hustled down to where Liddell stood.

"Hit it again, Charley." He watched while the man behind the stick dumped in some fresh ice cubes, drenched them down with bourbon, then softened it with a touch of water. "What's a guy do for excitement these days?"

Charley grinned lewdly. "You go through your babes too fast, Johnny. You ought to save some for a rainy night." He replaced the bottle on the backbar. "It's like that old one about the Chinaman who was walking down an alley where a dame had done a high dive and landed head first in the garbage can—"

"I know, I know. There's a lot of good mileage left."

The bartender's eyes slid past Liddell to the door. "Say, talking about Chinamen—"

Liddell turned.

In the doorway a slim Chinese girl stood looking around. Her eyes hop scotched from commuter

to commuter and finally landed on Liddell. She started across to where he stood.

Her hair was jet black, straight, cut in a severe Dutch bob that framed the doll-like perfection of her features. Her eyes were dark, liquid, slightly slanted—an effect that was enhanced by expert use of shadowing. Her lips were full, a slash of crimson in the ivory color of her face, were soft looking, inviting. She wore no other make-up.

Her dress was the traditional stand up collar, sheath type cheong sam; the slit up the side exposing a shapely calf as she walked. Her full breasts, jutting against the fragile fabric of the gown, had a gentle motion of their own.

She stepped in front of Liddell, paid no attention to the obvious inventory of her assets being taken by the commuters.

"Mr. Liddell?" the Chinese girl asked.

Johnny nodded.

"Your answering service told me I'd find you here. Can I talk to you?" She looked around, dropped her voice. "Someplace private. It's rather confidential."

"It just so happens I maintain a branch office here," Liddell told her. "The back booth." He picked up his drink. "Will you have a drink?"

"Dewars and soda," she told the bartender.

"We'll be in the back booth, Charley. Bring me a refill when you

come." Liddell motioned for the girl to precede him, followed her to the rear. He waited until she was seated, slid in across from her.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

The girl dug into her oversized purse, brought out a sealed envelope. She slid it across the table. "Keep this for me until Monday." She looked around. "Put it in your pocket, please."

Liddell picked up the envelope, turned it over curiously, then slid it into his breast pocket. "Just that? Nothing more?"

"Just that."

Liddell frowned. "What's the gimmick?"

"No gimmick. The contents of that envelope are very important to me. I'm afraid I might lose it. If I did, the consequences could be very serious to me."

"Why not mail it to yourself General Delivery or put it in a vault or—"

"Because I may want it at some hour of the day or night when it wouldn't be available, and—" She dug into her bag, brought up a small roll of bills. "Naturally, I expect to pay your fee. How much?"

"I didn't say I was going to handle it for you."

Concern clouded the dark eyes. "But you will? Please?"

"I don't even know who you are. Or why you picked me out of all the agencies in the city."

"Is that important?"

"It could be."

The girl waited while Charley shuffled up, slid two drinks in front of them, headed back to the bar.

"My name's Blossom Lee. I remembered your name from a newspaper story I read about you. I was impressed and when I needed someone to turn to, I thought of you." She consulted the tiny baguette on her wrist. "There's nothing illegal about this. You've got to believe me." She reached over, laid her hand on his. "Please?"

Liddell sighed, nodded. "Okay. I'll baby-sit your papers until Monday."

The girl smiled at him. "Thanks, Mr. Liddell."

"I always wondered if Chinese girls were different from other girls—"

The smile froze on the girl's face.

"—but I see they're not. They can wrap a man around their finger just by saying please."

Blossom Lee picked up her glass, raised it to her lips. She turned the full force of the slanted eyes on him over the rim. "I'm counting on you to keep that safe."

"I will. Meanwhile, where can I find you?"

"You won't have to. I know where to find you."

"But you'll need a receipt—"

The girl shook her head, smiled. "I trust you." She set the half full glass down. "I'm afraid I've got to run." She peeled two twenties off the roll in her hand, laid them on the table. "As a retainer."

Liddell nodded, watched as the girl turned away, headed for the doorway. The effect from the rear was just as satisfying as it had been from the front.

He drained his drink, picked up the re-fill the bartender had brought. He was sipping on it when the two men entered.

One of them was fat, coatless with dried crescents of sweat under his armpits. The other was a tall, rangy redhead, his face pitted with old acne scars.

The fat man led the way to the bar, ordered two bourbons. While Charley was pouring the whisky, the fat man lowered his voice, leaned over the bar. "Chink broad was just in here. Who'd she talk to?"

The bartender rolled his eyes upward from the drink he was pouring, was about to retort when the redhead showed him the .38 he held half hidden against his left arm. Behind him, down the bar, the commuters were busily re-arranging the time table to make room for "one more."

Charley's eyes flicked toward the booth where Liddell sat. The fat man nodded to his redheaded companion, shuffled back to Liddell's booth.

"Understand you have something belonging to a friend of ours, Mac. Thought we'd save you the trouble of delivering it by picking it up."

Liddell turned his head and stud-

ied him. Damp wet hair was pasted to the fat man's forehead. His eyes were expressionless black discs countersunk in pads of discolored flesh. His lips were thick, gleaming wet.

"Anything belonging to a friend of yours I wouldn't touch," Liddell told him. "Now, suppose you let me enjoy my drink."

He lifted the glass to his lips, the fat man swung his hand in a short arc, knocked the glass from his hand, smashing it against the wall of the booth. "You don't want to drink so much, pally. It's bad for your liver."

Liddell swore, tried to get to his feet. He was at a disadvantage when the fat man hit him on the side of the neck with a paralyzing chop. He sank back into his seat with a grunt. The fat man reached down, caught him by the lapels and pulled him to his feet. Liddell stood swaying, glassy eyed from the blow.

The fat man started to pat him down, one of the commuters came to life.

"Hey, now buddy. Hold it a minute. You're not going to—"

The redhead turned around, showed him the .38. The commuter broke off, stared.

"Sit down and shut up," the redhead grated.

Mutely, their eyes fixed on the gaping muzzle of the .38, the two men found seats.

The fat man found the envelope

in Liddell's breast pocket. He tore it open, satisfied himself as to the contents, stuck it in his back pocket. As Liddell struggled to regain full consciousness, the fat man buried his fist in Liddell's midsection. The air wheezed out of Liddell's lungs. He went to his knees, plunged forward on his face.

Johnny Liddell dropped the cab at the corner of Worth Street, headed for the three street area that makes up New York's Chinatown. He melted into the crowd of out of towners, of Orientals dressed in occidental zoot suits, of old timers who shuffled placidly and purposelessly under the garish neons that turn Mott Street into noon in the middle of the night.

He watched the faces as they flowed past him. The expressionless features of the Brooklyn laundry man come to Chinatown for a night of fan tan, the little Puerto Rican girl who was specializing in curb service of sex making house calls on the underwomanned Chinese, the Chinese girls who speak no English, wear only cheong-sams, appear from nowhere as companions of the older, wealthier citizens of the community.

Liddell had almost completed his circuit of all three streets—Pell, Mott and Doyer—before he saw the face he was looking for.

Sammy Ah Lee was in his late twenties, wore his hair long in a slick pompadour. His clothes were

of the latest western style, he was addicted to loud neckties, argyle socks. He was handsome in a smooth faced, unblemished way, fancied himself a hand with the ladies. For this proficiency, he was known locally as *Chai Long*—the wolf.

He was leaning against the wall of an apartment house that was old at the turn of the century, working his wiles on a giggling teen ager who was apparently buying his line all the way. He happened to glance up as Liddell stopped in front of him, his eyes widened.

Liddell nodded to him almost imperceptibly. Ah Lee bobbed his head in acknowledgment. Liddell continued walking, turned down Worth Street, melted into the shadows of a big warehouse. He lit a cigarette, cupped it in his hand and waited.

In less than five minutes, Sammy Ah Lee walked over to where Johnny stood, joined him in the shadows.

"You sure pick your times, Johnny," the Chinese complained. "I had something real good going for me there." He squinted at Liddell in the darkness. "How come the personal visit? The Ameche gone out of style?"

"I couldn't wait for a phone message to reach you," Liddell growled. "I've got to find a girl. Tonight."

"I've got them all sizes, shapes and colors—"

"A particular girl. About 23, five three or four, stacked. Dutch bob, good features. Calls herself Blossom Lee."

Sammy Ah Lee scowled in the darkness. "That's like me going uptown looking for John Smith. That Lee tag's a phony." He pursed his lips, considered. "That description doesn't ring a bell. If there was anything like that on the loose around here, I wouldn't have missed it."

"Think hard, Sammy. This kid's in bad trouble. She came to me for help tonight. Two meatballs almost beat my brains out after she left. So they must be on to her. I've got to reach her before they do."

"I'm trying, Johnny," Sammy complained. "But I don't make her. I can ask around for you, put out a couple of lines."

"You're sure?"

The Chinese nodded. "I know every chick in the area. The straight ones, the Young Willows, even the stuff they buy from catalogues out of Cuba. None of them fit."

Liddell took a last drag from his cigarette, flipped it toward the gutter. "Okay, Sammy. See what you can do. If you get a line on her, reach me through my answering service. I'll keep in touch." He waited until the dapper Chinese had headed back toward his stamping grounds, then Liddell went looking for a taxicab.

Johnny Liddell inserted the key

into the lock of his apartment door, pushed it open and walked in. A man sat in the chair by the window, legs crossed, settled back comfortably.

Liddell's hand streaked for the .45 in his shoulder holster, froze with his fingers touching the edge of the butt.

The man in the chair grinned at him. "You're slowing down, Johnny." He uncrossed his knees, got to his feet, walked toward Liddell with hand outstretched. "Long time no see."

Liddell grunted at him, accepted his hand. "How'd you get in?"

The other man shrugged. "I don't ask you for your trade secrets." He checked his watch. "You sure keep long hours."

"We've got a lousy union." Liddell headed for the small portable bar, poured himself a slug of bourbon. "Have a drink?"

The other man shook his head. "On duty." He was tall, rangy. His hair had begun to recede at the temples but his face was young in a hard, sunburned way.

"Talk about lousy unions. You Feds have the worst." Liddell tossed off the drink, set the glass down. "Okay. So clue me in. What does Treasury want from me?"

The thin man grinned. "You have something belonging to a friend of ours."

Liddell groaned, "Oh, no. Not you, too."

The smile faded on the thin

man's face. "What's that mean?"

"I mean two meatballs used the same approach. Only they got there first with the mostest and got whatever the Hell I was supposed to have."

The thin man walked to the phone, dialed. After a moment, "This is Rex Turner. Something's gone wrong on the delivery. Two men jumped Liddell. You've got to warn Blossom." The voice on the other end sounded agitated. "I don't know how you're going to do it, either. Just do it. If they're on to her, the only safe thing to do is pull her off the case." He slammed the receiver down, stared at Liddell. "I think I'll take that drink."

Liddell spilled two fingers into each of the glasses, held one out to Rex Turner. He watched the Treasury man toss it off in one swallow. "Feel like telling me what's going on?"

Turner raked his fingers through his hair. "The girl who approached you tonight was one of our girls, working undercover. That envelope contained the names of Chinese smuggled into the country over the past six months. We have more than a sneaking hunch that most of them are Red Chinese agents sent over here to blackmail the local Chinese."

Liddell looked incredulous. "Why should anybody over here pay them a cent?"

Turner shrugged. "Many of them have families in the old country.

Those boys over there can get real unpleasant."

"So where do I fit in and how come nobody took the trouble to brief me?"

"We didn't have time. Blossom set up a meet for tonight to turn the list over to one of our boys. She got the feeling she was being followed, called in. Your name popped into my head so I told her to give you the list, figuring I could pick it up here and she wouldn't have to make any contact with an agent." He found a cigarette, stuck it between his lips. "Sorry you got a beating—"

"Bumps and bruises are part of the business. They'll show up on the bill." He reached over, lifted the T-man's pack of cigarettes, helped himself to one. "But how about this kid? By now they know what was in the envelope." He touched a tender spot on the side of his jaw. "Those meatballs are pretty rough."

"You recognize either of them?"

"No. But I'll know them the next time we meet. But this girl—"

"The office is making every effort to reach her. If we can only get to her before they do, we'll ship her out of this district until we close the case—"

"And if you don't?"

Turner looked grim, shook his head. "Your guess is as good as mine." He touched a match to the cigarette, drew in a lung full of smoke. "The office will alert all police precincts, and every available

op attached to this division will be out trying to find her. All we can do is wait."

It was almost two o'clock when the call came.

Liddell answered it, held the receiver out to Rex Turner. "For you." He watched the expression harden on the T-man's face, the little knots of muscles that formed along the jaw as he took the report.

"We'll be right there." He slammed the receiver on its hook. "They found her." He headed for the door."

"Hey, wait for me," Liddell growled. "I got an investment in this, too. Remember?"

It was the kind of a hotel that gives love a bad name. A hot sheet joint that caters to the lowest type of street walkers and their Johns, where a room might turn over four or five times in a night.

The girl lay sprawled across the dingy linens on the bed, her bare arm crooked over her head. The shiny black hair was a tangle on the pillow; her eyes were half-closed, her lips parted in a half smile as though she were on the verge of saying something.

The ugly, gaping wound in her throat made it improbable that she would ever finish what she had started to say.

Johnny Liddell stared down at her, swore under his breath. He looked over to where a tall, heavy set man in a wrinkled blue suit

stood watching him, arms folded across his chest.

"How'd you get it, Mac?"

The man in the blue suit pursed his lips. "A squeal. From the desk. Said this girl and her boy friend were cutting up real bad and he couldn't get in. He wanted them thrown out." He permitted himself a grin. "It'd be the first time since I been working this district that anybody could get disorderly in this riding academy." He unfolded his arms, indicated two empty liquor bottles. "Looks like they did a lot of drinking. And the girl smells like she did her share." He shrugged. "That's it."

Liddell turned to Rex Turner. "A nice job of cover-up. The autopsy will probably show a heavy alcohol content in her stomach, the clerk will stick to his story that she brought a playmate in for games and stuff."

Turner stared at the body, watched while the men from the coroner's office covered it with a coarse blanket, lifted it onto a stretcher. "I'll get them for this, Johnny," he said in a low, tense voice. "I'll get them if I have to turn in my tin and put in all my time on it."

"You're not geared for that kind of an operation. You've played by the book for too long. These are my pigeons." He walked over to the man in the blue suit. "Clerk give you any kind of a description of the guy?"

The detective dug a leather notebook from his pocket, riffled through it. He scowled in concentration as he deciphered his notes. "Middle aged, maybe fifty. Chinese. Kind of stoop shouldered, carried a paper package." He nodded at the empty bottles. "Probably the juice."

"You buy this John bit, Mac?"

The detective replaced the notebook in his pocket, shrugged. "She didn't do it herself. The clerk's a taxpayer. Until somebody proves him a liar, I got to buy it." He squinted at Liddell. "You fixing to prove him a liar, Liddell?"

"Yeah. I'm fixing to prove him a liar."

"Don't make book on it. Fletcher—that's the clerk, Eddie Fletcher— isn't just around since yesterday. He's seen plenty of the inside. He's a tough nut to crack. On this one, I don't think anybody's going to crack him." He looked down at his stubby fingers, clenched and unclenched them. "Not even in the informal way you have with people you're questioning." He rolled his eyes up from his fist to Liddell's face.

One of the tech men, who had been powdering the bottles, checking them for prints walked over to the man in the blue suit. "Don't expect too much from us, Mac. Bottles been handled plenty, but most of the prints are too smeared to be any good." He looked around the room, scowled. "Here and there

you can pick up a trace of the girl's prints. The rest aren't worth a damn."

The homicide man nodded. "It figured." He waited until the men from the coroner's office wheeled the stretcher bearing the dead girl out of the room, turned back to Liddell. "You know how many slashings and killings we get around here? Some nights it's nothing but roll from the time you check in until it's time to go off. Always the same—some guy gets mad at the tramp he's playing house with, carves his initials on her with a knife. Or the broad dents the top of his head in with a bottle. Always the same. No one remembers what the playmate looks like, no one gives much of a damn. They all end up the same place—a slab in the morgue, an open file on the records." He looked incuriously at Turner. "I know Treasury's in this because we had a tip to watch for this babe. I don't know where they fit and I don't want to. Get smart, shamus. On this one we're playing out of our league." He nodded, headed for the door.

Liddell walked back to the T-man. "Guess we might as well get out of this trap, Rex. Nothing we can do for her here."

"Nothing we can do for her. Period. Three months of hard work all gone down the drain. The mob tipped off to the fact we're on their tail. And Blossom ends up in a dirty dive with her throat cut." He

swore softly under his breath, spun on his heel, headed out of the room.

Liddell followed him, stopped at the doorway, looked back into the sordid room where the girl died, tried not to think of what must have preceded the killing. He closed the door after him, followed the T-man to the street. He caught up with him on the sidewalk.

"I don't want any confidential information, Rex. But just one tip. You must know something about the mob behind this. Where they hang out, who calls the signals. Things like that."

Turner nodded. "Knowing it and proving it is two different things."

"I don't have to worry about proof. Not the kind the d.a. would need. That's where I have the edge." He brought a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, held it up to the T-man. "Your way, they walk away from it. My way, maybe they don't. It's worth a try."

Turner took a cigarette from the pack, tapped it thoughtfully on the nail of his thumb. "Sandy Masters runs the Chambers Line pier. He does his hiring, his shylocking and every other filthy thing he does from the Harbor Cafe. Blossom Wong was working in his office." He glanced at his watch. "Less than twelve hours ago, we had the proof to send Sandy Masters to Leavenworth for a long time. Now he's sitting back, having himself a good long laugh at us." The T-man had

an expression on his face that testified to the bad taste in his mouth. He shook his head, turned and walked down the street.

The Harbor Cafe was a grimy, brick fronted two story building set in the shadows of the Brooklyn Bridge, within smelling distance of the Fulton Fish Market. Across the Slip, South Street was lined with ships of all nations tied up at the docks as far as the eye could see. The lights on the Chambers Line Pier indicated that one of its fleet was about to be unloaded.

Johnny Liddell walked into the Harbor Cafe, leaned against the bar. A dozen other men ranged the length of the bar, nervously fingering their beer, casting occasional glances at a door in the rear.

Every so often it would open, a roughly dressed man would come out, carrying a slip of paper, hurry to the door and head across the Slip to the Chambers Line pier. The men at the bar would shuffle nervously, the door would open again and a man would appear in the doorway. He'd look them over, point to one of them. The man indicated would hurry toward the door while the rest turned back to their beer with disappointment.

To Liddell's experienced eyes, it was a hiring session with the men who were behind in their payments or who were slow in kicking back sweating out a night's work, hoping to get the signal that would

send them across the street where they were being short ganged, overworked and underpaid. And those who made something of it didn't work at all.

There had been investigations and sporadic attempts at a clean-up. On some of the docks it had worked, on others like the Chambers Line docks it was a token clean-up, with the abuses back the minute the glare of publicity was off.

"How about a drink?" Liddell asked the bartender.

"We're getting ready to close, mister," the man behind the stick told him. "Not serving any more."

Liddell looked up the bar to the glasses in front of the other men. "Make it a bourbon and water."

"You don't hear so good. I just said—"

Liddell reached across the bar, caught the front of the man's shirt, yanked him against the bar with enough force to knock some of his wind out. "You don't listen so good. I said bourbon and water."

The bartender reached under the bar, managed to get his hands on the weighted miniature bat. Before he could raise it, Liddell slashed him across the throat with the side of his hand. The bartender's face turned purple. He staggered back against the back bar, his hands tearing at his collar.

Liddell looked at the other men along the bar. None of them made a move. It was obvious the barten-

der wasn't in any position to win any popularity contests with his customers. They watched Liddell warily with the look of men who'd long since lost their desire to fight back.

The doorway to the back room opened, a fat man stood in the doorway. "What the Hell's going on out here—" His little eyes hop scotched along the bar, came to rest on Liddell.

"Hello, Fatso," Liddell told him. "You left without saying goodbye. I figured I at least owed it to you to repay your visit." He walked toward the man in the doorway, could hear the low murmur of the men who gathered behind him.

The meatball threw himself at Liddell, Johnny sidestepped the rush, brought up a stiff right, which the fat man fielded with his stomach. His eyes rolled back, he went to his knees, gasping for breath. Liddell brought up his knee, caught the fat man under the chin and slammed him back against a table. He rolled over on his face and lay still.

There was a low, excited murmur from the men along the bar. Some of them fingered old scars the fat man had given them and they licked their lips as they stared down at him.

"That meatball was all soft inside. Where's the redhead?" Liddell walked to the doorway.

A thin little man with a completely bald pate sat at a table un-

der an overhead light. He was completely devoid of hair with the exception of two tufts over his ears. A stubby pipe was gripped between his discolored teeth. He eyed Liddell with no show of belligerence. One of the longshoremen stood before him, his hat in his hand, a few crumpled bills on the table. The redhead, who had been behind the man at the table, walked around it as Liddell stepped in.

"Looking for me, sucker?" His hand disappeared into his jacket, came out with a knife. "Well, you found me." He started toward Liddell, froze in his tracks at the sight of the .45 that materialized in the private detective's hand. His eyes flicked uncertainly to the little man at the table, who watched with apparent interest, offered no suggestion.

Liddell walked over to where the redhead stood, knife in hand, its point upward in the approved style of a knife fighter. Liddell brought his gun up, slammed it down on the wrist of the redhead with shattering force.

The meatball screamed his pain as the knife dropped from his nerveless fingers. He started to spew curses at Liddell. The private detective slammed the barrel of the .45 across his mouth, knocked him back against the wall where he slid to a sitting position on the floor.

Liddell turned to the thin man. "You're Masters."

The man at the table nodded. He

smoothed out the crumpled bills on the table, put them in a box already half filled with currency. He passed a slip across the table to the longshoreman who took it, and ran from the room, slamming the door behind him.

"I'm Sandy Masters." There was a faint scottish burr to his voice. "And who might you be?"

"My name's Johnny Liddell. Tonight, your meatballs used me for a punching bag. It's not the first time it's happened, maybe not the last. If that's all they did, I could write it off as one of the hazards of my trade."

Masters clucked sympathetically. "They did more?"

"They killed a girl—"

"But that'd be against the law," the old man told him. He exposed the discolored teeth in a grin. "Nobody working for Sandy Masters breaks the law." He took the pipe from between his teeth, knocked out the dottle on the corner of the table. "This girl, now. She wouldn't be a Chinese girl? Used to work for old Sandy?"

"You know it is. And you couldn't know unless—"

"Just guessing, I am. But she was bound to come to a bad end, that one." He dipped his pipe into a leather pouch, started loading the tobacco with the tip of his index finger. "Dishonest, she was. I was fixing to let her go when I found out she'd been stealing my records."

"You killed her, and—"

The old man shook his head, rattled the juice in the stem of the pipe. "No. I didn't kill her," he leaned back. "Neither did any of my boys."

"You're a liar. You found out what she was after and you realized she knew too much. You had to kill her."

"Why? Once my boys had that list back, why should I kill her? I destroyed the proof. Why should I kill her? Killing brings heat, Liddell. I don't stand for killing. Not if it can be avoided."

"You're the only one who had any reason—"

"How about the people whose names were on that list?" The old man scratched a match across the table, touched it to the bowl of the pipe, exhaled a thick blue-grey cloud. "Mind you, what I'm telling you is in strictest confidence. I'd deny it in a minute if you tried to quote old Sandy. I'm just trying to keep you from wasting your time, as it is."

"You mean these Chinese you've been smuggling in from Cuba and South America—"

Sandy Masters managed to look hurt. "Pure rumor." He sucked away on his pipe, blew smoke at the ceiling. "Somebody's trying to defame old Sandy." He rolled his eyes down to Liddell's face. "Take an old man's word for it, Liddell. No one can prove a thing. About me, about the way the girl died, nothing. There's not a shred of

proof." He shrugged. "You may know something. Maybe you suspect a lot more. But you could never prove it."

Liddell hefted the .45 in his hand. "Maybe I won't try. Maybe I'll handle it my way."

Masters shook his head. "What would that get you? Put you in the death house? How many do you think you'd get before they got you? Not enough to make it worthwhile. Think about it." He picked up a sheet of paper, ran his eyes down it. "Now if you'll forgive me, I've got to round out my loading crew."

Against the wall, the redhead was pulling himself to his feet. His mouth was a smashed, bloody pulp.

"Wash your face, get that partner of yours in here," Masters snapped at him. He watched while the redhead tottered to the door, disappeared through it.

Masters looked up, as though he was surprised to see Liddell still there. "I thought I heard you going."

"I am. You've got me stopped, Masters. I can't prove a thing," he conceded. "You didn't leave me a thing—"

The old man shrugged. "A man doesn't live this long without—"

"But that's where you made your mistake, leaving me with nothing to lose. Because when I have nothing to lose—you have everything to lose." He shoved the .45 in its holster, walked to the door. The crowd

of longshoremen parted respectfully, he walked through, didn't waste a glance at the table where the redhead was trying to force a jigger of whisky into the mouth of the fat man.

The following morning, Rex Turner was already at his desk in the offices of Treasury Intelligence in the Federal Court House when Johnny Liddell walked in. The deep lines on the T-man's face testified to the fact that he hadn't even gone to bed. He waved Liddell to a chair, got up and walked over to the water cooler.

"We got the preliminary from the medical examiner, Johnny. Blossom had a heavy concentration of alcohol in her blood. They must have been forcing it into her in water glasses." He filled a paper cup from the cooler, stared at it, poured it out untouched. "Homicide sympathizes with us, but in the face of the evidence there's not much they can do about it." He walked back to his desk, sank into his chair. "And we're not in a position to tip our hand by making an issue of it."

Liddell nodded. "I've got some cheerful news, too." He shifted to a more comfortable position. "I had a session with Sandy Masters after I left you." He held up his hand, exhibited his bruised knuckles. "I met up with the two meatballs who took the list away from me. One of them will be eating through a straw and the other won't be eating at all for awhile."

"It must have been fun," Turner conceded. "But I'll bet you didn't get a thing that could help us?"

Liddell shook his head. "Masters claims he had nothing to do with the girl's death. That the man whose names were on the list killed her."

Turner grunted. "Same thing."

"He sat there laughing at me. He had the list back and it was destroyed. The girl was dead and we can't tie him to it. Just sat there laughing."

"I could have told you what you were up against," Turner nodded. "We've been trying to pin that slippery old goat for months. And here we are, as empty handed as the day we started."

"You never saw that list, did you, Rex?"

Turner shook his head.

"Know any of the names likely to be on it?"

"Look, Johnny. Why keep batting your head against the wall? You think you're going to walk in on these characters and muscle a confession out of them? Look what you're up against. Even if they beat the murder rap, they still have to face the people who sent them here."

"So?"

"You know the price of failure on a job like that. The minute they admit failure, they start living on borrowed time. And when the time comes they don't die easy. Nothing personal, you understand—just as a

warning to the ones who follow them."

"You didn't answer me. Know any of the names on the list?"

Turner raked his fingers through his hair. "I could make an educated guess. But I couldn't begin to guess where you'd start looking."

"Give me a couple of names."

The T-man pulled open a drawer, consulted some papers. "We're almost positive that the man heading this operation for the Commies is a former Hawaiian who went over to them during the Korea operation. His name's Roger Chan. We have evidence that he's over here someplace."

Liddell nodded. "Anything else?"

Turner read through the notes, shook his head. "Nothing positive. They're landed here, picked up and stashed away until they can get into operation." He dropped the paper in the drawer, slammed it closed. "They haven't been landing any lately, and we'll see to it that they don't. But the damage was done by the time we came across the operation. Our only hope was to get a complete list of those landed and to move in on them. We blew that one."

"I'm not so sure."

The T-man nodded. "They did such a slick job of cover-up that the only way we'll nail them now will be to catch them standing over a hot corpse with a smoking gun."

Liddell got up. "Maybe we can arrange that, too." He got up,

walked to the door. "I'll be in touch. And don't discount that smoking gun."

Johnny Liddell walked down the narrow, twisting Chinatown street, stopped outside a store front, half of whose window had been painted green. Inside, a thin, stoop shouldered man was drawing symbols on a long sheet of yellow paper with a camel's hair brush. He looked up as Liddell walked in, squinted at him through thick lensed glasses, went back to his printing as Johnny walked through the bead curtain to the back room.

Sammy Ah Lee was sitting at an enamelled table, picking chunks of food from a steaming pot that sat in the center. He looked up, sucked at his fingers, waved Liddell in.

A girl standing at the stove turned. She had the unnaturally white skin of a girl who spends all her time indoors. Her hair was parted in the center, done in pig-tails on the side; she wore form fitting silk pajamas. Her eyes widened as she recognized him as a white man, rolled to Sammy Ah Lee. "Lo fan," she cried in a low, musical voice and ran with a peculiar shuffling motion from the room.

"What's with her?" Liddell wanted to know.

"She's not used to seeing white men. She thinks they're all devils. Won her in a game. Old guy who paid her way here has three more." He motioned for Liddell to pull up

a chair. "You didn't level with me the other night, Johnny. You didn't tell me the girl you were looking for was a hustler." He dug into the pot, brought up a chunk of lobster, popped it into his mouth.

"She wasn't. She was an undercover girl, working for Treasury."

Sammy looked at him with humorous scepticism, saw that he was in earnest. "So what's she doing stoned out of her mind shackled up in a riding academy like that?"

"It was a set-up. To make it look like she was a hustler, so there'd be no heat." Liddell watched the Chinese digest the information. "You know a character named Roger Chan?"

All expression seeped from the other man's face. "Never heard of him." He looked up at Liddell. "Why?"

Liddell looked around, dropped his voice. "Chan was working with Blossom. He's a plant in the Red Chinese network. I've got to get word to him that he's being fingered."

"Sorry, Johnny, but this cloak and dagger stuff I don't dig."

"A grand. That you dig?"

Sammy Ah Lee licked at his fingers, fought a losing battle, finally bobbed his head. "A grand I dig." He looked unhappy. "What do I have to do for it?"

"Pass the word around. Chan doesn't know he's been fingered the same as Blossom. We don't know where to reach him, but if we can

get word to him fast enough—"

"But what if the word gets into the wrong hands?"

Liddell shrugged. "What harm can it do? They're already wise to him. It's a risk, but we've got to take it. And we have no time to waste."

Sammy Ah Lee sucked at his fingers, nodded. "I hope you know what you're doing, Johnny. I don't know this Chan character. I just know what I read about him when he went over to the Reds—"

"He was planted."

The Chinese shrugged. "If anything goes wrong on this, he's likely to be planted again. This time for keeps."

"Nothing will go wrong," Liddell promised. "Take my word for it."

Blossom Wong was buried on Tuesday morning.

Roger Chan's body was found floating in the East River that afternoon, was identified by fingerprints provided by the United States Army. His throat had been cut, his hands were tied behind his back when he was fished out.

Rex Turner walked out of the examining room at the Bellevue Morgue where Chan's body was stretched out on a slab, his sightless eyes studying the metal shaded overhead light. He picked the telephone up from the desk of the attendant, dialled Johnny Liddell's number.

"Liddell," the receiver barked at him.

"This is Rex Turner, Johnny. You get the flash?"

"Which one?"

"We have Roger Chan. They fished him out of the river. He's been dead for over two days."

"Small world, isn't it?" Liddell wanted to know. "Just today we buried Blossom, now we find out the guy who ordered her killed didn't live to read about it."

"How do you know he ordered her killed?"

"Sandy Masters told me. Remember?"

Rex Turner growled deep in his chest. "That's no proof. You couldn't get him to repeat it and you know it. I don't suppose you had anything to do with this killing?"

Liddell's voice had a hurt note in it. "How could I? If you want to check my gun against the bullets—"

"His throat was cut. Just like Blossom's. Probably by the same guy." Turner shook his head. "I'm glad he got it, I guess. But I would have preferred to get him alive."

"Well, we can't have everything, can we, Rex? By the way, is the story being given to the papers?"

"Already has been. The early edition should have it."

"Good. Like I promised, Rex. I'll keep in touch." There was a click as the connection was broken.

Turner stared at the receiver, grimaced. "I'd like to know how the

hell he arranged it," he growled at nobody in particular.

Tonight the Harbor Cafe had a light play. There were only two people standing at the bar as Liddell walked in, ignored the bartender and walked to the door in the rear.

Sandy Masters was frowning at a copy of the "Journal" as the door opened. Behind him, the redhead and the fat man were sitting at another table playing gin. The redhead jumped to his feet, his hand went for his knife.

"Sit down," Masters told him. "You're not even used to your new teeth yet and you'll be having them knocked out." He laid the paper aside, picked up his pipe. "Now what can we be doing for you tonight, Liddell?"

"I see you've been reading the papers. Interesting story about your friend Roger Chan."

"Never heard of the man."

"Now where did I get the idea that he was heading the troop of Red agents that've been smuggled in lately?"

"You've been watching too many of these here television plays," the old man told him coolly. "You still trying to prove something, Liddell?"

"Not any more."

Masters frowned slightly, erased it with a smile. He stuck the pipe between his teeth. "What's that mean?"

Liddell grinned at him. "Suppose I could prove you've been smuggling these Chinese in—?"

"Which you couldn't."

Liddell nodded. "You're right. I couldn't. But I don't even intend to try." He scratched a match, held it for the old man. "The worst you'd get for that would be a couple of years—"

Masters sucked deeply on the pipe, blew out the match. "So?"

"This way, Chan's buddies can never be sure about you, can they? They'll keep wondering how come a T-girl got planted in your office, how come you never did anything about it—"

"Now, wait—"

"No. You wait. And you keep on waiting. Because in a matter of days, maybe even weeks, they're going to decide that only one man really knows everything Treasury would like to know." He grinned as a look of comprehension ridged the old man's forehead. "They didn't take any chances with Chan. You know why? The word got around he was working with Treasury."

"That's a lie."

"Sure. But they can't be sure, can they? Even about you. And right now, they're probably deciding that they've got to be sure."

Masters licked at his lips, looked at his two bodyguards uneasily.

"I wouldn't count on them, Sandy. These other boys are no amateurs. And your boys are—"

The fat man growled, started to his feet.

"I told you to stay out of this. Get out of here. Both of you." Masters waited while the two men shuffled sullenly to the door, slammed it after them. "You want to be a little careful how you talk to them, Liddell. They're sensitive."

"I probably won't be running in to them again. You, either. So I thought I'd drop by and say so long."

"You think you're scaring old Sandy?"

Liddell shook his head. "Like you said, you've been around a long time. You know guys like that have too big a stake to fool around. They got the idea Chan had a big mouth—they made it bigger. From ear to ear."

The old man got up from his chair, skirted the table, walked to the door. He opened it a crack, looked out, then closed it. "Now, look, Liddell, I'm not saying we couldn't make a deal—"

"No deal. I don't want you for a lousy smuggling rap. One way or another you're to blame for the girl being dead. So you're going to pay off for it. Not to the law, because like you said we can't prove a thing. But Chan's buddies aren't going to ask for proof. They can't afford to take the chance—"

"You're setting me up to get my throat cut," Masters protested.

"You're already set up. The minute word got out that there was

some hanky-panky with the Feds, you grew more than one shadow. They're watching and they're waiting. And they'll pick the time and the place. And the method." He walked to the door, opened it. "So long, Sandy."

The little man's bald spot was gleaming with perspiration. "What do you want?"

Liddell studied the little man's face, watched him swabbing at the bald spot with a handkerchief. "The guys that killed the girl."

"I can't do that. You know they'd—"

"I'm not asking you to. It doesn't matter to me whether you finger them or they cut you. As long as someone pays for what happened to her." He started out the door. The old man grabbed Liddell's sleeve and pulled him back, slammed the door behind him.

Sandy Masters stared at Liddell for a minute. Then, "Give me the number and the name of the guy I talk to at Treasury."



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*True, she was beautiful. But she was so obvious and transparent, so predictable that he was becoming quite bored . . . and the pistol in her hand didn't frighten him at all.*

# LOVERS QUARREL

BY  
KELLY REYNOLDS



HER HAND was the soft white of pampered and indolent young flesh, made tender by creamy lotions and much disuse. The curve of her wrist was gracefully and delicately posed to reveal the little fingers with their babyish flesh and enameled nails. Those gleamingly red blades seemed to have no real connection with the rest of her body.

She sat curled in the chair with her knees tucked up: it was a sug-

gestive and comfortable position she had seen so often on the movie screen and she did it well. The length of leg exposed by the mator slacks was pearly smooth (she drew a fresh razor edge over her legs every three days—the wicked sharpness of it on her delicate skin was fascinating). Figured on the slacks was a black and scarlet design and the cloth on her thighs and hips was full, taut and straining. She let an arm slide across her lap and raised it to rest caressingly under her chin.

Disdainful, he thought. She is so obvious.

"Well?" she asked.

"Don't you think this is all just a little bit silly?"

"You think everything I do is silly."

Pout now, go ahead. There. The lower lip extended itself slightly, puffily, the corner of the mouth twisted in trembling anger. That was the real trouble with her: she made such a show of every little emotion she was able to summon. The lip began to curl under.

"That is certainly an exaggeration! Really, Fran, where do you get these ideas? You take my every criticism as a personal affront, as though I wanted to do nothing in this world but insult you. Don't you know it's nothing more than a manifestation of some deep-seated insecurity? My words are not really at fault. Wouldn't it make you a lot happier to have some professional

help with this? I was speaking to Dr Javits yesterday about us and he said . . ."

"Shut up, shut up!" Rage inflamed her mouth. Her brows were pulled into such a helpless distortion above the widened eyes that he almost had to laugh. Frowning was almost a tragedy in her life—perhaps the only one of which she was capable, he reflected with amusement. Tonight she would have to apply extra cold cream for fear of wrinkles. "Goddamn you, you smug bastard. If I hear anymore of that bull, I won't wait another minute. Bull, bull, bull." She screamed it with a furiously mounting inflection. "I'm sick of you and all that bull about insecurity and inferiority and what did my old man do when I was a kid and why don't I go lie down somewhere and have my head looked at. There wasn't nothing wrong with my father! You leave him alone. Aw, the hell with you. Go to hell! You get your head looked at three times a week and everybody knows it. You're the biggest case I ever met. It never does you any good. You think you're so smart."

"Analysis has been very helpful to me." This was the first time she had ever dared to mention this touchy subject in an argument. Of course he made no secret of his treatment, lest people find out for themselves and so conclude he was ashamed. He yawned deeply. "I'd pay all the bills, Fran, and you

could go as often as you liked. Just try it. It might settle this whole matter in a far less . . . painful fashion." He chuckled.

"Oh, you're so smart." She was getting herself under control again. He could detect the shame in her eyes. With considerable satisfaction he remembered the first such outburst she had thrown in his presence (it had been on the first morning, as a matter of fact, when he had made some remark as she emerged from the bathroom), standing there with the cold shining tile behind her, shrieking vile obscenities and almost slobbering with fury. He'd stretched his arms in a long sigh and quietly intoned: "Gutter tramp." It had taken her a long time to recover from that and the next tantrum had been very much abated. Now he let his lips arch just perceptibly. She knew what he was thinking.

"You just think you're smart, Harvey."

"No, no, I honestly don't. I recognize my limitations and that's one reason I've been successful so far. Analysis has helped me a lot with that, incidentally."

She exhaled a burst of air thru her nostrils—the rageful temper perishing in that little whiff. "What a laugh."

So the painful sense of exposure her revilement had caused him, had escaped her awareness. His casual and candid attitude had been enough to convince her of his in-

vulnerability. The uneasiness faded. He was conscious only of a vague irritation arising from a sudden sensation of monotony. She was altogether too predictable. Had he put his mind to it, it would have been the simplest thing in the world to have calculated, some days in advance, her actions and to have foretold the truly unique position he now occupied. As it was, the whole thing had come as a surprise. He had been sitting there, finishing off a last memo, admiring the neat calligraphy in which crouched the sting of invective and rebuke. Someone in the office would be kept awake by that! He hadn't even bothered to look up at first. And then he had failed to see it.

"Fran, I wonder if you have any idea why you're doing this?"

"To prove how sick I am of you."

He pinched his chin thoughtfully between thumb and forefinger. "No, I don't think that's so. I have the feeling that in all this you're just searching to discover your own limitations. You want to find out what you're capable of and in that way define yourself." (It was a good phrase—define yourself—and he had always been able to impress her with it.) "Once a person learns just how far and in what direction their character extends, then they're able to get a better idea of exactly what shape they present in the world of the personality."

Slowly he had become aware of her presence in the doorway. She

knew perfectly well that she was forbidden to intrude upon him at this hour under any circumstances and had always been given cause to regret it when she did. Usually it began with: "I'm lonely, Harvey," or, "How long are you going to stay in here?" When she didn't say anything he looked up briefly, a cursory and unseeing glance, then tapped his cigarette precisely on the ashtray and returned to the paper before him. When another movement, a strange one, had caught his eye, the suspicion of the alien object had entered his mind and he looked up seriously. She held the revolver perfectly level from the hip and the muzzle unwaveringly stared a straight line at his chest. Clearly that stance had been practiced for some days in her full length mirror.

"What do you think my shape is like, Harvey?"

He let the smile cut deeply into his cheeks. The intimate one, very warm. "I think you have absolutely the most beautiful shape I have ever seen on a living woman. You're a beautiful girl."

"I don't mean that corny stuff. I mean really. You know what I mean . . . in the world of person-

"But I am sincere, Fran. You have the breasts of a goddess." He could go a little further with this before she had another rage.

"You'd better stop fooling around and tell me the truth. I'm going to

do it no matter what you say."

"Oh, yes, I'm so glad you reminded me of that. Have you given much thought, by the way, to what's going to happen when you shoot me? Oh, I don't mean the simple facts of my being dead and the police and all that gas chamber business . . . what about the horrible mess it's going to make? You know the bullet doesn't just leave a clean little hole and I slump over and that's all there is to it. From that range and from the way you're holding the gun, you'll get me right in the head. Know what happens then? It goes all the way thru and rips out the entire back of the skull." He turned sideways to indicate the wall, painted a restful blue, behind him. "Big hunks of brains and blood splattered all over there. And you'll look down on the desk and just see a smashed, open hole staring up at you."

She tried not to wince. "I don't care about that." The revolver trembled as she tightened her grip on it.

"Why don't you then? Why don't you just go ahead?" For the first time he realized that it was his gun. He had hidden it away after that housebreaking scare had subsided. A glow of anger and mortification began to swell inside his stomach and fill his lungs, mounting. She had been snooping thru his personal belongings, prying around, peeping everywhere. After this everything was going to be locked. He could have killed her for it.

"I'm going to wait." She pursed her lips. Sensing her efforts to express contempt, he closed his fists as a sneer almost tore across his face. "There are some things I intend to find out first. I want to know what you've been thinking of me all this time."

"You mean since . . ." He lifted an eyebrow: blase.

"No, no. I mean ever since you first met me and all this happened. Why do you always treat me the way you do? I want to find out what you really think of me."

"Well, let me see . . ." She was going to be sorry for this to the end of her days. He had warned her about his drawers, his closet. She'd yelped like a puppy when he had given her ear a tweak to emphasize the danger of such meddling. And that night he had lain awake for a long time, gritting his teeth. Well, this had caught her now. There could be no more excuses or delays. He was impatient to get the gun from her. "You actually are a very intelligent girl, Fran. You have what I'd call an instinctive grasp of life. That's why I've always felt that with a little more education, a little chance to further yourself mentally, that you'd become a truly brilliant woman."

He knew what effect that would have. She let her mouth relax a little, easing open to show the teeth as she breathed slowly with repressed joy.

"You're serious?"

"Of course. Why do you think I noticed you?"

"I don't know, Harvey." The heavy bulk of the pistol rested motionlessly in her hand, forgotten already. Still it was trained directly on him. "I thought it was because . . . you know. All that."

"Oh, I don't deny that your other attractions influenced me. It's really the fact that a girl with all your attributes and . . . uh . . . skill, could have at the same time such a mental potentiality. I thought it was incredible, absolutely."

Now the aim of the gun dropped. Her eyes shaded. Had he been able to reach it, he felt he could have simply leaned forward and removed the weapon without her so much as noticing. A surge of anticipation welled up inside him.

"I just wish you'd told me all that before." Her voice was floating, buoyed by this new and long desired vision of herself.

"You know how reticent I am that way, Fran. I have this distrust of flattery. You know that. Remember what I told you the doctor said about my competitive instincts? I was afraid it might have led to a serious conflict between us."

"Oh, Harvey, I would never, never let that happen. Why you're so much smarter than me. I've always done what you told me." She took a few hesitant steps forward then stopped as if she suddenly had remembered something. The big breasts, hard and ripe, swung

under the blouse, braless, as she straightened her upper body. "Harvey, do you think I have a future?"

"Fran . . ." he reached forward and extracted a cigarette from the mahogany box. The gun rose and wagged slightly at his movement. She was more alert than he had thought. He was sure of his powers though, more sure than ever before. It was only a matter of manipulation. A dull throb pulsated in his belly, spreading warmth and vigor. "I'll tell you, before all this happened . . ." he snapped a wooden match, held the flare, puffed, let the match drop into the ashtray with a faint ting. "Do you know what I've been thinking these past few days? Why don't I talk Fran into continuing her education? We could have a tutor come up here, she could attend special classes, and in no time she'd finish that little bit of highschool. Fran wouldn't have any trouble with that, could do it in a few weeks. Yes, I was just thinking about that this afternoon."

The gun trembled in her enthusiasm. "Were you really? Were you thinking that? Honestly, Harvey?"

"And then I thought . . . well, why should I mention it now? It might only upset you, leave regrets." He leaned back, inhaled and held it, then released a careful stream of faint smoke toward the ceiling. "I thought that you should go to college. Yes, college. Fran would really get something out of that, I told myself, how happy it would make her! Every morning

she could get up and drive down to the campus and attend the classes. She could study. Have all the best teachers. College." He let his head ride down and gazed in her direction with a smile—a lost, dreaming smile.

"Oh God, Harvey, I didn't know!" The pistol was hanging limply toward the carpet. Amazed at her gullibility, he almost let the smile twist itself into a sneer of disgust.

"Well, that's all past now." He clapped his hands together and rubbed them smartly. "It's just an idea I had. If only it had come a little sooner this might have been avoided. Ummmm?"

"Harvey do you really think I could do it?"

"No question about it." He absorbed himself in grinding out the cigarette. "You could become a very brilliant woman, Fran." He ground the last of the sizzling coal into the ashes.

"I never really wanted to do all this awful stuff, Harvey." There was shame and the quivering catch of release in her voice. He concentrated his perceptions to be sure that they had lost none of their acuteness. He could interpret her slightest gesture, her faintest inflection. There could be no mistakes at this stage. "You know it was only because I loved you. I do, Harvey."

"I know you do, Fran. It makes me proud to know how much you love me." He swallowed. His eyes closed as he tried not to hear the

sound of his own voice. "I'll die a little happier with that awareness." His insides cringed. Good God!

"But how could I get through college and all that like you said?" She stood. The gun was now something to gesture with. "All my life I've wanted so bad to have that chance. So many nights, Harvey, you don't know, I've thought and stayed awake just praying . . ."

"I'll help you myself. We'll work together."

A sudden sadness pushed her back into the chair. Her face went loose. "You might be ashamed of me. There's almost two years."

"That's nothing. Your teachers were poor." He was becoming impatient as the desire seemed to fade under this prolonged trial of his composure. "Learning requires the proper environment."

"Harvey." The inevitable tear was beginning to trickle, her lip was spasmodically jerking as he knew it would. "I hope you can forget about this." He looked away as a big, watery, gulping sob broke from her lips. "It's so awful and terrible."

"Would you like to give the gun to me?"

"Yes, Harvey. Oh, it's awful, it's awful. I must have been insane to ever want to hurt you. I wish I'd never found it."

"Come around here and put it in my hand."

She stood and wiped away a dribbling tear. He could hardly restrain the shout that strained his throat—give it here you stupid slut!

"Harvey, were you scared?" The gun was dangling from her finger by the trigger guard. She began to giggle as she mopped her face with the other hand. "How scared were you?"

"I wasn't in the slightest afraid." He could wait no longer. "What makes you think I was afraid?" His eye was fixed on the gun where it clung perilously to her finger, the enormous weight of it bending the finger backwards.

"You weren't afraid?"

"No. Now listen, Fran, this has gone far enough." She stumbled back two steps and almost tripped over the chair behind her. "It's all settled now, isn't it?"

He had to have that pistol instantly. Already he'd been debased beyond endurance. He saw her body, its lush over-ripe flesh bursting in his mind into a monstrous vegetable of gross sensuality. A wave of horrid nausea left him weak, revolted.

"No, Fran. Of course not. Just a minute . . . I feel weak. You know that sick attack I get every now and then." He rested his face in his hands. When he looked up again, she had the gun securely in her hand, and was standing behind the chair. "College and everything. Yes, of course, you can start tomorrow."

But she didn't move. Her mouth was set in a straight compressed line. He had only seen that expression once before: when he had first asked her to live with him.

"Do you love me, Harvey?"

"Yes, yes, yes."

"Say it."

He had to get his strength back. He made a desperate effort to recall the surge of that strange desire. If he could just feel a little bit of that again, everything would be all right. He could almost feel it. "I love you, Fran."

With his head bowed he watched her. She stood immobile and transfixed by some inner puzzlement. The feeling was coming back for him, he could sense once more that momentum. Soon it was bound to become the surcharge he awaited.

"Harvey, will you marry me?"

"Marry?" The relentless black pupil of the muzzle enlarged before his stare, assuming the proportions of some fathomless cave. "Let's talk this over."

"Will you marry me?"

It was so absurd, the outrage left him so stunned, that he managed a weak smile. There was a way out of this, he knew there was. "Very well, we'll get married if you want. I never suspected you had the slightest inclinations that way, or else I might have said something myself. We'll announce the engagement anytime you like."

"Do you mean it?"

"I mean it. I give you my word." He was numb with loathing.

"All right then, Harvey." She started around the chair. "If you promise. Do you promise?"

"I gave you my word. I promise." He had never known it was possible to be subjected to anything so asinine. The word hung in his thoughts—asinine. It was revolting, it was hilarious. Yet he was suddenly unable to feel anything other than a peaceful torpor. He tried to laugh and emitted the sound of feebly clearing his throat.

"Say I'm your wife. Say, 'Fran is my wife and I'll always love her.'"

"Listen now, Fran." Again he coughed. "Let's be sensible about all this. Please."

"If you don't say it, Harvey, I'm going to shoot you dead with this gun right now. Just please say, 'Fran is my wife.'"

He spread his hands and tried to grin.

"Harvey, please, if you don't say Fran is my wife I'm going to shoot you. Please, please."

And as her finger, so inanely deliberate, pressed that final, immeasurable hair's breadth, his mind had just time to say to itself: how asinine, before the tiny, roaring bullet cracked his skull open.



*Hervie Taylor sat handcuffed to the detective beside him and listened to the click of the wheels on the track and looked out on the passing country-side. He faced a life term in the state prison . . . and he smiled happily.*

## LIFE SENTENCE

BY TALMAGE POWELL

**I**N MY official capacity I've escorted many men to state prison, each handcuffed to me during the train ride. Several of them have been murderers. This one was in that macabre category, and the thing that interested me was that I couldn't imagine him killing anybody.

As a matter of fact, his was the goriest murder of all. He had taken a heavy meat knife and chopped his wife so thoroughly that she was buried like a mass of hamburger.

His name was Hervie Taylor. He looked as if he should be on his way to keep books in an electric appliance store. This was precisely the job he'd had. If you'd noticed him at all against that background you'd have felt instinctively that he would

never go far. He was an excellent bookkeeper. This, coupled with his natural colorless attributes, kept him in his dim corner writing his careful rows of figures while the world went its laughing, crying, loving, brawling, lustrous way.

He was a considerate little man, doing his best to keep from being an inconvenient appendage attached to me by steel. Some of them can't help worrying their hand against the handcuff. Others want water. A few try to bury our hands in the seat to hide the cuff. Last one I took up before Hervie Taylor had to go to the bathroom every five miles or so.

Hervie sat beside me watching the scenery stream past, beautiful farming country of low, rolling

hills and green meadows, white houses and red barns. In this, he was different from the others. There are several stock reactions. Hatred for the beauty of the countryside. Bitterness. Nostalgia. Inner torture, if the man being taken away had a masochistic streak. Even hope, in a few.

Hervie Taylor simply sat and looked at the scenery,

He was a man of fifty, small-boned and not given to excess flesh. He had brown hair that he wore neatly parted. The hair had faded a little, but there was no gray in it. His eyes were dark brown, keen and intelligent. You'd never guess his age—or his crime—simply by looking at him. There was still the suggestion of boyishness in his face. A lively eagerness in his eyes that the monotony and cares of the years had not altogether extinguished.

He was of course going up for life. Perhaps he was thinking about it, now that each click of the wheels carried him that much closer.

"Do they have good food?" he asked.

"Simple, but substantial," I said.

"Not a lot of sticky, sickening stuff or creamed mess on toast, I guess."

"You guess right," I said.

"It was the only mess Jassie knew how to cook, wanted to cook, or cared to eat," he announced.

Jassie was—had been his wife. You've seen couples like them, a little guy with a woman who had

spread, flabbed, and grown to three times his size. There'd been a lot of Jassie to chop up.

"I lived with Jassie thirty years," he said idly.

"That's quite a time."

"Jassie never should have strung it out," he said. "She changed. Or perhaps I did. Or maybe it simply took me a long time to get to know her."

He must have loved her once, I thought.

As if suspecting the thought, he said, "She was a cute kid when we got married. Only having a husband made her feel secure, I guess. She had a man. She didn't need to fix up any longer. She let herself go to seed in a hurry."

"Some women are like that." Mentally, I added: Only you don't kill them for it.

"We never had children," he said. "We—ah—never did very much of the necessary prerequisite to having children. Jassie didn't want them around. Too much trouble, she said. I wanted a gang of kids. So the wife and I could sort of grow up all over again with them. Fellow with kids has got a good excuse to do lots of stuff like pitch a baseball in the back yard or tinker with a bike or take in a circus and eat hot dogs. Jassie didn't like any of that. She had to have a man who'd come in, cook supper, wash the dishes, and sit in the living room with her. Sometimes she started snoring on the couch—she had a wet, flubby little snore. Still,

she liked to have her husband sitting there with her. It was his place, she said."

"Fellow like you," I suggested, "should have become a Boy Scout troop advisor or had a Sunday School class of boys."

He looked at me as if I weren't very bright. "I tried both of those things. It made Jassie ill."

"Ill?"

"Yes, she'd have to call the doctor. She wouldn't get better until I had loaded the house with chocolate creams and was staying with her again." He sighed. "It got worse as time went on. She'd time me from the house to the store and back again. If I missed my bus, I'd have to explain every minute I was late."

"Sounds pretty dull," I conceded.

"You've no idea," he said. "For a time, I tried to make friends. You know, have somebody drop into the house and play bridge or have a little dinner. The experiences were horrible. A couple would drop in and Jassie wouldn't stir. I'd have to cook the dinner and explain her illness. Newly made friends usually dropped in only once, the house was usually . . . well, dirty, unmade, you know. Sometimes the dirty dishes and garbage container made it smell. Anyway, Jassie would never return a visit. As time went on, she got worse, of course."

He looked at me calmly and I got a mental picture of Jassie, spreading over the couch as the years spread over her. Jassie so helpless,

demanding every moment of his time, hemming in every second of his life.

"After a long time," he said in a tone more introspective than he'd used before, "I realized I must leave Jassie. I had no money. We never had any money. I didn't make much, and she knew the amount to the penny. She didn't know how to handle money. We arrived at every payday flat broke. Week by week—sort of like a motion picture that's going nowhere.

"Although I lacked money, I did get a chance to go in business. A man who knew my work offered me the same starting salary and a small interest if I would go into a new venture he was starting.

"Jassie wouldn't hear of it. It was risky. I wouldn't be able to work set hours. Sometimes I'd have to work nights or on weekends. The business was bound to fail. Everything must go on just as in the past."

"Did the business fail?" I asked.

"Most ironically," Hervie Taylor said. "The man who took the place I was offered absconded with considerable funds. He was later caught and punished, but the damage to the business was done. He'd spent the stolen money. I'm certain," he added solemnly, "the story would have been different had I entered the venture. I would have worked hard. I would never have touched the first penny."

I believed Hervie Taylor on that point. Until he'd chopped up Jas-

sie, his record had been without blemish.

"Please understand," he said, "how this affected me. Here was a business ruined and gone in which I might have found delight, interest, even excitement. So for the first time I left Jassie."

"First time?"

He nodded. "I slipped my clothes out of the house and moved to a hotel. I left her a note saying I would send her money each week. Believe me, I had no intentions of living a dissolute life. But I did have a glorious evening, just able to walk the streets. Jassie came to me. She begged. She wept. She implored. She just now realized how much she loved me, she said. She'd do better."

He looked out the window for a few moments. "Women," he said, "have emotional weapons they use against men sometimes, some women. You can't feel this weapon, you can't name it. It's like an invisible net and the more you struggle against it, the more you feel like a monster and brute. Do you know what I mean?"

"Well," I said, "I've never had your experience."

"You haven't a Jassie," he said. "I went back to her. And for a little while she was different. She even cooked a steak or two. It didn't last, this new Jassie. Before long she was back in her rut, only more so."

"You left her again?"

"Yes. This time she came with

the tears, the imploring, the promises. They didn't work. The next evening a seedy looking guy with the photostat of a private detective's license in his wallet came to see me. He said that Mrs. Taylor was his client and I was through mistreating her. His threat was veiled, but I understood. I returned to Jassie."

"That was the last time you left her?"

"Oh, no. She hemmed me in worse than ever. I simply couldn't stand it any longer. This time I would really run away, go to another city, change my name."

He paled a little, remembering. After a moment, he said, "She caught me slipping out of the house. Know what she did? She whipped the literal hell out of me. That's what she did. I mean, she used her fists. She knocked me down and kicked me and dragged me to my feet and knocked me down again. This went on for a considerable time. I really don't know of anything more shattering that can happen to a man. I despised myself. She despised me just as much. For years she had counted out my pocket money to the penny. Now she even told me what to eat for lunch. It was never much. I've never known the human heart could hold so much hatred as I felt for Jassie."

"You didn't run away again," I said.

"No. I knew it would be no use. A week later, after I'd cooked supper one night, she called to me to

bring her food to the living room so she could finish watching one of her interminable TV programs. A strangely nerveless feeling came over me. I found myself with the knife in my hand. Funny . . . when the knife disappeared in her, she gave a little squeak for all the world like a fat, gray mouse."

We rode a little in silence. We were almost at the prison now. Herbie Taylor sat at his window to catch the first sight of it.

"Relax," I said. "There are no

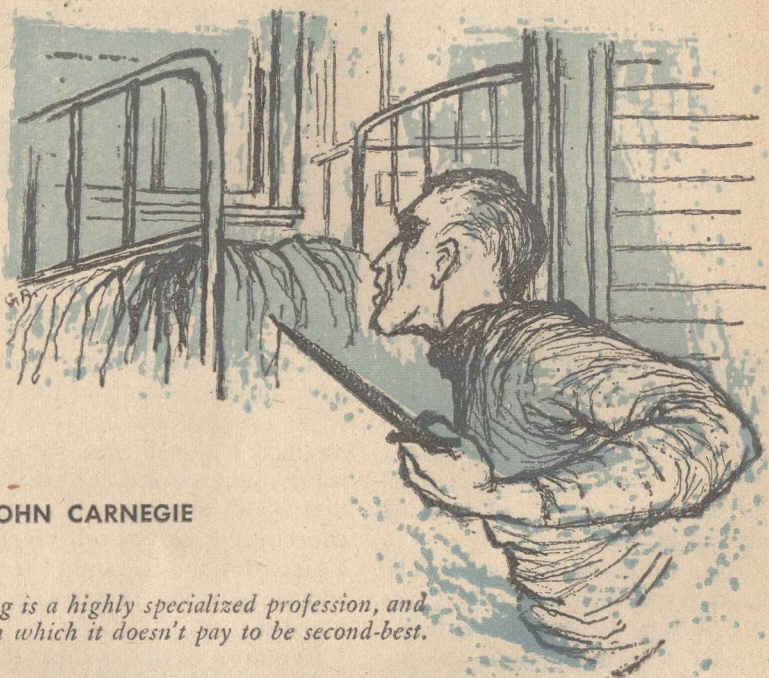
whips or sadistic guards in the place."

"Relax?" He turned to look at me. "But I understand it's a model prison. Weekly movies, a machine shop, a prison brass band, a nice library, even a baseball team."

"That's right," I said.

His reply was brief, simple, and straight to the point. A beatific smile brought out the boyishness of his face. He looked out the window toward the distant grey walls of the prison. "Freedom," he said.





BY JOHN CARNEGIE

*Killing is a highly specialized profession, and one in which it doesn't pay to be second-best.*

## THE CHALLENGE

THE FAT MAN was a little uncomfortable. He shifted uneasily in his chair, his hands toying with the small articles on his desk. He wasn't really afraid, he had been a big man in the business too long for that, he was just uncomfortable.

He kept his gaze wandering around the luxurious office but always they slid back to the kid seated across from his desk. He was

fascinated and repelled at the same time like a man watching a caged snake. The kid just sat there motionless, hands in his pockets, legs stretched out in front of him, his eyes veiled and unreadable.

The fat man cleared his throat and spoke, a deep rumble in the silence.

"What you want with Mr. Parker, Casino?"

Casino slid his hands from his pockets and looked at them speculatively. He flexed the long tapered fingers, arched the powerful wrists. Placing the palms together, he watched the hands melt into each other, lovingly entwine. He almost smiled.

"They're good hands."

The fat man said nothing.

Casino shrugged and straightened in his chair; his voice lost the light silky tone.

"I think I'm better than your Parker!" He stared at the fat man, his eyes suddenly hot and bright.

"You know my score. Seven clean hits in five months and the cops don't even know my name!"

Under the challenge of Casino's eyes, the fat man nodded.

"Yeah, we know your score. The syndicate thinks your work is fine but hell, boy, we got Mr. Parker."

Casino was angry now. A controlled tight anger that made his lean handsome features a harsh mask. He flowed to his feet and leaned over the desk.

"You got nobody! An old man that's been around too damned long. He's living on a rep he made twenty years ago and still you guys think he's the best. Try me one time. Just once, one lousy hit and I'll make Parker look like an idiot!"

The fat man shrugged his shoulders.

"Look, Casino, you know the syndicate. We use only the top man. We can't do anything for you, not

the way things stand right now anyway."

For a long moment Casino just stared at him. Then he smiled. He moved to the door, his motions controlled and graceful, the dark eyes expressionless. He paused, hand on the door knob and looked back. His voice was very soft.

"What if I took Parker?"

The fat man shrugged again.

"Like I said, Casino, we use only the best. . . ."

The word went out slowly at first, then gathered momentum and speed as the network of the underworld caught the full impact of the message. It leaped from the cupped hands and excited eyes of the small-time hoods to those who controlled entire sections of the country. It was a big word and it caught the mind and imagination of everyone who heard it.

Casino wanted to take Parker.

The tough young challenger wanted to take on the old, experienced champion. This was better than the excitement of a world series, a world title bout; two top professionals in the deadliest of all sports: the taking of a human life.

Bets were made, from the two bucks over the top of a bar to the no limit stakes of the country's biggest bookies. The arguments were endless, the fights numerous, speculation as varied and colorful as the tongues that made them. There were no sides taken, no organization planning. Professional killers

were hired by the job and belonged to no gang, or had any friends on any side. They worked alone, did their jobs as quickly and quietly as possible and of the really top killers for hire, like Casino and Parker, almost nothing of them was known except their reputations as professionals. Even their hits were little publicized, being bad for business in general.

The police could do nothing. They had heard the word as soon as it was out but until something happened, they could do nothing. Perhaps they didn't want to do anything anyway. This was something outside the law and the loss would be more of a gain in the end. One less headache for the departments, one less dark fruitless trail to follow for homicide. And being human, they too made their bets, had their arguments, their speculations. They waited.

Casino didn't wait. He had sent out the word and now he followed it. He was a hunter in the darkest of the jungles, hunting the deadliest game. He was a ghost in all his former haunts, he changed his habits, his pattern of living. He didn't work at his profession now; he lived it.

For five days, there had been nothing. Casino had methodically tracked down every lead he could find on Mr. Parker. He had waited patiently through the night hours watching the eating places, the Turkish Baths, the billiard club

Parker belonged to, even the branch library which Parker had been known to frequent occasionally. He didn't expect to find too much but he was following one of the prime rules of the profession—know your quarry.

He found out a lot but none of it helped. Parker was known only as a mild little man who came and went so quietly that you hardly knew he had been there. He found out that Parker drank nothing but mild sherry, liked gin rummy, read a lot, played chess occasionally at the Chess Club in West Park, smoked one cigar a day, travelled frequently, lived in a small furnished room somewhere on the north side of town, disliked violence (Casino almost smiled at this), and was all in all, such a simple-living old man that finding him was going to be the hardest thing Casino had ever done.

Killing him was going to be easy. All he had to do was find him.

Casino moved slowly along Seventh Avenue letting the crowd eddy and flow around him. He stopped frequently and leaned against a store front. He looked bored and restless, a young man with an evening to spend and no plans. He just looked that way, inside he was drawn taut, his nerves humming, the eyes constantly moving over the crowd. Idly he drifted another block, the hooded eyes studying every face he saw. Almost at the corner, he suddenly cut sharp-

ly through the crowd and halted before a figure crouched in a boarded-in doorway.

"Hello, Shad."

The little man barely glanced up. If he heard the greeting, he gave no sign. Casino's lip curled a little; like all normal people, he felt a faint twinge of contempt for the ugly or grotesque. The frame was a midget frame topped by a head far too large, the features twisted and shapeless, a drooping sneer permanently fixed on the huge lips. Standing over him, Casino caught the throat tightening smell of soiled clothes and unwashed flesh fighting with the sweet smell of cheap wine.

Casino nudged the shoeshine box lying by the crouched gnome.

"Let's have a shine, Shad."

Wordlessly, the little man reached out and lifted the nudging foot onto the rack of the shine box. The gnarled hands caressed the rich leather of Casino's shoes. Casino was wearing handmade Italian shoes and the rich black calf glowed in the darkened doorway. For the first time, Shad looked up and spoke, the words rasping out of the twisted lips.

"Beauties, real beauties," Casino smiled and said nothing. Silently he watched the progress of the shine. When the reluctant hands could do no more to the gleaming leather, Casino spoke.

"I'm looking for a friend of yours, Shad."

"I got no friends, mister . . ."

Casino studied the bowed head. He dropped a five dollar bill into the shine box.

"You used to know him real well, Shad, shined his shoes even. The hightopped ones you don't see anymore nowadays . . ." he dropped a second five alongside the first one.

Shad looked down at the money then up at Casino.

"How do you know I know this guy you're looking for?"

A faint tingle of triumph flowed through Casino. This little monster knew Parker. He kept his voice casual.

"I remember you and him years ago, down in the old neighborhood. Now you're here on the north side and so is he."

For long moments Shad didn't say anything then he picked up the money and dropped it into his pocket. There was a kind of sardonic joy in the rasping voice now.

"O.K., kid, I won't string you along. I knew who you was when you first tagged me. I heard the rumble. You're trying to take Parker. I don't like him any better than you so I'll give you a steer. Try King's place over on 92nd, three or four times a week he goes in for coffee and cribbage with some of the old gaffers that hang out there."

Casino looked down at the twisted little man almost fondly. The first solid line he had come across.

"I'm going to take him, Shad."

Shad shrugged.

"Parker's good, kid, been good for a long time."

"I'm better. . . ." The words were hardly out of his mouth when a white-hot searing pain needled along his neck and the boarded partition beyond his head splintered into fragments. Desperately, Casino hurled himself sideways and down to the pavement, tugging frantically at the gun under his jacket. He was dimly aware of the Shad scuttling animal-like out of the doorway and the amazed faces along the street staring at him. There was a flat coughing sound and the pavement in front of his face exploded into granite dust stinging his face. He rolled again and glass crashed from the store front over his head and tinkled onto his hunched shoulders.

Now people were running. A woman screamed adding to the panic. Casino managed to bunch his legs beneath him and hurled himself toward the curb just as the smashing shock exploded against the bottom partition of the store front where his head had been seconds before. He cowered panic-stricken against a car parked along the curb, his gun still jammed tight inside his jacket. Never in his entire life had he felt so helpless and frightened.

As suddenly as it had happened, it was over. In the silence of shock, Casino could still hear the flat cough and then the smashing explosions alongside his head. He

was momentarily deaf and to his desperate eyes, the whole scene was unreal. People still ran and gradually the street came back into focus and dimension. Traffic still flowed along the street. Things at a distance seemed normal.

Anger shook Casino. Scrambling to his feet, he raced parallel to the line of cars along the curb, his hand on his gun butt, his eyes searching the street for some sign. There was nothing except open-mouthed people staring at him. He darted into the street and made his way through the honking horns and screeching traffic to the far side of the street and to the comparative safety of the other curb.

For several blocks he moved fast then he slowed to a more normal pace. He caught a cab that was just disgorging its passengers at the curb and tumbled into the back, startling the driver.

"Uptown, fast. . . ."

As the cab pulled into the uptown traffic stream, he relaxed for the first time. His hands still trembled a bit but now it was from anger and humiliation. Caught like some kind of crawling animal, flat on his face and helpless. That cannon going off so fast and close that it had driven him into a numbing panic. The worst part of it all was that he hadn't even seen or known where it was coming from. His neck burned and when he explored with cautious fingers, he felt the warm seep of blood flowing down

into his collar. Damn, that had been close. Hell, every shot had been close. A fraction of an inch and he would be lying back there dead right now.

Very slowly and wormlike, a thought crawled through his mind. A terrible thought. Parker was an expert shot. That first one should have killed him. Was Parker playing with him? Trying to scare him off? He could have killed him with any one of those shots while he had been grovelling there on the sidewalk! A little tingle of fear started somewhere deep inside of him but almost immediately he shrugged it off. He was good himself, been in the business long enough to have a few tricks of his own. He'd show Parker a few things before this was over. Thoughtfully, he fingered the still throbbing gash along his throat. The scar would be some souvenir. He shivered.

For a few moments Parker had thought all the luck was going his way. He had been trailing Casino for several blocks, not really planning anything, more to just study this rash young man who had made such big threats. Then from the far side of the street, he had seen Casino talking to Shad. The shoe shine had been a stroke of luck, then the big produce truck with the canvas sides had stopped right in front of Parker. What more could a man ask for?

In twenty-seven years at his pro-

fession, Parker had never yet failed to grasp the slightest opportunity. The produce driver was leaving the small grocery and heading back for the truck. There were no other stops along this street. The opportunity was too good. In one quick motion, Parker had placed his brief case under the back flap of the truck and quickly slid up after it, noting with satisfaction that the interior of the big van was almost empty.

Working very quickly, he opened the brief case and fitted the German-made silencer over the end of the thirty-eight police special, his favorite. He smiled as he hefted the complete weapon. After so many years he had become very fond of efficient weapons. The long barrel for accuracy, the finger trigger pull, a pistol rather than an automatic for easy loading, no bother with clips or magazines.

He heard the slam of the truck door and the grinding whir of the motor starting. He moved to a point halfway down the side of the truck and took his small pen knife from his pocket. In two quick slashes, he put a triangular flap in the side of the canvas about a foot long and tucked it up into the roof slats. The truck had eased out into the traffic and was rolling slowly and smoothly down the street towards the corner where Casino stood over the crouching Shad. Resting his forearm upon the crook of his left, Parker took up his stance

well back from the torn triangle. The way traffic was moving, he knew they would never make the light at the corner. The evening jam made traffic crawl.

Parker smiled as the slow panorama of the sidewalk flowed by his peepsight. The angle was perfect, just high enough to clear the cars along the curb. As they approached the corner, the truck began to grind to a halt for the light. Perfect. He was now about thirty feet from the unsuspecting Casino and perfectly hidden. Slowly he brought the weapon to bear on the man's back. The instant the light changed he would fire and whatever small noise did escape the silencer would be swallowed up by the noise of starting traffic.

There was a trembling of the truck bed under his outspread feet and the crash of gears. Slowly he squeezed off his first shot and swore softly as the truck lurched a trifle as it gathered momentum. His target had immediately dropped at the shot and then to Parker's amazement, the figure rolled and fumbled in its jacket. Firing quickly he squeezed off three more shots as rapidly as he could. By now the truck was rumbling on across the avenue and his last chance for a sure kill was gone. He swore again under his breath. Well, he had scared the young pup anyway and keeping to his record, left no trace of where it had come from.

He rode the next three blocks

and then, as the truck slowed for a light, he shot a quick glance under the flap of the truck and dropped to the street. There was no excitement. No one even looked his way. No one ever noticed the small nondescript man carrying a brief case in a city of thousands of little nondescript men.

As he made his way down the long blocks, Parker began to hum a little. He had missed his hit but the build-up, the perfection of the near success had left him feeling vitally alive. He was a master at his trade and when a man is good at anything, he can't help but feel a little smug and content when he thinks back.

Casino wouldn't forget this evening. At the thought of Casino floundering around on the sidewalk, he began to chuckle then to laugh so hard he had to stop and lean against a building while the laughter ran itself out. Would he ever forget that panic-filled face, that frantic scramble as Casino tried to crawl right down through the pavement? Still chuckling, Parker made his way home. He would really sleep tonight.

For two days nothing happened. Parker stayed close to his furnished room. He wasn't particularly afraid, just cautious. He was positive Casino didn't know where he lived but he knew the neighborhood now and it would only be a matter of time. He thought of moving but just as quickly discarded

the idea. The war had become too big. This thing would have to be fought out here and soon.

Parker read the papers from cover to cover and listened to his radio. He worked out solitary chess games but Casino's face began to loom in his mind. He began to just sit and listen to the life around him. Then he caught himself listening for the sound of steps in the dim hallway, began to jump at the sound of a slammed door. He cursed his tension, the tightening of his nerves and when a soft tap came at his door, he almost cried aloud then sagged in shameful relief. The thin worried voice of his landlady spoke through the closed door. He assured her that he wasn't ill, didn't need anything and that a little privacy and rest was all he wanted.

With the retreating steps, he made up his mind. The punk was using one of the oldest of weapons: time. Time to drive the quarry into some desperate foolish action. This business of being the hunted instead of the hunter was something which he had to get used to. Actually he was in the better position of the two. Casino had to find *him*. All he, Parker, had to do was to wait and pick his own time and place for battle.

But the waiting was hard on the nerves. He had to get out and lead the hunter. With this thought, he felt relief. No kid was going to rush him!

He moved through the busy

streets like a man walking on glass. His head ached from the constant watching and listening for the slightest clue from his hunter. His small frame was rigid with the expectancy of some unseen, unknown violence. He began to prowl the lonely deserted sections, almost hoping for something to happen. His hands began to shake a little from the strain. He couldn't sleep except in fevered snatches and still nothing happened.

He joined the night people, those lonely souls that prowled the city's darknesses with big eyes and tight lips. He tried to believe that he had scared Casino away forever, but deep inside he knew that this wasn't true. He knew Casino was watching and waiting for him. Felt it in the impact of eyes he couldn't see, heard it in the soft scuff of a shoe on a lonely sidewalk. Once toward dawn he whirled frantically at a sound of a striking match behind him, heard a low laugh and when in sheer panic, he began to run, the laughter boomed high and rolling behind him. He ran for blocks until his heaving chest forced him to slump against a wooden fence. He crouched there, gun in hand, waiting. The faint street lights showed nothing. For blocks nothing moved, no shadow stirred. He was the only living thing in the world at this hour. He felt like screaming but knew that nothing but a croak would come from those dry lips, the parched

fear-filled throat. Slowly the old heart quieted, the rasping breath subsided. He died a little then.

Casino felt the first sweet taste of triumph as he watched the old man run panic-stricken down the street. His eyes glowed as the darkening figure ran. He didn't follow. There was no hurry. He had him, had him at last, the way he wanted to have him. Had him shaking, confidence gone, the fine edge of fear consuming him. Gone was the sure skilled touch of the master assassin, the cunning, of the fox had given way to the all-consuming fear of death. The old man tasted death now, would savor the bitter flavor until it permeated every fibre of his being.

Killing would have been so easy at that moment. Too easy, Casino thought. He wanted his man to die slowly, lingeringly, to think of his killer. To know at last who was the better man. To prove something to the whole world, to erase the horrible image forever of him crawling on his belly on a grimy sidewalk while the whole world guffawed. No. It had been hard, the hardest thing Casino had ever done, to stalk Parker night after night, to pass up chance after chance, to let the slow spirit-rotting fear build in his quarry until only a husk remained. But now the sweet, glorious wine of victory pounded along Casino's veins. The drama was nearly over. Tonight would be soon enough.

Casino slept for nine dreamless hours, a deep satisfied sleep. He awoke slowly, leisurely, a smile on his lips. Tonight was here. Tonight he would be king. He hummed under his breath as he shaved, taking an almost sensuous pleasure in the caressing bite of the razor, the snowy warmth of the lather. He paused and admired the blue steel flicker of the keen edge, turning it under the light to catch the cold fire of the fine steel. He suddenly grinned.

Why not? Since time began, the most dangerous combat had always been fought with the knife. One had to get in very close to use it. To take Parker with only a knife would make him a legend. To get the greatest of them all with only a knife and to get him in his own lair would be the supreme victory. He grew exultant as he thought of it, truly first class for him. Nothing else would do!

He dressed rapidly and very carefully, feeling the fine singing thrill coursing through him. He wore dark blue slacks and a matching navy sweater coming up high under the chin. From his closet, he brought out a pair of black leather chukla boots with gum crepe soles. From his bureau drawer he drew out an assortment of switch blade knives. He hesitated only a moment then selected the long slim Spanish model he had picked up only last week. Depressing the hammered silver stud, he watched the

glittering blade leap from the handle. Almost seven inches of the finest Toledo steel glittering under the light. He tested the edge on his left arm and smiled at the clean hairless patch it left. He thought of carrying the small snub-nosed chief's special in his waistband but shook his head. He would do it with just the knife. Anybody could use a gun.

Casino never stopped to wonder if the old man would be in his room. He knew he would. At this point there was no place to run, no place to hide. Casino got a quick mental picture of Parker waiting for him to come, hiding in the dark, hands shaking so badly he would be almost helpless, waiting the sure death he knew he could not avoid. There was no pity in him, never had been, and if he thought of Parker as a man at all, he thought of him with nothing but contempt. He had broken him and there was nothing left, nothing but the final act of dying.

Casino moved unhurriedly through the streets, now familiar after the long nights of his hunt. He knew every doorway, every nook and cranny of the neighborhood. How many hours he had haunted these same shabby buildings, these poor overflowing streets. He stepped from the glow of street lights into the gloomy tunnel of the alley and dressed as he was, he seemed to be swallowed up in the blackness. His shoes made no sound as he moved.

Halfway down the alley he surveyed the neighborhood inch by gloomy inch. Parker's rooming-house sat squat and ugly between two tenement buildings, its squares of yellow lights making a queer mottled patchwork of the surrounding darkness. The roominghouse itself was lit only on the first floor, the upper half of the old frame building lost in gray black shadows. From far off, he heard the rising half-despairing wail of a crying baby, the boom of mingled television sets and the tinny whine of the corner one on the second floor. There were no lights. Casino grinned. He could almost see the old man cowering in the darkness.

Moving swiftly, he approached the rear of the rooming house and paused long moments while he studied the building. A crackerbox, a real old fashioned, crummy crackerbox. Easing onto the back stoop, he shot a hasty glance down the first floor hallway. The dim naked bulb dangling from a cord halfway down the hall showed the row of dim doors, the faded runner of the carpet; an angle he couldn't see led up to the second floor. There was no back stairwell.

Moving back, he studied the row of windows on the second floor. He had to make it this way. Parker might be expecting him from the front and besides, the risk was too great that he might be heard or seen. A movement from one of the upper windows flattened him in-

stantly beside the back stoop. He caught the movement again and relaxed. Someone in the room across from Parker had left a window open and a corner of curtain eddied in the small draft. He studied it thoughtfully.

There was his ticket to get in. The power outlet of the building was an easy step from the projecting lintel of the lower window. By stretching slightly, he could move from the overhang of the rear door to the lintel, from there he could get a foothold on the curved ell of the power outlet and by moving carefully from there, he could reach the sill of the open window. Instantly later, he was curving his hands across the sill of the open window, the curtain brushing gently against his straining forearm. Inch by inch, he raised his body up to the level and hung there suspended while he strained his ears for the slightest sound.

There was nothing. The room was empty, buried in darkness deeper than the outside night. Soundlessly he slid over the sill into the room. A quick exploration and he almost laughed aloud. He was standing in the second floor bathroom. Casino shook in silent glee. What if he could catch Parker in here? Quickly he sobered. It was a bad spot and awkward if someone should suddenly come in.

Now he was less than ten feet from his quarry. Rage shook him, a reaction to all the days and nights

that had passed. This was going to be one job he would never forget. He spent precious moments in the darkness adjusting his eyes to the deep gloom. Through the heavy wooden panel of the door, he could hear the throb of a radio somewhere down the hall. There was no tell-tale slit of light under the bathroom door so he knew the hall light must be out. Parker, in a last moment of desperate cunning? Maybe crouched right outside this very door and peering down the dark hallway?

Inch by inch, Casino opened the door. A warm breath of air fanned his cheek, thinned the odor of old plumbing and acidy antiseptic. His eyes probed the glimmering darkness. Cheek almost touching the floor, he peered around and into the hall. The throb of music was strong now, echoing in the narrow hall. The hall was empty. He fixed full attention on the deeper shadow of Parker's door. It was shut tight. Two steps away. No creaking of floorboards to reward a straining ear, no jarring of old timbers to betray a stalking man. He grinned. Man, he had it made.

Flat against the far wall, his knife open and pressed tight against his thigh, he laid a creeping hand on the slick brass of the doorknob. A slight pulling pressure would keep the tumbler from clicking, a slow steady pressure would turn the knob enough to insert the shaved celluloid in the cheap lock, a gen-

tle pressure of his knee would open it. The throb of the radio filling the hall allowed him to work faster than usual. The ease with which the door opened almost betrayed him. He crouched for long moments, his breath held against gritted teeth.

There was no sound from within. His mind fought with a tiny fear. Was Parker in there? Was he facing him now, the old man's gun waiting the slightest suggestion of movement? It didn't feel right. Slowly he let out his breath and let the door swing gently inward. It made no sound, the inner blackness of the room matching the darkness of the hallway. Nothing stirred in the stillness. Still crouching almost on the floor, he brought his head around the doorjamb.

An old-fashioned rocker loomed directly ahead of him. It was empty. Slowly his eyes searched the small room. A bureau bulked against a shadowed wall, a table and chairs filled the far end. A pullman kitchen ran along one wall. A faint light streaming in from the window showed a rumpled bed. Casino's heart hammered. A figure lay on the bed, unmoving and silent. Too silent. No rasp of an old man's breathing, no stir of bedclothes. Numbly Casino rose to his full height.

Without taking his eyes from the still figure on the bed, he nudged the hall door shut. Like a mechanical man, he moved across the room

and stared down at the motionless figure. One thin arm was hanging limply over the bedside, the other held the long-barreled thirty-eight with its silencer pressed awkwardly against his right ear. The eyes were wide and staring in the dim light, the mouth hung open, almost obscene in its gaping ugliness. An expression of frozen shock was pasted on the old seamed face. A great stain covered the side of the head, dribbled black and greasy down the sunken cheek, pooled in rivulets onto the pillow.

Never taking his eyes from the horror on the pillow, Casino gingerly touched the limp arm hanging over the side of the bed. He shook his head wonderingly.

"Still warm . . . he's still warm."

Then rage shook him, a queer unreal cheated kind of rage. He clenched his fists and glared down at Parker.

"I was supposed to do it . . . me . . . me, Casino, the best there is . . . you dirty old. . . ."

He shook in helpless fury, the shock of finding Parker like this made him almost speechless. He turned and stared around the grey shadowed room, he wanted to smash something. The silence just mocked him. He shuddered convulsively. A great, overpowering weight settled over his body. Woodenly he turned to the door, his feet unsteady, his eyes unseeing. He reached for the doorknob.

"Casino!"

The room flooded with light.

Casino crouched and whirled in one motion, then stopped as if hit by a glass wall. His face was a study of fear and confusion. His mouth gaped. He was staring directly into the barrel of a thirty-eight.

Above the gun barrel, cold blue eyes stared unblinking at him. The thin lips slightly twisted at some joke. Parker sat upright his thin legs dangling over the side of the bed. With his left hand, he was towelling away the crimson stain that covered his cheek. The hand that held the gun was steady and unwavering. The barrel was big enough to crawl into.

"Messy stuff but quite effective." He tossed the towel to the floor. "Really fooled you, huh kid?" He chuckled.

Casino's mouth worked but nothing came out.

"Not laughing at my joke, Casino? You laughed loud enough the other night!" He shook his head

then the features hardened.

"Kid, you damned near did it. You're good, so good that I'm still afraid. You came so close." Parker shook his head in wonder. "So close. . . ."

Now there was no mirth at all. The blue eyes were frosty.

"But it's all over now. You're dead." He raised the barrel slightly, bringing it to a point directly between Casino's eyes. There was some ten feet distance between the two men and Casino knew he could never make it but he had to try.

"Good-bye, kid."

Casino's feet launched him from the floor and he soared for a long, long time until he hit the deepest and darkest of all the rivers in the world. He never heard the sound that reached his ears, never felt the blast that stopped all thought, never felt a thing. He just hit the floor at Parker's feet and he lay there.

Parker looked down at the crumpled form lying dead at his feet and sighed.


"So many of them try. . . ."



*In Hollywood you can hire just about anything . . . a publicity man to give you a past, or a pro killer to get rid of the one you have.*

# RUB OUT THE PAST

BY ROBERT S. ALDRICH



NOW THAT Dice Thorne is dead and you have read all the newspaper eulogies and those sickening pieces the fan magazines ran with composite cuts showing a handsome, smiling Dice sailing to heaven in his fishing boat, and the letters from sobbing girls who swear they will never love anyone else as long as they live, I guess it's time to set the record straight.

I'm not going to cover up for myself. I made a mistake, a bad mistake. Still, it was a mistake, that's all. As my kindergarten teacher used to say when I spilled the paste pot in somebody's lap, we all make mistakes.

Even Nate Klohn makes mistakes, although he can't afford to

admit them. The head of a big studio like Zenith has to appear infallible, especially to himself. That's one reason he hires expensive public-relations flacks to make his errors look like strokes of genius. That's why I, Art Clay, found myself in a windswept town called Winship, Maine. That, when you come down to it, is why the biggest young boxoffice draw since Jimmy Dean met an untimely death, cut off, as our hasty press releases put it, in the flower of his youth when his boat disappeared in an Atlantic storm.

Very handy that storm. Without it, nobody would have swallowed that story.

But I'm doing a crummy script job. We should open up on Dice at the height of his career, maybe a few shots of a premiere at the Carthay Circle with Dice flashing his famous grin as he gets out of his sports car and has his buttons snatched by screaming fans; then fade back to Youth, Early Dreams, Humble Beginnings, the girl whose hand he held at the high school picnic. So who am I, Tennessee Williams? I'm only Art Clay, flack.

All that stuff you read about Dice was a lot of jazz. You can hardly blame Nate Klohn for wanting to dress up his product a little. After all, you couldn't tell millions of adoring women that their idol was a grade-A bum certified so by a dozen police departments from Jersey to San Francisco.

So now that the guy is gone, real gone, I'm a bum for dragging out the truth. But would you believe it, I have a conscience. And it won't let me have a night's snooze until I tell my tale.

Being ushered into Nate Klohn's private office is always a little like entering an Oriental temple. You feel you ought to take your shoes off at the very least. Your feet sink into the deep red carpet and you gaze across half an acre of expensively decorated space to an enormous kidney shaped desk in the corner and there is the great man himself. You remember what happened to Mussolini, another guy who liked to impress visitors, but somehow you know that nothing like that will happen to Nate. He will die decently of a heart attack and the trade papers will carry black borders paid for by the studio.

There was a young guy sitting beside the desk that day but I scarcely glanced at him as Nate jumped up and wrapped me in a fatherly arm. "Art!" he boomed. "You're a stranger these days. No wonder my gin game is terrible, you don't give me any practice. Art, meet our newest star, soon to be our brightest—Dice Thorne!"

I almost said *who*? Because, Dice was just a name Nate had dreamed up. This dark, good-looking fellow got to his feet in a lazy slow-motion and accepted my hand.

I looked him over. With most ac-

tors I'd have thought, here's a guy putting on a studied act; crazy for a break but playing it cool, making like Brando. But somehow with Dice I knew it was for real; even with the good-natured grin you could tell he wasn't going to kiss anybody's foot.

Nate had a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Real name is Pete Koufus, but we can hardly see that on a marquee, can we? Pete has done a little of everything—great copy for you Art. Even made his living at the crap tables, Havana, Vegas, here and there. So 'Dice' is good for a start, and the Thorne is kind of sharp, huh? Get it?"

The new celluloid wonder didn't have much to say, answering questions politely with that pleasant grin and a sort of shrug as if nothing were very important. He'd knock the ladies for a loop all right, I thought, and he was he-man enough for the male trade. But I couldn't quite peg him. He wasn't beat, he wasn't a method boy scratching himself and chewing gum. I guessed he was just a guy. Something in his dark eyes bothered me a little; I got the feeling he was laughing at me.

Nate, I knew, was in desperate need of a new male star. Women he had plenty of. If this kid could act at all he might just do the trick. With the right buildup we could put him up there with the Holdens and the Waynes.

Nate was hitting himself on the

knee with a riding-whip, a relic of his polo days. He frowned. "There's a little problem, Art. Pete's a fine boy. Unfortunately, he has a police record. Rather a long one, I'm afraid. He's given me the whole story. I'm proud of him!"

Dice gave me that little shrug.

"Nothing really serious," Nate went on, handing me a typewritten sheet. "Just a few little scrapes, when he was just a kid eager for adventure. We might even let the press have some of it, within reason."

I looked at the sheet and winced. The record was long as a patrolman's arm. Carrying concealed weapons, assault, smuggling, resisting arrest, several jail terms. It wasn't a pretty picture and it didn't take Jack Webb to guess that Pete Koufus had been in and out of the mobs.

I wanted to tell Nate to boot the boy out and forget him. But Nate had that light in his eyes; he'd made a personal discovery and crossing him would be like arguing a lion out of lunch. I didn't get my job saying no to Nate Klohn.

"You know how it is, Nate," I said, "if we hold back on this stuff there's always some bloodsucker who might come along and give us trouble. It's quite a gamble."

"You're a worrier, Art! Here's a boy who's been in a little trouble and straightened himself out. A great American success story! Let Dice give a few talks at P. T. A.

meetings, that sort of thing. They'll eat it up."

"You let any bum come along and stick you for keeping his mouth shut," Dice growled, "and I'll handle him for you."

"No, no," Nate said. "We're here to protect you." He beamed on his boy.

So the wheels ground. We didn't hide the fact that Dice Thorne had been a pretty wild kid. Naturally, we soft-pedaled the rougher items including the longer jail stretches. The ex-gambler bit was a nice masculine touch. The fan mags made it clear that at heart Dice was still the good clean American youth whose nose Grandma wiped before she sent him off to Sunday school. Nobody seeing Dice's honest, all-American face smile at them from the screen could help liking him; you knew he'd help rescue the U. S. Cavalry when the chips were down. He made you think of more innocent days when men like Doug Fairbanks were the world's idols.

For the studio he was salvation, a living, breathing pot of gold. Nate Klohn was pouring millions into Thorne epics. After the initial risk it was like putting money into a slot machine that always paid off.

If anything should happen to our star—but the thought was too grim to bear.

Which brings me to what the studio writers sometimes call the weinie.

I probably knew Dice as well as anybody around Hollywood. We weren't exactly pals; this was business. I played cards and drank with him, listened to his complaints, got dames for him when he felt lonesome. I knew him, and I didn't know him at all.

I mean there was always that mask—that was what I called it, to myself. He wasn't shy or unfriendly. He was easy to get along with and he never threw any tantrums. He didn't care how they photographed him or what kind of lies we told about him. He understood we were selling an image. "What the hell," he'd say, with that grin, "as long as they pay me." Outwardly relaxed and good-natured, he seemed bothered not at all by his shady past.

It was a gambler's mask. A gambler can be a warm, friendly guy, but there's always a curtain drawn, a part of him hidden away, a card face down. The better we became acquainted the more I was aware of it, as if behind the masquerade of Dice Thorne Pete Koufus watched it all with cynical amusement and a trace of disgust.

Sometimes I wished he'd get sore, chew me out, anything to show he was human.

I tried a little probing one evening. The two of us were sitting around his swimming pool—about the size of a football field—and having a few drinks while the sun sank through the smog.

"You're a guy who's kicked around plenty," I said. "You fell into this barrel of mud and came up covered with lotus leaves. So level with me. What do you really think of it all? You happy? I must have sounded like Louella."

He gave me a Dice Thorne grin, and then his face clouded over and he wrapped himself in silence. I'd hammered on a door marked private.

"One time," he said, after a minute, "they had me in the can and I was pretty low. I had this dream. It was all so real I've never forgotten it. There was this island, sort of like Tahiti or one of those places. I was there, in the dream. I had this big white boat. It wasn't Tahiti. It was my island." He gave a chuckle. "It sounds crazy, but I knew it was mine and I'd find it some day."

I said I gussed every man had a dream like that at one time or another. I'd read some place that guys in stir had such dreams with special vividness.

"That's what I'd like," he said. "A place like that, kind of clean and fresh, like starting over again. You wipe the slate clean and here's a brand-new world and nobody else has their fingers on it."

I guess I was disappointed. I'd expected something besides an adolescent pipe dream.

"Well," I told him, "the idea isn't impossible. You can shop around and buy yourself that island."

He grinned. "With taxes? With

Nate Klohn owning me? I'm lucky if I can put a few bucks away."

There was a certain degree of truth to that. Nate had signed him before the kid knew enough to let a good agent front for him. He was a well-kept slave.

"So who needs money on an island?" I said.

He had his fists clenched. "You always need money," he said. "so somebody don't grab your island away from you."

He hadn't told me much, but I'd seen the mask lifted for an instant.

"Anonymity," he said. "That's what I threw away. I was a bum, but I was an anonymous bum. I could go anywhere. If things tightened up I could hop a freight. Now look at me. I can't even walk down to the corner drugstore."

"A lot of guys would trade with you in a minute," I said.

"Sure." He was all obliging good nature again. "I don't know what I'm talking about. Just babbling. Maybe feeling a little sorry for myself. I'd go nuts on some lousy island." He stood up and moved around nervously. "Let's cut out somewhere, go hear some jazz some place."

"Okay," I said. I looked at him. He was jumpy as a cat. I had the feeling he had to cut out, had to go some place where a lot of noise would drown out something he didn't want to think about.

One night shortly after that, I was ready to hit the sack when my

telephone rang and Nate Klohn summoned me. I dressed and toolled over to his home. I found him in the book-lined study he kept to impress his guests with his scholarly habits. I was startled to see him pale and tight around the lips and for a moment I thought he'd had a stroke.

"I've put my foot in it, Art." He was gazing solemnly at a bust of Napoleon. "I've gambled my reputation, the studio's future, everything on this boy." He covered his eyes. "If this gets out, it'll be the end."

"Nothing can be that bad, chief," I said.

He drew a long breath. "It's bad Art. The boy killed a woman five years ago."

I gulped. "Where? How do you know?"

He shoved a small batch of envelopes at me. "Letters. I've been getting them, one a week for six weeks. Each giving a few more details, like some lousy writer trying to sell me a script one scene at a time. Then this week, phone calls. A guy with a voice like a bit player in an old George Raft picture, calls himself 'Gus', no last name."

I laughed. "Some drunk looking for a fast buck," I said. "Forget it. I'll have him picked up."

"No, it's all true Art! I've had my own private detectives on the case since the first letter. He was living with this woman in some small town in Louisiana. He was

going under some other name then. They had a quarrel and he stuck her with a knife."

I felt a twinge of alarm, like a smouldering toothache giving me a jolt. "So who's Gus?" I asked.

Nate waved a weary hand. "Claims he was married to the woman at the time. She'd run out on him. He traced her to Louisiana, found them living together. Apparently she was going back with her husband and Pete Koufous stopped her, the hard way. Gus recognized the face and he wants money. Nate gasped for breath. "Two million dollars—cash."

"Ridiculous! Nobody's silence is worth that much."

"Against our investment in the boy, it's peanuts. You find a leak in the dike somebody's got to stick a finger in."

"You never stop paying a black-mailer, Nate. This is some crackpot. We can flush him out. Call the cops."

"No! They nab him and he'll spill his story all over the front pages. No police!"

"Have you talked to Dice?"

He shook his head. "I don't want him involved."

"He's already involved. We need his side of it."

"He doesn't have a side. He's a no-good crum and a filthy murderer. The record he had already was bad enough, but this! I should have dropped him, but I thought we could bluff it through."

I did some fast thinking. Sometimes you can handle a messy scandal by letting it out, let the public decide. But you can't tell them your All-American Boy is an escaped woman-killer.

I went over the detective agency's report. It was a sleepy little town and he'd made his getaway before the local cops woke up and decided they wanted him. There'd been a three-state alarm then but no trace of Pete Koufus. That must have been when he went to Havana.

"Gus's instructions are specific," Nate said. "He must get his ideas from old movies on TV. He wants one man carrying the cash in a suitcase and it's to be delivered in a certain part of the Hollywood Cemetery at a quarter of midnight. The night hasn't been set." Nate gazed at me hopefully. "Don't you think with that much he'll leave us alone?"

"Nate," I said, "he'll end up owning the studio."

As if our troubles weren't bad enough, another bomb struck the next day. Dice disappeared. We sent the bloodhounds out.

Early that afternoon my telephones started ringing. The news papers and wire services, all asking questions that made no sense until somebody explained.

Dice had issued an announcement, on his own. He was through with Hollywood forever. Sick, fed up. He was taking his bongo drums and an extra shirt and he was go-

ing to start a new life somewhere.

The reporters thought it was a publicity gag of course. I stalled them, hinting that it was. I was in a sweat when I put the last phone down. In the back of my head was the notion that Gus was behind this, maybe luring our boy into a net, insuring payment. Who knows what a crackpot will dream up?

As I was giving Nate the latest, my secretary brought the afternoon papers. A reporter had spotted Dice at the Chicago airport. Dice said he'd rented a cottage at Winship, Maine.

I told Nate I'd take a plane at once.

Nate told me to wait a few hours. He'd been turning over in his mind the problem of the blackmailer. He'd thought of every angle, including the fact that raising two million in cash was bound to cause a lot of questions.

"There must be some other way out," he said desperately.

"There is, Nate," I said. "It's the only way that's final."

I told him of a certain guy I knew. He was a smooth well-dressed guy who went around with a briefcase. You called him if you wanted a certain job done. He didn't do that kind of work himself, but he knew how to arrange it.

Nate turned pale. "But that's murder!" he said. "All of my life, I've been a good citizen. J. Edgar Hoover is a personal friend of mine. I raise money for the Boy Scouts."

I looked out the window at a sunny patio. "This guy looks like an insurance salesman, Nate," I said. "It's like buying insurance, and no questions asked."

"This thing," Nate said, "if we solved our problem this way—I say *if*—what about finding him?"

"The body? Nobody finds him. This guy arranges everything, including transportation. A car drives to the beach, a boat goes out to sea, there's a splash—"

"Don't!" Nate interrupted, holding his head. "All right, all right, God forgive me! But I know nothing about it, understand? You—you take care of it, Art, as a friend."

We shook hands. It was a very solemn moment.

Late that night I met my insurance salesman in a bar in downtown Los Angeles. We made our deal as calmly as if we were trading a corner lot.

This was Tuesday. Friday at a quarter to midnight was the black-mailer's rendezvous date. I arranged to meet my insurance man again on Saturday.

I was in Maine on Wednesday afternoon. Winship was a little fishing village; picturesque, but I had no time for scenery. I found Dice Thorne outside his whitewashed cottage wearing rubber boots and looking as if he came off a sardine can.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "Want to go fishing?"

I sat down on a crate and we

talked. He said he liked Maine.

"That's fine," I said, "but there's a twelve million dollar production waiting and you're breaking a contract."

He grinned. "Don't you read the papers? I quit."

"Look," I said, "I'm too tired for games. Whatever your beef is, you've got a choice right now. You get on a plane with me and go back to Hollywood or you're finished. You had a second chance in life. You won't get a third."

He moistened his finger. "Storm coming," he said. "My boat won't take a high wind. I'd better get going before it breaks."

I watched him loading junk on his boat. "You think you'll find that island of yours out there?" I asked him.

He turned around and grinned and I thought, just for the flash of a second, that his eyes held a look of desperate loneliness. But he'd worn his mask too long.

"Maybe I've found it already, Art," he said and waved goodbye.

I watched him push off. There were a lot of things I wanted to ask him, whether he really killed that woman in Louisiana, why he was kicking over the applecart this way. But I knew he wouldn't tell me.

I returned to Hollywood Thursday. I reported to Nate and then I did a vanishing act myself and got plastered. I was trying not to think about a man called Gus.

You think about how impersonal

it all is, as impersonal as a man in an airplane pressing a button to drop a load of bombs. I tried not to think at all, but I couldn't help myself. I wondered if the world had forgotten the difference between right and wrong; if the scientists, the people at drafting boards had any right to their calm detachment as they design mechanisms to spread death. I wondered if I was a murderer.

Friday night came and went. People shot each other. They died in auto accidents and drownings and in other ways. But there was nothing in the news about a man called Gus. I began to breathe easier.

My insurance salesman looked as smooth and grey-flanneled as ever. "That's that," he said briskly, as I handed him a package with his money—a lot of money.

We were sitting in a back booth. I said, "Look, I know I'm not supposed to ask questions."

He frowned. "That's right. I couldn't answer, anyway."

"No, I guess not. I was just wondering if you had anything you could tell me about this—this customer."

He handed me a manila envelope. "His personal belongings," he said. "I'll keep them if you want."

"I'll take them," I said.

"Well, don't hang onto them. Get rid of them." He picked up his hat. "Nice seeing you. Call me any time."

I opened the envelope and looked at the things they'd taken from the dead man. A wallet, wrist watch, ring, keys—that sort of thing. I didn't even have to read the identification to recognize some of them.

The jolt was bad, but I guess in the back of my head I must have suspected all along. He'd rigged the whole thing, the letters and phone calls, the quick trip to Maine and back again, even the details of the boat-lost-at-sea bit. He was a gambler, you see. It probably wasn't even the money—he'd have made more in the long run with a good agent to haggle for him—just the kick he'd get out of dealing the cards so they came up his way. He'd found his anonymity all right; you can't get much more anonymous.

I sat there with the stuff in my hands. I knew I ought to get on the phone and call Nate Klohn. But the more I thought about it, the more I guessed it was better to let him go on believing we'd done the best we could for Dice Thorne. The best, as well for Nate Klohn.



*Pounding exhaust . . . straight stacks pounding, howling . . . noise and blood pounding in his head! He watched the mirror and saw the lights of the Mercury, the Big Law, slash back and forth in the night and then straighten out into his mirror. They were gaining!*

# DON'T CLIP MY WINGS!

**S**KID DECIDED you just couldn't explain to a man as old as Tom Lester. He was thirty if he was a day, and he had a wife and kids. About all you could do was just ignore the question. If they left a couple hours early, so what? As old as Tom was, he wouldn't know what it was like to go swimming, naked, with a couple of dames. Especially Gloria. He could see her on the old Army blanket on the sandbar . . .

"I asked you what's yore rush?" Tom sounded tired.

"Ain't no hurry, but one time is as good as another. Get your shoes on and let's take off."

"Okay. I reckon it's all right."

BY

DAVID W. MAURER

He watched Tom turn toward the house. Tom's skinny old woman was standing in the door and a couple of the snotty-nosed kids were in the weedy front yard. Skid guessed the kids were listening to the rough sound of the souped-up motor of his car, maybe wishing they could be like Skid Mahoney. Probably the people in the house up the road could hear it too. They'd know who it was. He gunned the motor and watched the kids grin as thunder rolled from the dual stacks and blatted at his ears.

Tom yelled at the woman, "Throw me my shoes."

Skid watched her move back into the house without saying a word. How could a man marry a woman that looked like that? When there were girls like Gloria around. Reaching into the glove compartment, he felt the smooth, cool bottle of hair oil as it came into his hand. He pulled the comb from his hip pocket and worked some of the hair oil into the ducktail at the back of his head, liking the smell of the stuff, remembering that Gloria had liked it. He almost laughed. After he'd swum the river and back, she couldn't have smelled it in his hair if she hadn't been so close! He could feel her against him now, and it was hard to know which was her perfume and which was the hair oil. Lord, how beat could a man feel!

His back didn't feel right against

the seat. His legs felt sort of limber. He wanted to get out and stretch his legs, but that would just make Tom slower. A breeze stirred and he felt it against his face. The air was cooler, and the moon was coming up. If the sky stayed clear, it would be bright as day when the moon got high. If it was necessary, a man could even drive without lights. It would be like flying, to go helling along the road in the moonlight, not knowing what would be next but knowing every turn and every hill, driving by the feel of it where you couldn't see far ahead. But there shouldn't be any need for that tonight.

Buzzing his brain, he thought back to the afternoon. Why had the law acted the way they did? First, they had turned around and took after him. Then, after he held up a little so they could get in sight, just to make a race out of it, they quit. Just gave up the chase. He wished they hadn't. For one thing, it would be good to know for sure if that gray Mercury of theirs would run with his Ford. He knew the Feds had been working today, so they wouldn't be out tonight.

Skid saw Tom's woman reappear at the door, swing her arm, and the shoes tumbled through the air and hit in the dust near the gap in the raggedy yard fence. He saw Tom bend to pick them up.

"You kin put 'em on in the car, Tom." He gunned the motor again as Tom came around the car.

In the sky, he could see the blood-red afterglow where the sun had slipped below the knob in the distance, and one long cool cloud lying well above it. It seemed to stretch out in the sea of red above the knob like a girl stretched naked on a blanket . . .

The smell of Tom Lester came into the car with him. Sweat, dirty feet, and the smell of a moonshine still. Glancing at him, he knew the smell was in the denim pants and the shirt and the cap and even, maybe, the shoes. He was sure Tom must have changed clothes after he finished work at the still, but the smell was like walking past the mash tubs and hot still-slop.

As he heard Tom's door slam, he teased the motor and released the clutch. The car lunged forward, making his uneasy back push into the cushion behind him, and making Tom grab for something to hang onto.

"Hey, Skid, nobody's after you! I gotta git my shoes on."

This ought to be fun! Just wait until they got out on the road! Tom would get the ride of his life.

The blast of the stacks eased in his ears as he lifted his foot and shifted to second gear, hooking the wheel just a little as he released the clutch and gunned the motor. He heard the tires scream, and in his mind he could see the twin black streaks on the road surface. In his arms and shoulders he felt the yawing of the car in resentment against

hooking the wheel. It felt like the flaring of a woman touched too soon, unwilling, and not ready for the firm hand. Wind pulled at his left ear as he blew the stacks in second gear. He liked the straight stick. To hell with automatic transmissions. The powerful thrust of the motor pushed him back against the seat. The smell of hot oil seeped into the car.

Keeping the accelerator pedal on the floor, he listened to the sounds he knew, and loved them. Two carburetors getting wind through the air intake, warm air rushing across the grooved flat engine heads after it poured through the oversized truck radiator. Two tail-pipes talking fast and sharp. The road moved. The car was still. The ribbon of road rushed under the car with increasing swiftness, and he felt the familiar, unfailing thrill. Glancing at the tachometer to read the r.p.m.'s, he felt under the dash for the switch and tripped it, listening for the faint whir of the auxiliary fuel pump. It worked, so that was that. Realizing he wouldn't need the additional gasoline because the brief straightaway was running out, he switched the pump off regretfully. He was sure he felt Tom pushing against the floorboard.

Lifting his foot to let the braking power of the motor slow the car for the curve, he asked, "Where to, Tom?"

"Over to Jessie Joe Leake's." He was sure there was fear in Tom's

voice. "We put the liquor in his cellar."

"Damned good thing you told me! I purty nigh overshot the turn-off!"

Making a quick judgment, knowing he could make the turn, he slammed on his brakes, cut the wheels and slowed into the crooked gravel road through the woods.

"Goddam, Skid, don't git us kilt!"

He felt a quick satisfaction. He knew just what Tom would say, and Tom had said it.

"I ain't." It was funny how Tom got scared. If a man knew his roads, he could do all right. That culvert, where the road turned into the woods, was filled up until the ditch was level, so you could cut across the end of the culvert . . . Thing like that . . . That's what makes a real driver . . .

A hoot owl flashed through his vision, looking light gray in the lights. A hoot owl in the narrow chute through the trees where the moonlight made a light lane. The moon was at the end of the lane. The moon was coming out of Jessie Joe Leake's chimney like a big light-bulb. Light enough to drive by. Light enough to run by.

He reached for the light switch and felt it bump against the heel of his hand, and then there was just the moonlit slash through the trees, and the owl was gone, and Tom was moaning, "Don't do that!" It was moonlight here, and moonlight

where he was going . . . going with lights, or without lights by moonlight . . . going with straight stacks talking, tires screaming, and money when he got there.

As they slipped back along the darkened lane from Jessie Joe Leake's, fifty gallons stashed snugly in the rear deck of the car, Skid said, "You never said where we're gonna take the liquor, Tom. You ain't trying to keep it a secret from me, are you?"

When they got as old as Tom, they got as dumb as Tom. It didn't make any difference if Tom knew or not. Tom wasn't going to take the liquor. It was Skid Mahoney that would take it. Walt ought to just tell him and let Tom stay home with his skinny woman . . .

"Fifty gallon to Cave City."

Part of that road was good, part of it crooked. On the good part you could wind the Ford up and let it howl. On the other part, you could scream through the curves.

"That fat fella . . . Lick Skillet, they call him." Sure, as if Tom needed to explain. And his name didn't make any difference. Lick Skillet. Name enough. He didn't amount to anything. Lick Skillet. Just a bootlegger.

"All I hope is that the Revenue Law don't git after us."

He didn't bother to answer. Tom hoped the law didn't chase . . . What if they did? But they wouldn't. A lot of things Tom didn't

know about. Maybe it would be better to set him straight . . .

"They ain't, Tom. I seen 'em goin' home early. They drove right past where you was workin'. Me and Mick looked for their track out of that lane and wondered if you'd got caught. Looks like they coulda smelt that shine from the road."

That was a funny thing, the way the law acted. They didn't even make a race out of it. It was a good chance to show Mick what the Ford would do.

"I heard them come by. We got a man in a tree. Built a platform in a tree . . ."

The law didn't even try to catch them . . . A man in a tree! Tom thought it took a lot of brains to figure that out. Tom was a talker and liked to brag.

"... when they come past in that gray Mercury they caught off Walt . . ."

The gray Mercury. He had driven it a few trips before the law confiscated it. It was a hell of a note to get a car fixed so it would run, really run, and then the law caught it and used it to chase you with!

The little towns along the road were going to bed. The dark storefronts kicked back the pounding of the straight exhaust stacks as the car swept through, and the tail end of the Ford had a logy feeling. Fifty one-gallon glass cola jugs full of moonshine liquor . . . An even dozen cases of four, and two loose singles. Eight cases in the trunk

and four in the back eat. They made the Ford tail-heavy. Made the headlights reach down the road to where you couldn't tell headlights from moonlight . . .

Glass! 'Walt put it all in metal cans.' Just because the cans cost a little more . . . 'Walt said take glass.' Old Tom, giving orders. Jessie Joe Leake in his long drawers and shirt-tail . . . Old Jesse Joe standing in the door and Lillie . . . Who'd think a man like that would have a girl like Lillie? She had grown up since he saw her last, and she was a real hot number. You could find out a lot in a few minutes. A fast worker could, at least. In the time it took Tom and Jessie Joe to load fifty gallons . . .

"You best slow some for these little towns."

He had nearly forgotten about Tom. Who wouldn't, when you got to thinking about a hot number like Lillie?

"Skid, slow up a little."

It seemed a shame to slow up when the Ford was running along so slick and sweet. If he slowed down, he'd be driving just like the cars he met and the cars he passed. You could almost forget the drag of the fifty gallons in the back, making the lights reach down the wide tunnel of maple trees lining the highway. It was the only thing you could call a street . . . Maybe where the other highway crossed right in the middle of town . . . If it wasn't for the crossing of the

highways, there wouldn't be any town! Crossroads and a filling station. To hell with slowing down!

As they flashed past, he got a glimpse of a car and felt his neck muscles jerk as he tried for a better look. Just the nose of a car; but it looked like a gray car, a gray Mercury. A man gets jumpy. If the law had gone home, then they weren't backed up in a filling station thirty miles down the road . . . Let it be the law! They didn't want to race at noon, so now, let them . . . He could feel Tom twisting in the seat.

"Goddam, Skid! You see that?"

"Yeah, so what? It ain't the law. I seen the big law . . ." There it was! He caught the Mercury in his mirror and saw that it was moving, but the lights weren't on. "Well, whoever it is, they're coming!"

From outside, the steady, rough hammer of the straight tail pipes on the Ford and the rush of the wind beat at his ears. It seemed to him that his blood was roaring louder than the car. There was no reason for anybody else to follow him . . . Hijackers, maybe! Pricks like tiny needles touched his skin.

Quickly, his mind ran over his back trail. Who could have put the law on him? Mick knew about the trip tonight, but Mick didn't know where the load was going. Anyhow, Mick wouldn't do it. Had he said anything to the girls at the river? Anyway, they couldn't know . . . He hadn't known himself! Old Jessie Joe Leake wouldn't do it.

Could it be just a fluke? He realized that Tom was yelling.

"It's the law!" Tom's voice was high and a little wild.

"Yeah, it's the big law." No use kidding himself any more. No use kidding Tom. Tom knew. Damn the law! You wanted them to give you a race when you were empty and they wouldn't do it. Then, when you were loaded . . . Hell, maybe they would stop again like they did before. But they didn't.

Suddenly the lights from the car behind flashed on and hit them, reflecting in the mirror, glowing in the Ford like daylight.

That did it! Whatever little doubt and hope there had been just turned over and died. Skid gritted, "Hell, yes, it's the law!"

Wanting to get all the advantage he could from the start he had on them, Skid pushed the accelerator to the floor as they hit the straightway beyond the little town. The roar of the motor walked up the scale to a howl. The wind became a tornado in his left ear. He felt the blood pounding in his throat. His breath came so fast it made him feel uncomfortable.

Pounding exhaust . . . straight stacks pounding, howling . . . pounding, howling wind . . . noise and blood pounding in his head . . . heart pounding . . . lights ahead . . . lights behind . . . Fifty gallons of moonshine dragging back . . . Fear building up, aching deep in his loins.

There were no red lights and no siren, yet. He knew the law was after him and they knew he knew it. They would wait until they were closer before they turned on the siren and the red spot-light. Skid didn't intend for them to get that close. He felt a sudden surge of hate for the sneaky way they set the red light and siren back behind the grille of their car. Why couldn't they put them on top like the State Troopers did? Sneaky as hell!

The length of straight road was shortening fast. He saw the headlights of a car coming out of the easy curve to the left that was just in his lights. He had to watch the road ahead and the lights of the car behind. He looked in the mirror nearly as much as through the windshield. The weight of the fifty gallons of liquor seemed to be riding between his shoulder blades as he came into the curve.

"Fan this sonuvabitch, Skid! I don't want to git in no trouble!"

Reaching under the dash, Skid tripped the switch on the auxiliary fuel pump. He thought he heard the familiar "whirr" as the pump started. He wanted that going when he came through the curve. He braked a little with his motor, then gave it the gas as he came out of the curve.

"Don't worry. When I get this buggy wound up, they won't keep in sight of us."

"I don't know. I heared 'em say that Merc will fly."

"Just hold your hat and grit your teeth on this swaight stretch, and I'll show you something."

Skid was afraid. He admitted it to himself. But it wasn't so bad, because he was sure he could outrun the Mercury. He remembered hearing the boys talk about the law chasing them. They all said the Mercury would run, but they weren't the kind of hot driver Skid Mahoney was. If the Merc wouldn't run faster than it did back when it was hauling liquor, then his Ford would leave it. It depended on what had been done to the Merc since the law got it.

They were on a newly-built stretch of road, now, and it was uneven. The Ford was going so fast that the dips seemed close together. Whump, whump, whump. The Ford was running free and easy, whining a little somewhere down in its guts. The car felt light, the wheels touching the road lightly. A long stretch of white fence flashed past on the right, and Skid knew the new section of the road was coming to an end. He was sorry, because the Ford had about topped off, and he wanted to hold it open for awhile. He hated to give up the feel of lightness. The scream of the wind past his ear shouldn't lessen!

The lights behind seemed just as bright as ever in his mirror, and he began to worry more. He pumped the accelerator a little, but he had all there was. Maybe there was a gravel side road he could

take, and cover them up with dust, or a better road he could take and cut off his lights so they couldn't follow him. He needed more lead for that. They could accelerate faster because they weren't loaded. He sensed that they could catch him on a narrow, crooked road.

"By God, Skid, they're gaining on us!"

He was desperate now. He wanted any way to get them off his tail for a minute, he'd ditch the Ford and take across the fields on foot!

Tom was scared. Bad scared. He had a wife and kids . . . well, that was just too bad! Nobody told him to have them. He was rattling around in the car grabbing at whatever he could get hold of, looking back at the lights behind, moaning a little.

"I'll shake them on these curves."

He felt Tom hunch forward to look toward the next curve.

"Be careful, Skid, don't wreck us!"

Skid wondered if Tom was more scared of the law, or of riding in the Ford. He was glad the curve went to the left. That would put him on the right side of the road coming out of it. At this speed, you had to cut across from the outside to the inside and come out wide, or not come out at all. As he came into the curve, he pulled as far to the right as he could, and raised his foot off the accelerator, listening for the sudden tone-change of the exhaust. He touched the brake a

little and released it as he eased a little pressure onto the steering wheel.

The car banked for the inside of the curve. Skid held it as tight as he dared. He held it until the rear wheels started to slide. All four tires were screaming at him to release the wheel. He eased the wheel a trifle but not enough to rock the car. Then he hit the accelerator again and hung on. The whole thing was to keep your nerve. Coming out of the curve, the hind end of the car got over on the shoulder a little, but he was out! He held the accelerator against the floor.

As he watched the mirror, he counted. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . . He saw the lights of the Mercury slash back and forth across the night above the road. Then they straightened into his mirror.

Tom was looking back, and he yelled, "They skidded worse'n we did!"

"They ain't got the weight and they ain't got the guts!"

"I wisht we never, either. I wisht to God we never. If I could git to all that liquor, I'd start throwing it out."

"Hell, no, Tom!"

The fool ought to know it would be the same to get caught with five or ten gallons as the whole fifty. It would be all right if he could throw it all, but part of it . . . To hell with that.

The Ford was really going. It

seemed to float between the rises in the road. But the lights in his mirror made it seem like he wasn't going very fast. He remembered how much better he felt while they were hidden by the curve.

A car flashed by, going in the opposite direction, and the Ford coming into a curve to the right. Skid worried about coming out of it on the wrong side of the road, but it couldn't be helped. He just hoped nobody was coming the other way. It would be tough on Tom. His own seat was welded in place, but Tom's would go, and Tom didn't have a steering wheel to hold to. As the tires squalled, he held his breath, watching for headlights, and then he saw the lights of a car. It was too late to do anything but hope. He rammed the accelerator down and tightened up on the wheel a little. Then he was sliding sideways on the blacktop and the oncoming car took the ditch. He felt relief flood over him. If that car just bounced back onto the road in time to catch the Mercury in the curve, maybe the law would hit it. He hoped it would. He started counting again.

When his count reached nine, he was feeling easier; then the lights were in his mirror again. The lights didn't slash back and forth this time, so he knew the Mercury had slowed for the curve.

Elation touched him. "We're pulling away Tom! Slow down, hell! I got it wide open!"

DON'T CLIP MY WINGS!

"Watch that curve!"

Skid didn't have time to answer. This curve went sharply to the left. The memory of the glaring lights in his face made him slow. But there were no lights this time. There was no skid coming out of the curve. He stomped the accelerator back to the floor and the whine of the motor started climbing the scale again; but he was uneasy. He had slowed too much and he could feel the weight of the liquor dragging back on the Ford.

One, two, three, four, five, six, sev . . . The lights were in his mirror again! Maybe he had counted slower! Maybe . . . Oh, God! Let 'em wreck! Let 'em blow a tire. Strike 'em with lightning. Anything to get 'em off my tail!

"Hell, Tom, them bastards is gaining on us. They never even slowed for that last curve. We gotta do something quick." He was yelling above the sound of the motor, the roar of the wind, and the pounding in his head.

"Wisht to God we could stop and set it out."

"Think of something we got time for! The goddam Merc is coming in." He could feel himself hunching at the steering wheel, urging the Ford on. He cursed himself for slowing at the last curve. That did it.

"He's turned on his red light."

In the mirror, he could see the pulsing of the blood-red light like the beating of a big heart, and then

the wail of the siren bristled the hair on the back of his neck.

"Goddam 'em, I wisht they'd turn that thing off."

Skid was wishing the same thing. The headlights in his mirror were close now, and he wondered what the law would do. They didn't have time to pull alongside or go around before the next curve, that was certain. He hoped they'd meet a string of traffic.

The curve was easy, and Skid didn't slow for it at all. Before his car heeled back level again as he got out of the curve, he could hear the scream of the Mercury's tires drowning the squall of the siren. There would be hell to pay now!

"You might as well pull it over and stop, Skid. They got us."

"Like hell they havel I ain't gonna quit!"

Fleetinglly he thought of Mick and the others who would give him a hard time if he got caught.

"What you figger on doing, holdin' the road on 'em?"

"Naw, they'd bump us, and we'd turn over. I'm gonna let 'em pull up beside us and ram 'em in the ditch. Hold on tight!"

He didn't want to think about being rammed from the rear. He had heard a lot of talk about that. It would turn you over in two shakes! The idea made the tingling at the back of his neck worse.

Tom yelled, "Hell, they might start shooting!" There was terror in his voice.

"Naw, they ain't gonna shoot if we don't."

"I ain't got nothing to shoot with."

Skid didn't say anything about the old .38 under the seat, but he knew he was going to throw it out before the law got a chance at it. It would be silly to try to shoot it out with the odds two-to-one.

Then he saw the riding lights of a big truck coming up out of one of the dips down the road. Maybe that would give him a chance. Maybe the law would wait until they met the truck. He was going to take a chance. Just so they didn't bump him first. Away down at the other end of the stretch he saw the lights of three cars coming single-file. Ahead of him, meeting the truck, he saw the tail-lights of the car he must pass. He would try it! Maybe he ought to tell Tom . . . To hell with Tom!

Fences, telephone poles. Cattle grazing in the moonlight. Dips in the road. Tail-lights. Headlights. Pulsing red heart behind him. The banshee wail of the siren in his ears. The whoosh of the big truck passing. The tail-lights coming back toward him. Headlights rushing faster to meet him, but farther away. The Ford hammering along at more than a hundred miles an hour.

His heart seemed to catch in his throat as he cut out from behind the car ahead. Headlights ducked. His timing had been a split second

slow. He cut his wheels again and saw the second car overtake the one he was meeting. As screaming tires took him back to the right side of the road, he heard the crash of metal as the two cars hit. He was away!

The pulsing lights behind him were falling back fast now. Tom was under the dashboard screaming. The Ford was howling. The smell of liquor came to him raw and strong. One of the lousy singles busted!

He remembered a side-road ahead that would take him back toward home. The red lights were coming . . . No! Fire! A great flash of fire back there! Gasoline exploding!

There was a house on the corner where the side-road came in. Old plank fence, half rotten. He remembered it. He had thought of this before and wondered how far the planks would fly. Tom got up just in time to duck back down again. He wouldn't make the mistake of slowing again! He'd cut across! He jerked the steering wheel. Planks flew. There was a crash as one came through the right side of the windshield. He jerked the wheel to miss a tree and felt one side of the car go down a little as the wheel hit a flower bed. Then the planks were flying again as he crashed the other side, and he couldn't separate the noises until his wheels roared onto the gravel on the lane. Then he felt wonderfully light and free.

"Made it!" He was long gone, now! To hell with the law.

"Where in hell you going?" Tom was crying and shaking.

"By God, I'm headed for home by all the back roads you ever seen!"

"Be a blue million warrants for you by morning."

"I don't give a goddam. I'll leave this buggy in Bardstown and swear somebody stole it."

"You reckon the law's still after us?"

"Naw, they'd have to stop and help the people in them cars I put in a pile back there. They ain't got time to chase us. They couldn't catch us anyhow."

They were coming into a cross-road and car lights were coming from the left. Tom squalled, "Look out, Skid!"

"You git back under the dash and shut up. I'm going home!"

Skid mashed the accelerator to the floor and went helling through the intersection of country roads just ahead of the car coming from his left, throwing gravel over it as he went. The night air was sweet and the night behind him was light with nothing but the moon. Maybe that sweet little Gloria would still be around town. He gripped the wheel and felt the lump of elation swell in his throat. He wished Tom could be Jessie Joe Leake's Lillie right now. Or Gloria. Hell, it didn't make any difference. Find a girl!

There wasn't a headlight anywhere and his Ford was thundering along like a great live thing, the music of the motor taking the place of the roar as his heart came back to normal. He patted the steering wheel and thought about the naked girls swimming the river. And then Gloria on the blanket . . .

Suddenly it occurred to him that the law maybe didn't go home in the afternoon like he thought. He wondered again who had told them something that nearly got him caught. And he wondered again what they thought about his Ford, now that they had lost him. He glanced in the mirror. Nothing there. Of course not. The law would have to stop and try to help the people in the wreck.

The County papers would be full of it in the morning. Maybe somebody killed, or maybe a car burned up. Well, good for the law! Let 'em stop and take care of the wreck! The people in the wreck might need the law, but Skid Mahoney sure as hell didn't! They'd play hell ever catching him. Too damned smart for them. And he hadn't even lost his liquor. Except that one single. It would get there. Let Walt worry about that. It was too dangerous to try it now. If they knew he was pulling a load tonight, then they might know where he was taking it, too.

He followed the crooked gravel ribbon through the moonlight and wondered if the third car had

plowed into the cars he had wrecked. That would be something for the papers to write about, too. It was a shame they couldn't know about the hot Ford and who was driving it. The law might know, but they'd have one helluva time proving it.

Turning the square to the right, he threw gravel over the fence as the back end skidded. He kept the motor running free and fast. Tom crawled back onto the seat.

"How're we gonna git home from Bardstown if you leave this car somewhere?"

He hadn't thought of that. Maybe he'd call Mick to come get them. First thing, though, they'd better set the liquor out and hide it good someplace where the law couldn't find it. It was silly to haul it back and take a chance on getting stopped.

Slamming on the brakes, he jumped out. Tom didn't have to ask questions. Tom knew. And they'd best put the right license plate on, too, in case somebody, maybe the big law, had read the plate and was looking for the phony number on it right now.

The law wasn't very sharp. They'd have to swear what number was on the car, and that number wouldn't be on it! A sharp operator always had it on the law because the law had to swear to just the truth. Most always, anyway.

He thought back to Tom's question. "Don't let it worry you, Tom.

I got plenty of friends. I might not even do that."

"What you gonna do with this liquor?"

"Put it in that culvert, of course. Nobody'll find it until we get back to it." His mind turned back to what to do about the car. "I might let Alex put it in his shop and fix it up. I figger I got to have a new windshield and maybe I'd like it painted yellow for awhile. Alex would swear I brought it in this afternoon. I'll leave it a few days. Even if they found it, they couldn't prove when I took it in." He thought of Mick. "Mick was with me when I took it in and left it with Alex this afternoon." He laughed as he slammed the lid of the trunk down. "Git the rest of it out of the car and shake a leg." He glanced down at his wrinkled clothes. "By God, I almost believe that story myself!"

"Okay, I'll swear whatever you need." Tom sounded tired and beat. "Hope there wasn't nobody kilt in that wreck."

"Aw, that." Well, sure, he hoped not. He had nearly forgotten about the wreck. He was thinking about something else. Maybe Tom didn't see the fire back there . . . No, Tom was under the dashboard then. Old, dumb Tom! Worrying about getting home from Bardstown!

After they stashed the liquor, they got back in the car and sat a few moments in the great cool dark

silence. Skid reached into the glove compartment where his hand sought the long, round bottle. Shaking it vigorously, he poured a little into his hand and carefully replaced the bottle. Then he rubbed his hands together briskly and ran them through his hair. The comb from his pocket, running free and easy through his heavy hair, and this was a swell night after all.

His thoughts were suddenly in the shaded streets of Bardstown. That hot little black-haired Gloria. Setting there naked as a jay-bird on the blanket, rumpling his hair and snuggling against his chest. He remembered exactly what she had said. 'You must have a lot of nerve, Skid, to drive the way you do.' And he said, 'Aw, I don't know. It ain't nothing if you know your car and you know your roads.' And she said, 'Skid, after today I'll always be worrying about you, racing the law the way you do.' And he said, 'Why would you worry, honey?' And she had said, 'Oh, it's kinda different now . . .' Then he remembered she was quiet for a long time, and kept patting him on his neck and on his collarbone, real gentle. And he had felt uneasy down inside himself, for it isn't a good idea to get a dame in love with you. Not too much in love with you, and too fast. So he said, 'Hell, honey, nobody's got a right to worry about old Skid. I'll do my own worrying. After I take you home, I've got fifty gallons to haul,

and I won't think no more about it than you would about goin' to the grocery . . . ?

He blocked out the remembered words then, reveled in what she had done, sliding around to his side and pulling him down over her on the blanket. His hands caressed her flesh again, and his tongue sought hers, and he remembered how excited he got when he felt her arching her back to get closer to him. Jesus, he had to have her again. Right tonight. It wasn't late. It just seemed late because so much had happened. Couldn't be more than nine-thirty, maybe. He had to have her, and quick.

He was suddenly aware of the smell of Tom beside him. He glanced over and saw Tom looking out of the smashed windshield.

"Hell," he said, "nobody's around. Let's go to Bardstown."

He started the car and teased the hot engine to a muffled, sputtering "roar," then kicked the clutch out and the tires threw gravel. Tom grabbed the dash and started talking about how he'd get home.

The vision of black hair and blue eyes and warm white flesh swept over him again and he was surprised to see how quick he was all ready for her again. I must be one hell of a man, he thought, to take as much as I did, and still want more. Then he laughed, and felt very good as the cool air caressed his face and hair, flowing through the open windows as the car swept

along like a bird behind the long shafts of his headlights. He'd leave the car in the shop. Alex would lend him something to get Gloria in. It would be better if he had the Ford, but what the hell.

They'd do it up right tonight. He'd take her out along 150 to a little motel, and they'd have a showerbath and everything. Then he could prove where he was if the Law ever asked any questions. And Gloria would swear it. She'd better, anyway. And when he picked her up, he'd say, "Well, honey, yore worryin' fever got you no place. I'm right back here with you." And she'd say, "I always worry when I know that you . . ." Say, could she. . . ? The thought hit him like a heavy blow in the pit of his stomach. I done told her plain as day I had fifty gallons to haul. But she didn't know nothin', really. But dammit why was the Merc waiting there, laying for him it seemed? How did the Law know about the Ford . . . even that afternoon when they gave up the chase? By God, they was probably waitin' to catch him with the shine. Hell, Gloria had seen the Ford, been in it with him. A sickening thought hit him. The wreck back there on the road. Suppose the Law got hurt or killed even. Jesus! They ever catch me they send me up and throw the key away. And oh-my-God if Gloria told them about the haul she sure as hell told them who he was too.

Suddenly the night was very big and open and foreboding and he felt small, too small for the Ford even. And it was like the Ford was too much for him to handle. He was shaking. He could smell the hair oil and it made his stomach twist with nausea. Gradually the car slowed down. He said, "Yuh'll stick by me now, huh Tom? I mean the story. If the Law asks us?" His voice was higher than usual and it quavered and he sounded like a damn kid. Tom looked at him funny, "Hell yes Skid, you know that. I'll swear to anything you need."

Hell, of course. And so would

Mick and Alex. But Jesus, he wasn't sure of nobody now, and then what the hell was he to any of them? Oh God, he'd go nuts in jail. In a little cell behind bars, with no road to drive, no howling wind, no whining tires. He'd die without the pulse-beat of an engine. And for how long? For what he'd done it'd be years.

They were down to a lady-like forty miles per hour. Tom looked at him bewildered, "What the hell now Skid, you can go a little faster. Let's git to Bardstown and get rid of this thing. Tonight we oughta have a celebration." Skid said, "Yeah, sure Tom."



**RING THE BELL  
FOR  
MENTAL HEALTH  
GIVE!**

# THE NUDE

## IN THE SUBWAY

*It was a hallucination! It had to be. He hadn't had a drink, but he needed one badly when the pretty nude girl cowering on the station platform whispered, "Please help me!"*

BY

ARNE MANN

I DON'T DRINK, I don't smoke those little brown cigarettes. There are no holes in my veins. So when I see something, I really see it. When I saw a naked girl in the subway I said to Patsy, "Patsy, there is a naked girl down here."

Poor Patsy had been sleeping on my shoulder until we came into our station. She was still groggy. "How nice for you dear," she yawned.

The platform was deserted, except for the three of us—Patsy, me, and Lady Godiva. After all, it was four in the morning. Our heels echoed as we walked toward the exit, and closer to the nude in the subway. She pressed against the



tilled wall as though she thought she could get into it altogether. She was young; although it was delightfully apparent that she wasn't Lolita, exactly. It's hard enough for me to tell a girl's age when she's dressed, but this doll didn't even have her shoes on. Suddenly a curious and frightening thought occurred to me: had sex crowded in on so much of my mind that I was seeing animated pin ups? But by the way Patsy suddenly grabbed my arm I knew she'd seen it too.

The train roared away and left the station to us and only to us. Our back-to-nature friend was cowering behind the bench, staring at us wide eyed and posed like Botticelli's *Venus on the Half Shell*. She was trying to cover herself in a couple of places with her hands, and it wasn't working. Patsy and I just stood there like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, until finally the girl called hoarsely, it was barely a whisper, "Oh, help me, please."

Before my phlegmatic brain could figure out what was happening, Pat was tugging at my raincoat, and in a half-minute she had pulled it around the girl. The poor kid practically collapsed in Pat's arms, and when I finally hurried over I could see she was almost hysterical with fright and relief. Dried tears had streaked her makeup. Mascara stained what seemed to be a pretty face, and I abruptly flushed, remembering how attractive the rest of her had been. She was bab-

bling at Patsy, but her speech was so jammed with sobs and little anguished cries that she was almost entirely incoherent. It was obvious that she would fall apart completely if we didn't get her out of there. I mumbled something about the police, but she pulled my coat tighter around her throat. Her eyes opened so wide it seemed possible to me, in the macabre wonderland we were in, that her face would suddenly turn inside out!

"Oh, no, for God's sake," she choked.

With a flash of personal panic I realized how terrified I would have been, in her place, and realized what a nightmare this was for her. Standing in our own echoes, in that sepulchral cavern, I wouldn't have been surprised to see the Angel of the Bottomless Pit come stalking down the tracks breathing fire and swinging a huge broadsword. A girl had to be out of her mind to come into most of the dark and lonely subway stations in Brooklyn's bowels, especially at four in the morning. In fact, I was abruptly anxious to get us all out of there.

We bundled the girl into a cab and went to Patsy's place. We tried to get her to lie down, but she wouldn't. The few blocks in the cab, she had sat tensely between us, and in the apartment she perched on the edge of the couch, wound so tight that one more turn and she'd have flown apart like a busted main spring. However, she eagerly

changed into a robe that Pat offered her. It was about a size too small, which would have increased its sales about a thousand per cent, if they could have advertised it that way. I was nervous, and very grateful when Pat sent me into the kitchen to brew coffee.

When I came back, the girl was a little more relaxed, and by the time she had the hot cup in her palms, I knew she'd be all right. As it turned out, she was a quiet, pleasant young lady, who didn't usually hang around subway stations in her birthday suit.

"You read about the terrible things that go on in those places," she was telling us. "You pick up the paper and you see . . . a girl gets mugged, gets, gets . . . attacked on some deserted platform. It's nothing new."

"But you never think it can happen to you!" Patsy added.

The girl nodded her pretty head. "Oh, don't think I didn't worry. My heart was in my mouth every time I came home."

I looked at her in amazement. "You mean you do that every night!"

"Every Friday," she said. "I have to. I have this extra job on Friday. I check hats at a dance. I wanted to quit on account of having to come home so late, like this, but, well, I took the job for the extra money . . ." she finished with a helpless gesture.

Finally she was able to tell us

what had happened. She had been the only passenger to get off at that lonely station. As soon as the train pulled out, and before she got to the stairs, three teenage hoodlums, ". . . the oldest couldn't have been more than sixteen . . ." had pushed her back, threatening her with "commando" knives. They had taken her purse, but it was obvious right away that it wasn't what they were after. They had worked in a great hurry.

"They told me just to stand there. They said if I made a sound they'd stab me. And they meant it. Especially the littlest one. I think they wanted me to scream, or run. That little one wanted to draw blood, I could tell it. . . ."

Patsy stopped her then, and slowed her down from time to time with coffee, or a cigarette. The apartment began to get light and we turned off the lamps.

One of the young hoods sliced her clothes right off her back. As each article of clothing was slashed, the others pulled it from her. First her dress was ripped from collar to hem. They cut off her slip and tore it from her. The razor sharp blade snipped the strap of her bra and hot little fingers pulled it away. They even held her and stripped off her shoes and stockings. Then they went away, according to the fantastic account. One of them gathered up the clothing and some old newspapers that had been left lying on a bench, and shrieking

like Harpies, they fled, leaving her alone in hell.

Before she could even gather her senses together to scream or to beat her breast, they reappeared on the other platform. They wanted to watch what happened to her. *They had been hidden, watching, when Patsy and I were there!*

"What are we breeding?" the girl wailed. "What are they!"

Pat and I stared at each other in wonder. "They didn't . . . I mean . . ." deliberately Pat turned her back to me and I lowered my eyes. She asked the girl, "Wouldn't you like me to call my doctor . . .?"

"Oh, no. No, no, no. . . ." She looked past Patsy to me, for some reason. The same one for which I had lowered my eyes, I suppose. "They didn't touch me. They just wanted to humiliate me! They . . . they just wanted to see the next train come in. Their kick was leaving me there, like that. I swear, I almost jumped in front of your train, when it came in. What could I do? I couldn't go up in the street without my clothes!

"Well, let's not get all worked up again," Patsy had the good sense to interrupt her. And I got a pen-

cil and said, "Maybe you ought to give me a description of them . . . while it's still fresh in your mind."

"You think I'll ever forget them? The little one, that one was most frightening . . . couldn't have been more than fourteen years old."

We shook our heads incredulously.

"Two were blond," she began, "and the little one was a brunette. They all wore saddle shoes. You know, those white kid things they wear, and white socks. The one called Kitty, the oldest, had one of those black motorcycle jackets . . ."

"Kitty!" I said.

"Yes" The girl's eyes began to look sad. "They called the little monster Mary. I didn't get the other one."

The light began to dawn, both on the city and on its favorite son. Or so I thought. "Ohh," I ohhed. "They were . . . gay, these boys!"

She seemed puzzled. Then she frowned and swung her head slowly from side to side. "Oh no . . . my God, you mean I didn't tell you!" The horror swept in and covered her anew, "They were all girls! They were little girls!"



THE MORGUE attendant was a skinny, pinch-faced little guy with horn-rims and a nervous Adam's apple. He peeled back the sheet and said, "It ain't a very good looking corpse, is it, Mister?"

"Not very," I said.

It wasn't. The bullet had smacked him in the forehead, splintering the bone over the bridge of his long nose. The skin around the wound was ragged and burned. In back was another hole, much larger than the first, where the bullet came out.



## WHARF RAT

*A Novelette*

BY ROBERT PAGE JONES

*Everybody who was anybody said, "Drop it, Chance. The old man was a bum and a rummy and he killed himself." But Johnny Chance thought different . . . and then there was the old man's pretty daughter.*

"Wait 'till we clean him up and wire his jaw together. He'll go out of here looking better than when he came in." Pinchface grinned. "He a personal friend of yours,"

"Not exactly," I said.

I gave Pinchface the two bucks and watched him pull the sheet up over the old guy's face. Then I went out into the hall.

It was a big, almost empty hall, painted green halfway up the walls. The only furniture was a couple of banged-up wooden chairs and a wooden bench like the ones in bus station waiting rooms.

There was a guy on the bench. He was stretched out on his side, his legs pulled up under a seedy topcoat, hugging himself to soak up a little warmth. It wasn't cold. I went over and shook his shoulder and without opening his eyes he said, "Just resting, Officer. Be moving right along."

I shook him hard and he sat up, smacking the bad taste from his mouth. He looked almost as bad as the guy in there on the slab; all bone and loose skin that made his nose stick out. He stopped smacking and said, "Didn't mean to doze off, Johnny Boy."

"It's okay," I said.

The rummy looked up at me. "How about it, Johnny?"

"I'll do what I can," I said.

"I knowed you would." The rummy got to his feet and we started down the hall. "Pesk was a right guy, Johnny, not like the rest of

the bums along the wharf. Pesk had a family, he did. Worked hard, kept himself clean. You should have seen him around the boats. Peck could work them engines as good as anybody."

"Yeah."

We went down the steps to the street. It was a little after six A.M., and the sun was up, but it wasn't hot yet. I said, "You sure the old guy was killed?"

"That's the legend, Johnny."

"The police say he knocked himself off."

The rummy shrugged, as if in shrugging he could resolve some problem that bothered him.

"You got anything else?" I said.

He glanced over his shoulder and said under his breath, "The word is you should talk to Hiram Moon on this one."

"The boys think Moon was involved?"

He gave another shrug and looked down the street again.

"Here's a buck," I said. "Get yourself some breakfast."

"Gee, thanks, Johnny." He took out a little notebook and a pencil stub so short the lead seemed to start out of the eraser. "I keep a record of who I owe. That way it ain't so much like a handout."

"Forget it," I said.

"No, sir. A loan is a loan." He wrote deliberately in the notebook, wetting the pencil lead with saliva. "You just get the man what done this to old Pesk."

"I can't promise anything," I said. "Tell the boys that. I'll do what I can, but you tell 'em I can't promise anything."

"I'll tell 'em," he said. He gave his hat a little tip, like an old time song and dance man, and grinned at me through rotten teeth. "I'll tell 'em you're on the job boy."

Lieutenant Julian Flack is a tall, red-faced cop with big hands and feet and an aversion to work. He poured coffee from a hotplate on the windowsill in his office and said gently, "Goddamn you, Chance."

"Julian." I made a clucking sound with my tongue. "What would your mother say?"

"You should know by now I never had a mother." He rummaged through his desk drawer for another cup. "And don't call me Julian. Coffee?"

"Black."

He came back to the desk and slid my cup across. "Now then. Just once more. Tell me just once more why we can't have a little trouble in this town without you sticking your nose in."

"Because," I said, "I have a very inquisitive nose."

Flack pointed a big-knuckled finger at me. "I'll tell you one thing, Chance. If I had a mother, she sure as hell wouldn't allow me to associate with private detectives."

"So get rid of me by telling me what I want to know."

He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Look, Chance. Frank Peskin was a bum, a rummy. Who knows why a guy like that knocks himself off. One of his buddies found him propped against a piling at the end of a wharf. There was a hole in his head, made by a .38 caliber bullet lodged in the piling. The condition of the wound, the position of the body, indicate the wound was self-inflicted."

"You made a paraffin test?"

"You know that a .38 probably wouldn't leave any traces that could be detected by a paraffin test."

"You make one?"

"You know we made one."

I looked at him. "Well?"

"I told you. A .38 probably wouldn't leave any traces on the firer's hand." He relaxed a little. "There were powder burns on the guy's face, and the skin around the wound was torn. That means the gun was pressed against his head when it went off."

"What gun?"

"The gun." He took a can of condensed milk from the desk and stirred some into his coffee with a pencil. "What's the matter with you?"

"You got it?" I said.

"Got what?"

"The gun."

"I'm warning you, wise guy." Flack's face turned red. He rose halfway to his feet and sat down again. "Peskin's body was discovered less than two feet from the

edge of the wharf. The gun could have slipped from his hand into the water."

I took a sip of my coffee and made a disgusted face. "You got any sugar?"

"This ain't the Ritz." He handed the can over. "Kill the taste with a little cream."

I said, "What about Hiram Moon?"

"What about him?"

"Peskin worked for Moon. That's enough to warrant an investigation. You know that."

"Why? Because Moon isn't the town's leading citizen?"

"Because he's the town's biggest crook."

Flack took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're way off base, Chance, trying to tie Moon in on this thing. If you've got any sense you'll leave this one alone. I mean *alone*, understand?"

"*Julian.*" I made the clucking sound again. "Don't tell me Moon has his thumb on the department, too. Not while Julian Flack is still on the force."

Flack leaned back in his chair and grinned wearily. "I'm telling you, you're wasting your time. Moon is clean. We've checked that. You go sticking your nose in, and he hurts you, there's nothing we can do."

I got to my feet. "Just the same, I think I'll do a little checking around."

"Meaning Moon, eh?"

"Maybe. I'll stay out of trouble."

"Sit down."

I grinned at him. "Some other time, Julian."

"Goddamn it." His voice was the same, but I could tell he wasn't kidding. "Sit down."

I sat.

Flack said, "You got a client on this thing, or you just trying to make trouble for me? So help me, Chance—"

"No client. But I wouldn't make trouble for you," I said. "Let's just say there are some interested parties."

"I know." He pointed the finger. "Chance, you're a sucker for every wharf rat and rummy in town. Why don't you get some clients with money?"

"I've got money." I grinned. "Besides, the gentlemen in question are my best source of information. It pays me to do 'em an occasional favor."

"They think the old guy was murdered, eh?"

"Like I said, they're my best source of information."

"It's funny," Flack said. "That bunch could tell me the color of my Aunt Flossie's underwear. But whenever I have 'em brought downtown they clam up like it was a few days before Christmas."

"That's because you don't know how to communicate with them," I said.

"Yeah. Well, if I find out they're withholding evidence, I'm going to

rattle their heads together." Flack sipped his coffee. "I'm going to level with you, Chance. We're already working on this thing. Don't get me wrong. Chances are the old guy did knock himself off, but there are a couple of things that don't fit."

"Like what?"

Flack's face tightened. "I've got the autopsy findings here," he said, tapping a stack of papers on his desk. "They agree with the preliminary report made by the police doctor who accompanied the ambulance. The old man was shot in the forehead, about two inches above the bridge of the nose. That's pretty high up on the forehead. The skin around the wound was burned—indicating a contact wound."

I held an imaginary gun against my forehead and squeezed the trigger. "Seems like an awkward way to shoot yourself."

"Exactly. Considering the position of the hole in the back of his head, and the trajectory of the bullet, it barely seems possible. Of course, he might have pulled the trigger with his thumb . . . but that doesn't make much sense either."

"You think somebody pulled it for him."

"I don't think anything, yet. You remember that." He scratched his head. "If Ben Sharber knew I was even talking to you, he'd throw a fit."

Sharber was the District Attorney. I said, "You telling me to lay off?"

"You know I can't tell you to lay off. I'm not even sure I want to. If it was homicide, and Moon had anything to do with it, it might not be a bad idea for you to stir things up a little. But just remember that the police are convinced it's suicide."

"You got anything else that might help, anything that points directly to Moon?"

"No. But I'll give you some good advice. You scare Moon too much and he might bounce you around. This guy's big, Chance. He owns a couple of state legislators right down to their bunions—and he enjoys playing things rough."

I was insulted. In my crepe-sole shoes I'm slightly over five feet five . . . and nobody bounces me around. Nobody. I still have a few muscles left over from my college days, and I carry a gun. I figure the gun adds immeasurably to my stature.

"I'll watch it," I said.

Flack went into his desk again, took out a fifth of bourbon, and poured some into his coffee. He grinned. "Wanna cheer yours up a little?"

"No thanks." I got up. "I'll keep in touch, Julian."

Flack's grin disappeared. "Don't call me Julian. And watch your step. I got enough trouble without having you turn up dead."

"Yeah," I said. "Then how come you tried to poison me with the coffee?"

"Go on, beat it."

Hiram Moon made most of his dough during the war. As a small-time politician, he held a couple of minor city offices, and even ran unsuccessfully for Congress once. When that didn't work out he took the money suckered out of a lot of private citizens and sunk it into certain "investments." They paid off—big. Now he owned a good chunk of the San Diego waterfront—a fleet of sport-fishing boats, three of the big new tuna clippers and a popular sea food place out on the Point, a five-mile-long blade of land that shelters the bay.

The sea food house was a big, barny place, painted red, with a big neon sign in the shape of a lobster suspended up over the roof. It was built halfway out on a plank wharf that extended maybe four hundred feet over the bay.

I started there.

Inside, I climbed up on one of the wooden bar stools and waited for my eyes to become accustomed to the dark. A couple of tourists wearing loud Hawaiian shirts and two-dollar yachting caps sat in one of the leather booths against the far wall. They chatted over tall drinks and shot occasional glances at the stuffed Marlin over the bar. The sun was up full by now, and it was hot.

"I'm looking for Hiram Moon," I told the bartender, a big guy with puffy, freckled forearms.

"Moon?"

I nodded.

"What you want with Mr. Moon?"

"Business," I said. "It's personal, so why don't you just tell me where I can find him."

The bartender said, "You want to tell me your name?"

"Nope."

"It's a hot day," he said. He shrugged, put a slice of lime in some juice tongs, and deliberately squeezed juice into my glass. He dropped in a sprig of mint and slid the glass across. "Why don't you enjoy your drink and run along."

"The weather's bad for your disposition," I said.

He grinned.

"It's the kind of day everybody should relax and take things easy." I put a five spot down on the bar. "Come on, where do I find Moon?"

He put his face up to mine. When he opened his mouth I could see the piece of meat hanging down in the back of his throat. "Listen, shrimp. Anybody have any business with Mr. Moon, I know about it first, understand? Now drink your drink and beat it."

I could feel the muscles around my mouth twitching. I don't like it when people call me shrimp.

"You fat bastard," I said.

He wasn't really fat. Most of it

was muscle, but I was too mad to worry about that. I grabbed a handful of greasy hair and pulled his face forward. With my free hand I snatched up the juice tongs and fitted them over the end of his nose. Then I squeezed. "Where's Moon?"

He couldn't answer me right away.

Tears came to his eyes and his lips popped open a couple of times, but no sound came out. He tried jerking his head loose and the tongs damn near amputated his nose. It was pretty gruesome. I even began to feel a little sorry for the guy, but I figured he might kill me if I let go of the tongs.

He tried sticking it out.

He reached down under the bar, scrabbling around frantically, his face purple. I gave a little tweek on the tongs, and his hands shot back into view, palms flat against the bar. Tears ran down his cheeks and mixed with the blood dripping from his nose.

"You want to be pleasant?" I said.

One of the guys in the booth giggled faintly.

It wasn't funny.

I squeezed the tongs.

"Yeah. Yeah." He tried to nod.

"Jesus. Anything you say. Only let go, will ya? For Christ's sake, let go."

I swallowed.

I began easing my grip on the tongs, gingerly, testing his reaction.

There wasn't much reaction left.

He picked up a bar rag and began mopping his face, pouting, a tiny piece of lemon peel protruded from one nostril.

I stuffed the five spot into his shirt. "Where do I find Moon?" I said.

He dug out the five spot, looked at it, and crammed it back in his pocket. Then he looked at me for a moment, "Around the side and up the stairs."

"Thanks," I said brightly. I went back out on the wharf.

It was the middle of the afternoon, but the neon sign over the door was on. It read: *Sea Food. Regular Dinners. Cocktails.* Water slapped at the pilings beneath me.

The building took up nearly the full width of the wharf. In back, facing the end of the wharf where Peskin's body was found, was a flight of stairs that led up to a door marked *Private*.

When I knocked, a little pear-shaped guy with no hair and a pimple on the top of his head opened the door a crack. He had a can of Schlitz in his hand. "Yeah?"

"I'm looking for Mr. Moon," I said. "The bartender said I'd find him up here."

"Who's looking?"

"Tell him, Johnny Chance."

He looked at me skeptically. "Who's Johnny Chance?"

"That's me." I grinned at him.

"Some other time, shorty. Mr. Moon is—busy."

It hurts my pride when people call me shorty. I reached out and put a little pressure on the door. "I guess you didn't hear me good."

A voice said, "Let him in Charlie. He sounds very nice."

The voice sounded very nice; it was like hot candle wax sliding down the neck of a bottle, warm and sultry.

"Thanks." I didn't wait for Pimplehead to object, but gave the door a shove and walked inside.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of Moon seated behind a desk on the other side of the room, but only a glimpse, because even the corner of my eye couldn't stay interested for long.

She was draped over the arms of a pink modern Danish chair, a tall, honey-haired blond with soft, luminous, nearly-black eyes that went all the way with the sexy voice. She wore a yachting outfit; a sleeveless sweatshirt and a pair of thin cotton shorts, bone-white against tanned, full-calved legs that were so long they seemed out of proportion with the rest of her. All of her best parts seemed out of proportion with the rest of her—rounded hips and pencil waist and firm breasts that jutted almost shockingly beneath the sweatshirt.

"Hello," she said brightly when I walked in. She squinted at me curiously. "Hel—lo."

"I'm Johnny Chance," I said.

"You can call me Marty."

"Marty?"

"Uh-huh. My father had his heart set on a boy."

I muscled my eyes up from the sweatshirt. It was an effort. I said, "He must have been bitterly disappointed."

"Crap." Pimplehead still had a grip on the doorknob. I figured he must be Charlie Visser, Moon's partner. I took a good look, filing his features away in my brain.

"Don't get excited," I said. "I'd like to talk with Mr. Moon."

"I'm Moon." Moon tapped a knuckle on the desk. "The babe you're drooling over is my wife. This is Mr. Visser. You got business with me?"

"I'd like to ask some questions."

"What about?"

"Frank Peskin," I said.

"The rummy?"

"That's right."

Moon didn't say anything right away. He took a can of beer from a bucket of ice on the floor and popped it open. Then he leaned back in his chair, sizing me up, pulling absently at the beer.

He looked heavier than I remembered from the pictures I'd seen in the papers. Most of it was in his face, and in a thick bulge of purple fat that puffed over his collar. He had slack, unhealthy-looking skin, and there was sweat on his face.

"You a relative of Peskin's?"

"No." I looked at his face, watching for a reaction from eyes that were like marbles pushed into a lump of moist bread dough. "I'm a

private detective. I'm checking a few things concerning Peskin's death."

Behind me Visser said, "A private dick, eh?" He giggled. "I though maybe you was a jockey."

"Don't mind Charlie," Moon said good-naturedly. He wiped some of the sweat from his face, "How about getting to the point, Mr. Chance."

"Okay. Peskin was found at the end of the wharf last night, with a hole in his head. You know that, naturally. My client wants to know how come the hole."

"The police seem to think it was suicide."

"They do," I said. "My client doesn't agree."

"Your client, eh?"

"That's right."

"Who's your client, Mr. Chance?" He grinned.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you that."

"Crap."

"Shut up, Charlie." Moon leaned back in his chair. "Chance here is just doing a job." He leaned forward again and said slowly, "But, Chance, you should be careful about coming in here and throwing your—ah—weight around. You want to ask a few questions, fine. You just want to throw your weight around—that's something else."

Visser giggled. I figured it was at the remark about my weight—after a full meal I push the scale up to around 130—and I said, "Listen, Fink. You keep interrupting and

I'm going to pop that pimple on your head. Moon here can tell me what I want to know."

"Apparently you didn't understand," Moon said. He tensed up for a second, then relaxed again, and took a swallow of the beer. "What's to tell? Peskin was an old guy. Maybe he was sick. Who knows? As far as I'm concerned, he got fed up with the rat race and pulled the cork. Bang. One squeeze and he had no more worries—like in the spray deodorant ads. Simple."

"Too simple," I said. "Peskin wasn't the kind to knock himself off."

"Maybe. I wouldn't know."

"He worked for you."

"A lot of guys work for me. Look, Chance, I'll make it easy for you. I know from nothin' about Peskin's death. The old guy worked around on my boats, keeping the diesels in shape, earning a few bucks for booze. He's been around the wharf for as long as I can remember. So he knocks himself off. So what? If you're smart, you'll leave it that way."

"I'll leave it," I said. "For the time being. But I'll be around, Moon. If the old guy was killed—I'll get the man who did it."

Moon got to his feet and leaned over the desk. He brushed at the sweat on his face and said, "Drop in anytime, Chance. Always glad to be of help. You a drinking man, Chance?"

"No, thanks," I said.

"Too bad." He popped another can of beer. "It's a hot day, eh?" He held the can in a toast.

Visser opened the door for me, grinning, and followed me out onto the landing. "Chance."

"Yeah."

"You're kind of little to be talking as tough as you were in there. You know that?"

I didn't answer him.

"You ought to watch that mouth of yours." He had a raspy voice that rubbed my nerves like a cheese grater. "Mouthing off like that ain't healthy. Sometimes just asking questions ain't healthy. You get me?"

I stared at him.

"If I were you, Chance, I'd stay away from the wharf and from Mr. Moon and from *everything*. You get me?"

"Crap." I said it the way I'd heard him say it. Then I started down the stairs.

I shouldn't have turned my back. I heard his foot drag across the plank landing, but I didn't make it back around. I grabbed for the railing, but it was no good. The foot caught me in the small of the back, and shoved.

I woke up sick. For a minute I just sat there with the odor of old fish in my nostrils, gulping big lungfuls of the ocean breeze, wondering whether I had enough strength left to make it upstairs.

I didn't.

I barely had enough strength left to pull myself up on the first step. I was still sitting there, hurting in every bone in my body, when the door at the top of the stairs banged shut. I felt under my arm for my .38 and swung around in time to glimpse the nut-brown legs and the flouncing sweatshirt and the cotton shorts that were so tight they pulled into a little V in front.

From where I was sitting, the effect was superb.

"Goodness," Marty bubbled. She sat down beside me. "You fall down the stairs?"

"Oh, brother," I moaned. It seemed like a shame, all that lovely skin and no brains.

"Charlie said you fell down the stairs." She giggled, blond hair swirling round her face. "I'll bet he tripped you. Charlie's nasty."

"Charlie's a real bastard," I said.

"They're all bastards," she said. "Charlie and Hiram and the whole lousy bunch around this wharf."

"Hiram know you're out here?"

"He doesn't even care. He'll sit up there all afternoon, until he runs out of beer, and then he'll come get me and undress me with those fat hands. She made a face. "It's the price I pay."

"For what?"

"For this." She pointed with her long fingers. "For all of the money it brings. Hiram's a very successful man. He's a pig—but he knows how to make money."

"That's important to you?"

"More important than anything in the world." She said it matter-of-factly, but I knew she wasn't kidding.

I said, "You make your husband sound like a pretty ruthless guy—capable of almost anything."

She pulled her black eyebrows together and looked at me. "He's capable of murder, if that's what you're not quite saying. But he's also very smart. I don't think he'd go around killing people just for the fun of it."

"You can't think of any reason why he'd want Peskin out of the way?"

"No." She said it haltingly. "Questions over?"

"Anytime you say." I grinned.

"Let's talk about something else." She squirmed a little, only in the tight shorts it looked like a lot. "Let's talk about you. Are you really a private detective?"

"Uh-huh."

"How interesting! I don't think I've ever known a real private detective." Her lips parted slightly, exposing rows of even white teeth that rubbed almost imperceptibly together, as if she wanted to bite on something. It was a peculiar, fascinating gesture that somehow went with the throaty voice and the slight, Southern accent. "But aren't you awfully small? I mean, I always thought private detectives were big, mean-looking men who chewed gum."

"I don't like gum," I said.

"You're not mean looking, either." She pushed a strand of hair from her face and said softly, "You're sort of cute, really. I'll bet you can take care of yourself, too. I mean, I'll bet you can handle most men twice your size."

I said glibly, "Two or three at a time. Sometimes, when they gang up, I bite their limbs off."

She gasped, "Oh—." She thought that was wonderful. "I'll bet you do, Johnny."

She was a strange girl. She got to me, got under my skin in a fascinating way. I could feel the sweat collecting on my face. It made me uncomfortable. I said, "I'd better go—before Charlie comes out and tries kicking me *up* the stairs."

"Oh—." She smiled, moving her teeth in that odd way. "Just when we were getting acquainted. You haven't even seen my boat."

"You're a sailor, eh?"

"Uh-huh." She pointed to what looked like a hundred thousand dollars worth of sailboat at the end of the wharf, a white-hulled sloop with the name *Marty* lettered across the bow in gold. "It's all mine."

"Nice," I said.

"There isn't another one like it." She leaned forward. "We'll have to go for a sail sometime."

"I'd like that," I said.

"I know you would." She raised one of the black eyebrows in an arch.

I smiled and got up, bracing my

feet, and said, "Thanks for the information."

"You're not really going to leave me?" She lay back on the steps, running slender hands over breasts that would have been ridiculously large if they had been hands or feet or anything but what they were. As it was, she looked deformed in the most wonderful way imaginable.

"Got to," I said.

"Oh." She pouted. She pouted all over. "That's too bad."

"Yeah." I grinned at her. "Too bad."

My apartment is in the Sea Cliff Apartments in La Jolla. For three hundred and fifty dollars a month, plus a repeated promise not to disturb my neighbors by having licentious parties and disporting myself generally, I am able to put on a lavish front of the type that spells success to my clients. It gives them a sense of security—plush, butter-colored carpet, expensive furniture, a view of the ocean—and makes my exorbitant fees seem less exorbitant.

In back is a garage where, for an extra fifty bucks a month, I park my Corvette and stack old copies of *Nugget*.

I parked.

I had made several stops along the bay-front after leaving Moon's place, bars and hangouts where a few bucks might buy a little information. Nothing. It was after mid-

night, and I had run out of capacity before running out of bars. I was beginning to feel the drinks and my brain was turning like a roulette wheel. Inside, jumping around like the little white ball, was the thought: *nobody wants to talk about Frank Peskin*. Then I thought: *the hell with it. Nobody ever wants to talk about a guy that's dead*.

I got out of the Corvette and was reaching for the handle on the overhead garage door, when a voice behind me said, "Chance."

I froze, my hackles standing up like toothbrush bristles.

There were a couple of guys there in the alley. They were bigger than me. Hell, almost everybody is bigger than me.

"Who?" I said pleasantly.

"You're it," one of them said. I wondered what he meant by that. He was a big up-and-down character with holes in his face, as if his skin had been gnawed by a rat. His pal was about the same height, only thinner, with hair that stuck out all over and a broken nose. The thin one was grinning as if something was about to be very funny.

I had a feeling I wasn't supposed to enjoy the joke.

"Sorry. My name's Alfred," I said conversationally. I lowered the door. "Alfred Humphrey—"

"You sonofabitch," the big one said. He spit the words out, lips tight against his teeth.

I started to circle around, slowly,

so that my back wouldn't be against the garage door. I was scared. I opened my mouth to say something else as a fist slammed into my face. It hurt. It split my lip and brought blood rushing into my mouth. I spit some of the blood at ratface and hit him in the stomach, hard, right where he lived. Then I ran down the alley.

Ratface caught me.

He doubled my arm up behind me, twisting my hand up high, and spun me around just as the skinny one came racing up. I lifted my knee and he ran into it—groin first. He went down on his hands and knees and I kicked out at his face with my foot. I missed. I tried to get at ratface, but I couldn't. He gave my arm an upward twist, shooting a stab of pain through my shoulder, and held me. The pain made me dizzy and I shut my eyes.

Ratface put his face up to my ear and said conversationally, "That wasn't so smart. When you don't stand a chance it's best just to hold still and take your beating. Sometimes it ain't so bad that way. Now you've got Patty mad."

Ratface held me until Patty got to his feet. He was right. Patty was mad. He let me know it by digging out my .38 and busting me across the cheek. Then he slipped the gun into his pocket and went to work on my stomach with his fists. He talked pleasantly while he hit me, the moist grin spread across his face like an infected sore.

"How you like that, Big Daddy?"

*Wham!*

"That feel real good, Big Daddy?"

*Wham!*

It didn't. It felt more like somebody had stuck a cherry bomb in my navel and exploded it. Each time he swung his fist I tried to suck my stomach up inside my chest. Pain throbbed through my brain, and my breath came in short gasps.

He was enjoying it. His face seemed to waver and change shape before me, as if I was seeing him through muddy water, but the grin remained the same. He kept on grinning.

After what seemed like a long time I realized that the blows had stopped. I was lying on my back in the alley, my head making like a roulette wheel again. The taste of blood was strong in my mouth. When I got to my feet a stab of pain in my stomach bent me almost double. I leaned against the fence that ran parallel with the alley, trying to clear the fuzz from my brain.

It took me a full five minutes to make it up the stairs to my apartment. I took it a step at a time, pausing every few steps to rest. Mrs. Hollenbeck, who lives in the apartment below mine, opened her door a crack when I passed her landing. She looked at me curiously, grunted, and narrowed the crack until only one eye was vis-

ible. I leered at her and she banged the door all the way closed.

When I got upstairs I didn't try to undress or clean the mess off my face. I didn't even take off my shoes. I just flopped face down on the bed, grabbed a mouth full of the spread to ease the throbbing in my jaw, and slept.

It wasn't completely light when I woke up again, but the foggy, half-light that sometimes lingers along the coast in August. I got up and put some coffee water on and got under the shower. Pain leaped through my stomach and my head felt like a coconut that had fallen from a tall tree.

I soaped my face, carefully washing away the caked blood, wondering whether I should try to shave between the cuts. When I had tow-eled off I worked through a cigarette while I drank some of the coffee. I began thinking about Frank Peskin, wondering why a guy like that would kill himself—or get himself killed. I thought about Hiram Moon, too, wondering why the rummies around the wharf had hinted that he might be involved. It didn't seem likely that he'd have any reason for wanting Peskin out of the way, but I'd never known the wharf rats to be wrong.

The punks in the alley were Moon's boys. That much I knew. Why they were there, why the rough stuff, I didn't know. Unless

the beating was Moon's way of scaring me off. Only that didn't make much sense either. If Moon was really involved—and I hadn't uncovered any evidence to suggest that he was—he'd have better sense than to sick his apes on me.

I thought: *the hell with it. Let the police handle this one. There's nothing in it for me if I get involved.*

I drank some more of the coffee and made a call to a client in San Francisco. I told him I'd fly up in a day or so with some information he'd asked for, then I went in and shaved.

I'm not sure when I made up my mind. Maybe it was when I got a good look at my beat-up face in the mirror. Maybe it was plain curiosity coupled with the fact that I had some time on my hands. After a while I just got dressed and left.

Julian Flack had said that Peskin was living with a daughter out in the beach area. I called him for the address and headed out there. The house was a neat white-washed frame job in the 1700 block on Peacock, about a block from the ocean. I parked the Corvette out front and rang the bell. It was a little past 8:30 A.M. I rang again.

I wrote a note on one of my cards, asking Miss Peskin to get in touch, and pulled open the screen so I could slip it under the door. It opened.

Before I had straightened up, before I got a really good look, my

stomach told me she was beautiful. The first thing I noticed were her eyes, soft, light-brown eyes that looked almost golden under dark brows that arched up slightly and then tapered back over clear temples. When she looked at me the eyes had an innocent expression.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to stare. You're Miss Peskin."

"Yes."

"I'm Johnny Chance," I said. "I'd like to ask you some questions."

"What about?"

"About your father."

She looked at me. Her face got very sober for a minute, and then she said, "Of course. Please come in."

I walked past her. The place was small, but it had a warm, cheerier look about it. There was a lot of yellow in the room, in the ruffled curtains and in some of the furniture. Off the living room I could see a spotless kitchen also done in pale yellow.

There was a pot of coffee perking in the kitchen. Real coffee. The aroma reminded me of a little store I used to know in Newark as a kid, where fresh coffee beans always spilled out of a grinder into the window. It was the only street in my neighborhood that didn't stink.

"I was just about to have some coffee. Would you like a cup?"

"Some coffee would taste good."

She came back from the kitchen pushing one of those low serving trays you get with green stamps. On top were a couple of cups and a pot of steaming coffee.

"Were you a friend of my dad's?"

"I knew him only slightly," I said. "But I have some friends who thought he was just about the greatest guy who ever lived."

"You must mean his friends around the waterfront." She smiled with even white teeth. "Frank was one of them, really. He drank too much and he would disappear with them for days sometimes—but he was different, too. He had a real understanding of their problems—maybe it was because he had the same problems—and he tried to help them whenever he could. He could never keep any money, because there was always a buddy who needed new teeth or a drink."

"You called him Frank?"

"He was my stepfather." She sipped her coffee. "I think that's the reason I've always been sort of tolerant of—the way he was. You see, he took on quite a handful when he married my mother. I've got seven sisters, Mr. Chance. That's a lot of women for one man to contend with. My mother died shortly after they were married. He took it very hard. It broke his health completely, and he was never very strong after that."

"He raised one very attractive daughter," I said.

"Thank you. He really tried."

"You lived here alone, just the two of you?"

"Yes. I have a job, as a waitress. It's not very glamorous work, but the tips are good. With the money Frank was able to pick up working around the waterfront, we made out okay."

"Miss Peskin," I said. "Did you know of any trouble that your dad might have been in?"

She looked at me, puzzled. "No. There was always some minor thing—an unpaid bill or some thing—but never anything serious. Why do you ask?"

I hesitated, and said, "When you heard that your father was—dead, did you have any idea his death might not have been suicide?"

She looked dazed for an instant, and then snapped right out of it again. "Why, no, of course not. Why should I think such a thing?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's why I asked."

"Who are you?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm a private investigator. I should have told you that."

"You said you were a friend of Frank's."

"I knew him casually," I paused. "That made me his friend. In many ways he was a very strong man. I don't think he would take his own life."

"But why?" she said. "Why would anyone want to kill a man like Frank?"

"I don't know," I said. "I was

hoping you might be able to tell me something that would help. Was he in any trouble with his friends, or any of the people he worked for?"

"No. Nothing that I knew of."

"How about Hiram Moon?"

"No. Nothing."

"You're sure?"

"Please," she said. I thought she might cry. "I just don't understand all this. Frank was a sick old man. He would have died anyway before very long. Why would anyone want to kill him? It just doesn't make sense."

I took a slug of my coffee. "I'm sorry. About all the questions, I mean. I shouldn't have come barging in here like this so soon."

"It has been kind of a shock," she said. She settled down a little. "Perhaps if you could come back later, after I've had time to think."

"Of course." I got up and she walked me to the door. "If I've upset you, I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

"Your dad was a nice guy, Miss Peskin." I felt foolish and headed for the car.

I had some breakfast in the beach area and drove downtown. On the way I went over the whole thing in my mind. There were only two sides to it. One: the old guy knocked himself off; I should quit wasting my time. Two: he was murdered; the evidence is all there.

I figured he was murdered.

What I couldn't figure was why.

Why would Moon—or anybody, for that matter—knock off a harmless rummy like Peskin?

In a town scared half to death of a man like Hiram Moon, there's one source of information that isn't afraid to talk. The city newspaper.

I decided to give that a try.

I spent most of the rest of the day thumbing through soiled copies of the *Union* in the morgue. I wasn't sure of exactly what I was looking for, but I figured that if there was anything in Moon's past that shed any light on the subject, I might find it in the paper.

I was lucky.

The story ran the day after Rome fell to the Allies, June 5, 1944. It was shoved in among the news from Europe, a short, one column story under a mug shot of Victor Pompero.

I remembered reading about the Pompero thing. What I hadn't remembered was the names of some of the others involved. The story refreshed my memory. It said that Pompero, a small fry in the L. A. rackets, had fallen over the side of a fishing boat during rough weather off the point. It also gave the names of the other members of the fishing party: Sidney Potter, owner of a bowling alley and fight promoter; a Mexican businessman named Armando Perez; Hiram Moon, businessman. All three men admitted to the fact that there had been liquor on board and that, despite the rough sea, they felt par-

tially responsible for Pompero's death. The skipper of the boat had been too busy fighting the swells to even notice that Pompero was gone. The skipper's name was Peskin.

At 9:45 I turned into the drive at Moon's place on the point and stopped about a hundred feet from the house. It was a big, sprawling place with a wall around it, crowded by hundred-year-old eucalyptus trees. French doors opened onto a tiled patio in the rear. I crossed the patio, my feet making a faint tapping noise on the tile, and slipped inside. The room I was in opened onto a larger room that must have been used for entertaining. There was a piano and a few car loads of fancy furniture and a bar long enough to accommodate a room full of thirsty sailors. Light seeped under a door on the other side of the room. I walked over and pushed it open.

Moon was in there.

He stood behind a desk roughly half the size of a boxing ring, a big .45 in his hand. When he saw who it was he put the gun on the desk and sat down again. He said, "I didn't hear you knock, Chance."

"I didn't," I said.

"You should have." He nodded toward the .45. "If I was the nervous type, I might have killed you."

There was money on the desk, lots of it; more money than I'd seen in a long time. It was separated into

stacks. As he finished counting one of the stacks, Moon riffled it with his thumb, like a deck of cards, snapped an elastic band around it, and placed it aside. He said, counting, "You're a persistent man, Chance. I like that. Your manners could stand some improvement though. Next time, I suggest you try the front door."

I said quietly, "All right, Moon."

He looked at me, snapped a band around another stack of bills, and smiled. "What's on your mind this time, Chance? Still hot on Peskin?"

"Hotter than you think," I said.

"Okay. You start it."

"Vic Pompero," I said. I watched him close, waiting for a reaction.

"Pompero?" He took a cigar out of a box and bit the end off.

I dug out the clipping and dropped it on the stacks of bills. I said, "Why don't you give me the straight story, Moon?"

"Pompero, eh?" He still had the end of the cigar in his mouth. When he spat, the tobacco caught on his lip and hung there. "You know what I think, Chance? I think you're out of your mind."

"Maybe."

"The police tried to pin the Pompero thing on me fifteen years ago. They couldn't. What are you trying to pull, anyway?"

I said, "Think about it, Moon. There were four people left on that boat after Pompero went over the side—four people who knew what really happened out there."

"Go on." He licked his lips.

"Where are they now?" I said.

"You're telling it, Chance." He leaned toward me, his face nasty. "But you'd better make it real good, sucker. I don't like accusations, understand? You start making statements you can't back up, I might get angry."

"I figure what I got to say makes sense," I said. "Let's add up the score. First of all, Sidney Potter gets knocked off in the war. A few years later Perez gets it in an automobile accident in Mexico. Now Peskin takes care of himself. That leaves only you, Moon, with only one story about what really happened on that boat."

He didn't react. Not the way I expected. His face went slack, and perspiration popped out on his neck, but he wasn't scared.

He said quietly, "You're crazy, Chance."

I said, "Not this time. It's too good, Moon. There isn't a D.A. in the country that would pass it up."

Moon said, "Answer me this, shrimp. How come I waited so long? If Pompero's death wasn't an accident, and I was afraid Peskin might run off at the mouth, how come I waited fifteen years to get rid of him?"

"The old man was sick," I said. "He didn't have much longer one way or the other. Knowing that, maybe you figured you couldn't keep him quiet any longer."

Moon got his cigar going and

grinned at me through the smoke. "I like you, Chance. That's why I'm going to straighten you out before I toss you the hell out of here. For one thing, Pompero's death was really an accident. I can't say I was sorry to see him go, but I didn't kill him. That should make the second thing pretty obvious. I couldn't have any reason for wanting Peskin out of the way."

I looked at him. There was still no hint of fear in his eyes, no hint even that he was disturbed. It bothered me. I said, "If you didn't kill Peskin, somebody's gone to a lot of trouble to make it look as if you did."

He said thoughtfully, "You got real evidence that Peskin was murdered?"

"Enough to send you to the gas chamber."

He chewed the cigar. His eyes narrowed and he said, "Who'd want to pin a rap like that on me?"

"Who'd stand to gain the most?"

"Nobody. That's just it. Nobody."

"Visser?"

"What do you take me for? Anything happens to me, Visser would be out on his tail in a week. Why else do you think I take care of all this myself, Chance?" He indicated the money on the desk. "I control everything, understand? Nobody's got a string on my business, nobody."

I thought about it for a second. That's all it took. "You're wrong."

Moon's face got pink. I think he got it too. "You bastard," he said.

"Your wife," I said. "With you out of the way, she gets it all. Everything."

For an instant I thought he might go for the gun. He came all the way to his feet, eyes narrowed to angry slits, but even through the slits I could see the hint of doubt. "You bastard—"

And that was the end of the conversation.

That was also the end of Moon. He died with his mouth open, about to call me another ditry name, but the only sound was the explosion of the gun behind me and the dull smack as his head bounced off the desk. For an instant he stared up at me from the blotter, a neat hole parting one eyebrow, and blood running out onto the stacks of money. Then he slipped down behind the desk and was gone.

I turned slowly, fear eating its way up my spine.

Marty was standing just inside the door, her small hand clutching the gun that had made all the noise. Her small, red-tipped fingers looked very fragile against the blue steel.

I said, "You must want it bad."

"I do." She came a step closer. She wore a low-cut blouse of some gold material and a pair of black, skin-tight pants and gold slippers with little tassels on the ends. "All of it."

"But why this way?" I said. I swallowed. "You were his wife. It belonged to you anyway."

"That's where you're wrong." When she spoke her voice was tight. She shuddered. "As long as he was around, none of it was mine. You can't own anything with Hiram, only be owned. I didn't want it that way. Not with him; not with that pig."

"So you killed a scared old man and tried to make it look as if Moon did it to get him out of the way."

"It will still look that way." She looked at me, smiling. "Only it doesn't make any difference now."

"You killed the old man." It made me sick.

"Yes."

"You bitch."

"He didn't know. He was an old man, Johnny." Her eyes widened slightly. "He was asleep, Johnny, just sitting there on the end of the wharf. I walked out there and held the gun against his head and threw the gun in the water. He didn't know."

"Then it was you who sent Moon's boys to work me over."

"Yes." She said it matter-of-factly. "I didn't know the police would think the old man killed himself. When they did, I thought the whole thing would turn out wrong. Then you came around asking questions. I wanted to make sure you didn't give it up."

"I didn't," I said.

"Maybe you should have. Now I'll have to say you came barging in here and accused Hiram of poor Peskin's murder. That seems like a reasonable accusation. Hiram reached for the gun on his desk and you shot him."

"And you shot me."

She smiled. "Too bad."

"You're developing a real taste for killing."

"I wonder if I really am." She licked her lips, pressed her teeth together. "I'm sorry it has to be you, Johnny."

"You've made a mistake, Sweetheart. You can't kill me with the same gun you used on Moon."

It pulled her up short. Her breath sucked in and she looked at the gun in her hand. It was enough. As soon as her eyes shifted I grabbed the .45 on the desk, jumped sideways as I pulled the trigger.

I was lucky.

She fired, but it was too late. The bullet caught the edge of the desk, gouged out a hunk of mahogany, and slammed into the carpet behind me. I went down on my knees and watched as her body jackknifed four or five feet against the far wall. She lay on her back, her eyes open, the long legs spread obscenely against the expensive carpet. Most of her jaw was gone.

I didn't even feel her pulse.

I waited for Flack and gave him the story in bits and pieces while he yelled at me. It was okay. Flack is always yelling at me.

# MOTHER'S WAITING

BY

MURRAY KLATER

*There was something he needed to do. What it was had bothered him all evening. The girl he'd picked up in the bar giggled and rubbed against him. He drove faster through the heavy fog.*

HAWKINS KNEW there was something he had to do. He didn't know what or when or how, only that there was something lurking there in his mind, something he had to do.

"What time is it?" the girl next to him asked.

He pulled out a worn gold pocket watch and looked at it. "It's six thirty," he said. He motioned for the bartender to refill his glass.

"You're a funny guy," she said. "You been sitting here for half an hour and you haven't said nothing."

Hawkins didn't answer. He didn't look at the girl. He had seen her through the mirror in back of the bar and knew that she was a bleached blonde, about thirty, that she had a fair figure in a rawboned sort of way, short though, that her face was beginning to wear around the eyes and that she had a promi-

nent nose like his mother's. Maybe after a few drinks she would look better.

"Most the guys come here like to laugh and joke," she said. She took a quarter from a knotted soiled handkerchief and laid it on the bar.

"Maybe I just don't see much to laugh at," he said.

"God knows I ain't got nothing to laugh at," she said. "It's just sometimes when I'm here and they start joking, I forget and laugh too."

"Maybe they'll come later."

"I don't think so. They're usually here at six and it's foggy."

He looked out the window in the front of the bar room and saw the fog swirling along the street, blanking out the street lights so that from the bar it seemed like the whole world was floating in a mist.

He had rented a car from Hertz for the night and it troubled him

that it was foggy now and it would be hard for him to drive. Mother didn't like him to drive but it seemed like he always rented a car when he decided to have a night out only now he probably wouldn't even drive it.

But the fog did make it kind of cozy and apart in the bar. He started to relax a bit. Maybe later it would come to him what he had to do.

"What time is it?" the girl asked again.

He took out the watch and looked at it. "It's six forty-five," he said.

"I ought to go home and eat," the girl said. She didn't move from her bar stool.

"That's a pretty watch you got," she said, "It's different."

"It was my Dad's," he said.

"It must be nice, keeping things in the family for a long time like that I mean."

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, it is." He didn't tell her that it was the only thing his Dad had left. Until he was fourteen Mother had always told him that Dad had died. Then one day she let it slip that he had just gone away and never come back.

"I ain't really very hungry," she said. "Maybe I'll just have another beer and then go."

"Let me get this one," he heard his voice saying. It surprised him.

"Thanks," she said. "My name is Essie."

"Essie?"

"That's what they call me. My real name is Karen but I married this guy named Esposito. A real crum; he didn't even drink. Anyway the fellows shortened it to Essie, the name, I mean."

The bartender brought them fresh drinks and set them on the bar. Hawkins raised his glass and said, "To you, Essie."

It was hard for him to realize that the voice that said "Essie" so caressingly was his. It was more like he was in a dream that he had dreamed sometime before.

"To you, mister," she said.

They drank in silence.

Hawkins went back to the men's room. There were dirty pictures on the wall and someone had scribbled an obscenity and the name Doris and a telephone number. He wondered why he was in this dirty washroom of this dirty bar. He knew Mother was waiting patiently at home. Perhaps she was crying.

When he came back Essie was putting a dime in the juke box.

"I like good music," she said. "It livens things up."

He started to reply but the music blared out a loud cha cha to the tune of "Turkey in the Straw."

"That's better," she said, talking over the music. "I hate quiet. I hate quiet and this damned fog."

She drained her beer. "You know what I like to do?" she asked. "I like to dance. Doesn't that music make you want to dance?"

"I don't dance—very good, that is."

"You should learn. There's nothing like it. I like to dance—close."

He looked at her and there was a trace of fire in her tired eyes. For a moment he thought he knew what it was he had to do.

"Do you live alone?" he asked.

"Don't get fresh," she said.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be. Just don't get fresh."

"Maybe we could go someplace else and dance."

"I'm out of the mood now."

"Please," he said. "Don't get mad."

"I ain't mad at you," she said. "It's just you reminded me of something I come here to forget."

"I lost my boys today," she said. "The damn state took them. Snotty damn state can come right in and take away your kids. That's why I don't want to go home; I ain't got nothing to go home to." She laid her head on the bar and cried.

"Don't cry," he said. "Jees, please don't cry." His voice was suddenly high and excited.

He hated to hear a woman cry. They always cried. They cried and it drove him frantic. It drove him frantic when Mother cried. He wished he'd gone to Hollywood to-night. The girls in Hollywood had never cried. But then he'd forgotten; he couldn't go to Hollywood—it was too risky.

"Stop crying and I'll buy you a beer," he said.

"Sure," she said. She raised her head from the bar. "What's the use of crying? What's a couple of kids?" There was mascara running down her face in dirty streaks.

"That's better," he said. "Maybe I can play something for you, a record or something. What would you like?"

She looked at herself in the mirror. "I'll be all right," she said. "Just let me go and wash up and I'll be all right."

When she was gone he put a dime in the juke box and listened to another cha cha. He wondered if they had pictures in the ladies' room too. He wondered what Mother was doing now. She had probably eaten and was sitting on the couch waiting for him, patiently. "I have the patience of Job," she always said.

When Essie came back she said, "Let's go someplace else. This place is like a morgue."

"Okay," he said. "I got a car outside."

They walked out into the fog and groped their way to where the rented car was parked.

"Gee," she said. "You must be in the chips."

He didn't answer her, but opened the door for her to get in instead. When he opened the door an overshoe tumbled out into the gutter. She stepped over it into the car and laughed.

"Oh god," she said. "A big old guy like you wearing rubbers."

He picked up the overshoe and put it on the back seat. He should have put them back there to begin with only he didn't want to forget them when he took the car back. He hated overshoes but Mother always insisted on him wearing them if it was cloudy.

He got in the car and started to drive.

"I shouldn't have laughed," she said.

"It's all right," he said.

"I shouldn't have laughed but I just couldn't help myself." She started to chuckle and then burst into a guffaw.

"It's all right," he said. His voice was high and tense again.

"Okay," she said. "Relax. Relax and enjoy yourself."

He drove through the fog-en-shrouded city up into the mountains. He didn't consciously know where he was going. It was more like the car drove itself, turning here, taking this street rather than that; it was like it was pulled along by unseen strings. Sometimes he would remember a building or a corner like he had seen it before in that dream. And now there was an anticipation building within him. Even the anticipation seemed a part of the dream, like it too had happened before.

She snuggled up beside him in the car.

"I feel a little drunk," she said.

"No," he said. "Don't get too drunk."

"I like to get drunk," she said. "I can be very nice when I'm drunk and the best part of it is I don't have to remember a thing."

"Don't get too drunk," he said. *Damned slut*, he thought. *Please don't let her get too drunk.*

"I don't have to remember a damn thing," she repeated and snuggled her head down into his lap.

The anticipation grew and he drove more quickly, banking and turning the car swiftly through the fog as they went up the steep grade. Finally he pulled off the road and killed the engine. They were in a murky glade between two veiled trees.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked, looking up at him enticingly.

"We'll see," he said. The anticipation was so strong now he could barely control it.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. Her mouth melted to his kiss. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. Then he worked his hands up her back until they were around her throat.

"No," she said. She stiffened and broke away.

"Please," he said. "Please."

She opened the car door and ran into the fog.

"No," he cried. "Please don't go."

But she didn't listen. She ran sobbing into the trees. He ran after her, sensing her direction from the sobs. He stumbled over a rock

and fell. He heard his watch shatter under the impact of the fall.

"Damn slut," he muttered as he got up and continued the chase.

He spotted her in a clearing and then lost her as she ran into a thicket. Then he saw her again. He saw her trip and reach out instinctively for support from a slim weak branch. He heard the crack of the branch as it splintered from the tree and then he saw her fall sprawling to the ground, the branch still clutched in her hand. He watched as she pulled herself laboriously to a spot where she would be hidden.

When he finally came upon her she was lying face down under a tree. She was still crying. *Why did they always have to spoil everything and cry?* She looked very small and helpless and old, even. She remind-

ed him of his mother. He knew what he had to do. He didn't want to do it, but he had to.

When he picked her up to turn her around there was no struggle left in her, only a kind of lifeless resignation.

"No," she whimpered. "No. Please." But the vacant look in her eyes seemed to say, "It doesn't make any difference any more."

Then his hands were pressing on the throat and after they had pressed hard for a while and after the death spasms had passed he laid her down and kissed her tenderly. Then he got up.

He heard the jangle of the watch parts in his pocket. He felt in his pocket and picked out the pieces.

"No, no, no, no," he cried softly. How was he ever going to explain the watch to Mother.



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**H**IS NAME was Ramey and at forty-four he had the shoulders of a football player, the neck of a boilermaker, the chest of a wrestler and the integrity of a Kansas City gigolo.

On this hot Friday evening he stood in the middle of Tony Spaino's office holding his hat in his hand and looking very much like a

overhead lights, peeled the plastic wrapper from a cigar and waited for his bodyguard to come forth with a platinum lighter. While the bodyguard held the lighter with a steady hand, Spaino studied the man in the center of the office. "How long have you been in this section?"

"Three weeks, sir," Ramey said,

## THE SAFE KILL

*Spaino wanted a man killed. He called for Ramey . . . because Ramey could get away with murder.*

BY KENNETH MOORE

schoolboy waiting to be punished by the principal. He felt beads of perspiration break on his forehead and run to catch in the corners of his eyes. He licked dry lips and wished he had enough courage to light a cigarette.

Spaino, healthy and prosperous behind a polished desk which sent back the bright reflection of the

then realized he shouldn't have said "Sir". It cast Spaino in the role of the superior.

"Why were you transferred from the old section?"

"I killed a man," Ramey said.

The swivel chair creaked under Spaino's weight as he leaned back and nodded slightly. He made a nice appearance: a tall, heavy man

in his mid-forties, with a clean shaven olive face that glistened in the light. The expensive Italian suit was so well tailored it exposed only a slight trace of a paunch acquired from years of soft living.

"You know about Joey Keener?" Spaino asked.

"The whole city does," Ramey said. He was beginning to relax now, and a smile twisted the corner of his mouth.

"Joey and I used to be friends," Spaino said. "But now we don't get along so well. Joey thought he'd like to take over part of my organization."

"I know the tale," Ramey said. "He tried to gun one of your lieutenants, but an innocent bystander got in the way. Now that Joey's been identified, the cops are working overtime to find him. He's just a punk, but he knows enough about you to put you in the death house. The cops figure if they sweat him long enough he'll testify against you to save himself."

"And if he's knocked off, they'll know I did it or had it done," Spaino said. "Either way I'm on my way to the death house."

"Interesting situation," Ramey said.

"That's why I sent for you," Spaino said. "I've got ten thousand dollars that says you can help me."

He snapped his fingers. The bodyguard moved forward, placed five one thousand dollar bills on the glossy desk. "Take it," Spaino said.

"Half now; half when the job's finished."

Ramey looked at the money for a long time, then shook his head. "You're the gambler. Not me."

Spaino's eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I want all of it now."

Spaino relaxed and Ramey could hear him exhale across the room. "Give him the rest of the money, Elwood."

The bodyguard placed five more one thousand dollar bills on the pile. Ramey reached over the desk, folded the money and put it in his pocket.

"Remember, I can't be connected with this in any way. If the cops even suspect I had anything to do with it they'll find some way to burn me for sure."

"Don't worry," Ramey assured him. "You'll be in the clear."

Spaino handed him a slip of paper. "Here's the address. My boys traced him to this spot."

Ramey studied the slip of paper. "What's he doing?"

"Waiting. Trying to decide whether to run or take his chance with the cops." Spaino chuckled lightly then, probably his first chuckle in days. "He's almost in the same predicament as me. If he runs, one of my men will get him sooner or later. If he goes to the cops, he stands a good chance of getting the chair."

"You can relax," Ramey said. "I'll take care of him."

"It has to be tonight. If my boys were able to trace him, it'll only be a matter of time until the cops manage to find him."

"Tonight then."

Ramey turned and walked out of the office. He went down a flight of stairs to the alley and got in his car. He drove six blocks to an all night drugstore, went inside and bought a box of envelopes and a stamp. Inside a telephone booth at the rear, he addressed one of the envelopes with his home address and stamped it. He took the bills out of his pocket, placed them in the envelope. It was a necessary precaution. He couldn't afford to have the money found on him in case he had to go downtown to police headquarters to sign a statement. Some smart cop might take it upon himself to suggest a search.

He left the drugstore and dropped the envelope in a corner mail box. He climbed into his car, studied the address again. He checked his watch, saw that it was half past midnight. He kicked life into the motor, pulled the car away from the curb.

The address was a shabby six floor hotel on the city's southside, situated in the middle of a block of gray and black granite buildings. It was typical of a place where a man like Joey Keener might hide. It was a neighborhood where a man could pass unnoticed for months and buy anything if he had the price.

Ramey parked a few doors away

from the building and walked to the front entrance. The clerk was dozing behind the desk in the lobby. Ramey went inside, spun the register around on the desk and checked the name assigned to room 37. He knew Keener wouldn't be using his real name, but Ramey wanted to appear professional for the benefit of the clerk, who now yawned and climbed to his feet.

"Sorry, no vacancies," the clerk said.

"Give me the key to 307," Ramey ordered.

"That's Mr. Scott's room."

Ramey's jacket fell open, exposing the .38 holstered under his arm. "The key," he said.

"Sure, sure," the clerk said. He dug into the pigeon hole for the key.

"How long has this Scott been here?"

"A couple of days," the clerk said. "A week maybe."

Ramey pointed to a chair. "You stay there."

The clerk dropped into the chair, his mouth hanging open. "And don't try to warn him on the house phone," Ramey said over his shoulder as he turned.

"No sir," said the clerk.

Ramey took the stairs three at a time. When he reached the third floor, he dug his .38 from the holster and walked softly down the hall toward the room. He put his ear to the door of 307. Hearing no sound from inside the room, he put

his shoulder to the door, felt the lock snap under his weight.

Joey Keener was at the bureau pouring himself a drink when Ramey came through the door. He spun suddenly, and the glass and bottle shattered against the floor.

"Easy, Keener," Ramey ordered, leveling his gun on the other man's chest.

Keener gave one fleeting glance at the gun on the bedside table across the room. "I wouldn't try it, Joey," Ramey cautioned. "I could drop you before you went two steps."

Keener raised his arms. "Who are you, mister?"

Ramey walked around the shabby room, noted the overnight bag on the bed. "Looks like you were getting ready to take a trip," he said.

He picked up the gun from the table, balanced it on his palm. "Nice gun," he said. He pointed it, pulled off two fast shots in the direction of the doorway. He looked at the holes for a moment, then nodded. "They should do nicely."

"What's the pitch?" Keener asked. "And who in hell are you?"

"Spaino sent me," Ramey said.

"Spaino. He's crazy if he thinks he can get away— Recognition suddenly crossed his face and with it came fear. "Say, aren't you—"

Joey Keener never finished. Ramey pulled the trigger of his .38 twice and watched the bullets tear into Keener's chest. The little man's

body slammed against the wall. He stood there a moment, his body supported by the wall, his fingers laced across the bullet holes in his chest. Then he slid slowly to the floor and collapsed in a heap.

Ramey put away his gun, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his prints from Keener's gun. He bent over the body, placed the gun in the limp hand. He put the dead man's fingers through the trigger guard, pulled the trigger and then kicked the gun aside. He lit a cigarette and went over and sat on the bed to wait for the police.

"Christ," swore the lieutenant. His name was Bland, and he had been trying to nail Joey Keener and Tony Spaino for months. He stood in the middle of the hotel room and watched the deputy coroner complete his preliminary examination.

"I tried my best," Ramey said. He pointed to the bullet holes in the door. "But he put up a fight."

"I wish there had been some way to take him alive," Bland said. He looked down at the body. "There goes my last chance to get a case against Spaino."

A reporter pushed his way through the crowd into the room. "How about a story, Lieutenant?"

Bland gave him the story, speaking slowly so the reporter would get all the facts. The reporter jotted notes in his notebook. "Off duty policeman kills wanted man resisting arrest," he said. He turned to

Ramey. "Should make a nice headline, Sergeant."

Ramey's face turned sour. "Can I go now, Lieutenant?"

Bland nodded. "Yeah, Sergeant, but you'd better report to headquarters first thing in the morning. The captain will want to talk to you."

Ramey nodded and pushed his way toward the door. The captain would probably raise holy hell and even suspend him, but Ramey wasn't worried. He had ten thousand dollars now, and it was just possible that Spaino could find another job for him in the future.



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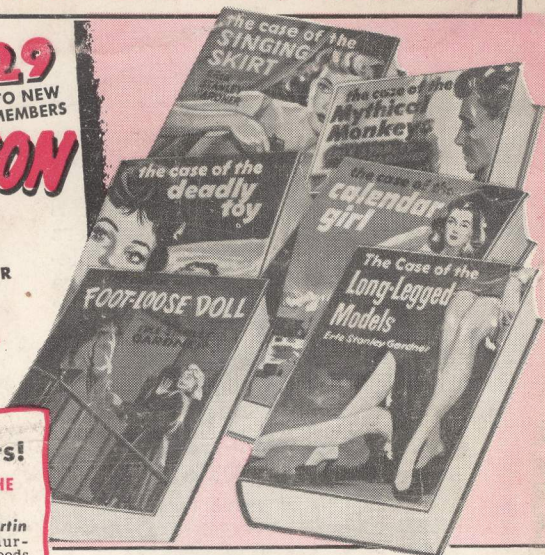
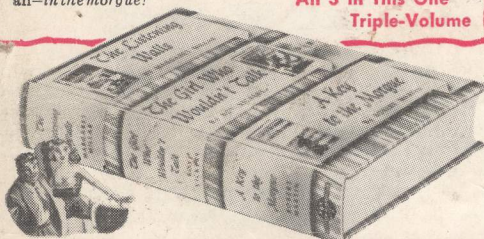
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